

Reflections on Friendster, Trust and Intimacy

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ABSTRACT

By asking users to articulate and negotiate intimate information about themselves and their relationships, *Friendster.com* positions itself as a site for identity-driven intimate computing. Yet, trust issues are uncovered as users repurpose the site for playful intimacy and creativity. To flesh out the tension between purpose and desire, i reflect on *Friendster's* architecture, population and usage.

Keywords

Friendster, intimacy, social networks, trust

INTRODUCTION

Intimate. Adj.: marked by a warm friendship developing through long association (Mirriam-Webster)

While intimate computing may connect people with machines, the concept also has implications for how technology connects people together and with themselves. From email to SMS, Usenet to blogging, MUDs to *Friendster*, technology evolves to accommodate sociable interaction and personal presentation of self. Yet, the medium through which people interact digitally is so structurally different than the physical world that its architecture fundamentally alters social behavior. Technology does not simply connect people; it defines *how* people connect. Consequently, people continuously repurpose technology to allow for the kinds of intimacy that they desire.

In challenging the architecture, people's behavior highlights how, fundamentally, intimate computing hinges on issues around trust.

- 1) People must trust the technology architect's intent towards protecting their identity.
- 2) People must trust the architecture to convey the appropriate context and validity of information, while simultaneously allowing for a variety of mechanisms for social exchange, identity presentation and relationships management.
- 3) People must trust others in the system to operate by

the same set of social norms. They also want to be able to gage reputation and contextualize information presented.

In order to consider issues of trust in intimate computing, i discuss various aspects of the architecture, population and usages of a relatively new site called *Friendster*. Fundamentally, *Friendster* was designed to allow people to articulate their social networks so as to connect with potential dates. Although social networking sites have existed before, recent commercial interest has resulted in the emergence of a variety of new sites dedicated to helping people connect to their social networks for dating, jobs, recommendations and listings¹.

While there are many ways in which people connect to and apply their social network, i highlight *Friendster* because of its popularity, press coverage and diverse usage. Not only does *Friendster's* service bridge the physical and digital world, it has generated new vocabulary for discussing relationships amongst certain crowds. *Friendster* is also valuable because of the increasing tension between its architect and population, as users try to present themselves within the system while the architect tries to define and regulate acceptable modes of intimacy.

MY PERSPECTIVE AND GOALS

In order to understand people's perspective on and experience with *Friendster*, i have surveyed or interviewed over 200 people as well as engaged 60 people in 6 focus groups on the topic. Given the popularity of this meme, i've been able to gather hundreds of comments on people's blogs and have actively overheard conversations about *Friendster* in public spaces. I have spoken with programmers who have scraped data from the site to visualize it, as well as to those who have sold access to their network via *eBay*. I have joined mailing lists of *Friendster* fans and foes, as well as participated myself.

Through all of these activities, my social goals were: 1) to understand how people negotiate context when presenting themselves; 2) to understand the network structure of how a meme spreads and connects people; 3) to understand the issues involved in articulating one's social network as compared to a behavior-driven network.

¹Old: *SixDegrees.com*; New: *Ryze.com*, *LinkedIn.com*, *EveryonesConnected.com*, *eMode.com*, *Tribe.net*

WHAT IS FRIENDSTER?

Friendster is a website that allows people to explicitly articulate their social network, present themselves through a dating-focus Profile (interests and demographics), post public Testimonials about one another, and browse a network of people in search of potential dates or partners. *Friendster* is built on the assumption that friends-of-friends are more likely to be good dates than strangers. The site was built to compete with *Match.com* and other online dating sites, with social networks as an added twist. While Stanley Milgram argues that everyone is connected within 6 degrees [4], *Friendster* only allows you to see or communicate with those who are within 4 degrees.

Unlike most dating sites, *Friendster* encourages users to join even if they are not looking for dates, under the assumption that they probably know a wide variety of friends who are looking and, thus, would serve as a meaningful connector and recommender.

By mid-August 2003, *Friendster* had 1.5 million registered accounts and was still growing exponentially. Both mainstream and alternative press had covered the site, yet word of mouth was the dominant entry point for most people. *Friendster's* popularity is primarily cluster-driven. Thus, if a handful of people in a subgroup know about it, everyone else does as well.

Yet, even with a word of mouth network, users are quite diverse and their different intentions and expectations bring a variety of challenges to the site.

FRIENDSTER AS A MEDIUM OF PRESENTATION

Friendster asks users to articulate and utilize their most intimate relationships, while simultaneously destroying the nuanced meaning of those connections. Additionally, *Friendster* assumes that users will authentically define their identity via their Profile so as to ensure more meaningful connections. While a tool for people to present their most personal selves and connect through their intimate relationships, *Friendster* fails to understand that publicly articulating one's social network and identity does not

provide the same level of trust and meaning as the behavior-driven offline equivalent.

Articulating a Social Network

In *Friendster*, one is asked to manually articulate one's network in a binary fashion: Friend or not. There is no indication of what it means for someone to be someone else's Friend, nor any way to indicate the role or value of the relationship. While some people are willing to indicate anyone as Friends, and others stick to a conservative definition, most users tend to connect with anyone who they know and don't have a strong negative feeling towards. Yet, this often means that people are indicated as Friends even though the user doesn't particularly know or trust the person. In some cases, it is necessary to be-Friend someone simply for political reasons. In other cases, people

want to connect broadly so that they may see a larger percentage of the network, since users can only browse 4 degrees from themselves.

As a result of the uncertainty of who one lists as Friends, it is difficult to gage the meaning or type of relationship between connections within the system. This inherently devalues the assumed trust implied by the term Friends. In turn, groups of people started using the term *Friendster* in regular conversation to describe one's Friends. For example, "She's not my friend, but she's my *Friendster*."

Such an articulation also disempowers the person presenting his network. As the hub of one's social network, power exists in the structural holes that one maintains [3]. By controlling what information flows

between different connections, one is able to maintain a significant role in transactions that occur, and thereby control information flow. This is the value of a headhunter or a businesswoman's Rolodex. Even at the simplest levels, people often don't want certain groups of friends to be able to reach out and connect with others, or for work colleagues to connect with personal friends. By asking users to articulate and collapse their network in a public way, *Friendster* is also asking them to give up their status as a connector.

The screenshot shows a user profile on Friendster. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links like Home, Invite, Gallery, Messages, Events, Shopping, Help, and Log Out. Below that, a 'Welcome Zephorial' message is displayed. The profile is divided into several sections:

- My Profile: [Edit Profile]**: A table with fields for Gender (Female), Interested in Meeting People for (Dating, Serious Relationship (Women and Men), Friends, Activity Partners), Status (Single), Age (25), Occupation (social networks researcher), Location (San Francisco, CA), and Hometown (Lancaster, PA).
- Interests**: A list of interests including people watching, intellectual culture, books, buddhism, computer-mediated communication, social networks, and technology.
- Favorite Music**: A list of music including psytrance/goa/trance, Infected Mushroom, San Kite, Ibooga/Digital Structures, downtempo, Thievery Corporation, Ani DiFranco, Erin McKeown, Ween, and White Stripes.
- Favorite Books**: A list of authors including Erving Goffman, Stanley Milgram, Jeanette Winterson, Eric Schlosser, Leslie Feinberg, Dorothy Allison, and Italo Calvino.
- Favorite Movies**: A list of movies including Amelie, Waking Life, Tank Girl, The Matrix, Clockwork Orange, and Koyaanisqatsi.
- About Me**: A paragraph of text describing the user as a geek, an activist, and an academic, fascinated by people and society. It mentions buzzwords like context, social networks, identity management, and musings on http://www.zephorial.org/thoughts/.
- Who I Want to Meet**: A paragraph of text describing the user's ideal match as someone who makes life's complexities seem simply elegant, is a partner in crime with an intellectual bent, and has a passion for creating change.
- Testimonials: [Edit Testimonials]**: A list of testimonials from other users, including 'SlowDuck' (07/30/2003) praising 'danah' as an inspirer, 'vered' (07/22/2003) praising 'danah' for her energy and loyalty, and 'Miriam' (06/01/2003) praising 'danah' for her wit and charm.

Presentation of Self

One's *Friendster* profile consists of five primary elements: 1) demographic information; 2) interest and self-description prose; 3) picture(s); 4) Friend listings; 5) Testimonials. By providing both the individual's perspective of self as well as that of his Friends, *Friendster* Profiles are much richer than those on other sites.

Yet, while a significant improvement, the Profile is still a coarse representation of the individual, which provides a limited and often skewed perspective [2]. It represents the individual's mood at the time of creation or update. The Friend information is rarely updated and people only remove Friends when there is an explosive end to the relationship, as opposed to the more common growing apart. Testimonials are only a tribute of the moment and reflect the same type of language one might see in a high school yearbook. Combined, *Friendster* Profiles and the network fails to evolve with the individual, yet that evolution is what makes one's network so meaningful.

Additionally, context is missing from what one is presenting. On one hand, an individual is constructing a Profile for a potential date. Yet, simultaneously, one must consider all of the friends, colleagues and other relations who might appear on the site. It can be argued that this means an individual will present a more truthful picture, but having to present oneself consistently across connections from various facets of one's life is often less about truth than about social appropriateness [1]. Notably, most users fear the presence of two people on *Friendster*: boss and mother.

Given these complications, it is both challenging to construct as well as to derive true meaning from others' Profiles. Without a sense of purpose, Profiles are quite varied and creative.

FAKESTERS: BEYOND ACCURACY

From very early on, people began exploiting *Friendster*'s architecture to create fake characters, also called Fakesters or Fraudsters. Three forms of Fakesters account for the majority of use:

- 1) Cultural characters that represent shared reference points with which people might connect (e.g. God, salt, Homer Simpson, George W Bush, and LSD);
- 2) Community characters that represent external collections of people to help congregate known groups (e.g. Brown University, Burning Man, Black Lesbians and San Francisco);
- 3) Passing characters meant to be perceived as real (e.g. duplicates of people on the system, representations of friends who refuse to participate).

When creating a Fakester, users go out of their way to be as creative as possible in articulating their Profile. People choose to be-Friend these characters when they connect with what is represented, value the creativity of the creator, or seek to expand their network.

Passing Fakesters are intended to represent non-participants or provide useful services. For example, a group of guys

created a fake female character to give them good Testimonials and to introduce them to interesting women.

More problematically, some Fraudsters are also created out of spite in order to confuse the network by having multiple representations of a single person, fraudulently operating as that person when interacting with others. Their venom is usually directed at *Friendster*'s creator, who feels as though Fakesters have no value in the system. While he has been systematically deleting fake Profiles ("Fakester Genocide"), their owners have started a "Fakester Revolution." Their antics include cloning fake characters and developing Fakesters intended to pass amidst the real people, often fraudulently representing the creator and his friends.

The Value of Fakesters

The argument against Fakesters is that they collapse the network, devaluing the meaning of connections between people on the system. This, of course, assumes that the network's value is in trusted links and that a Friend of a Fakester is going to be less trustworthy or compatible than the real, but virtually unknown, acquaintance of a friend. This also assumes that the primary use is in searching through the gallery for potential connections.

Most users do not browse via the central searchable index of Profiles; they navigate through Friends' Friends. Thus, they ignore Fakesters if they aren't interested. Yet, by and large, most people love the fake characters. They become little hidden treasures in the network and people go seeking out the most creative ones. Fakesters that represent groups allow people to more quickly find one's friends and acquaintances.

Those who create Fakesters value the opportunity for creative expression. Many also have "real" Profiles, but prefer exploring and relating to others via their masks.

Fakesters and Trust

While people love Fakesters, they also reflect the fundamental weakness of trust on *Friendster*. Is anything actually real? Even Community Fakesters don't authenticate that the individual actually belongs and is accepted by the represented community. One user told me that Fakesters were actually great because they reminded him that nothing presented on *Friendster* is actually real.

FRIENDSTER AS A SITE OF CONNECTION

People use *Friendster* to connect to others for a variety of reasons. Consistently, most users begin surfing *Friendster* by looking for people that they already know, either currently or in previous situations.

In doing so, it is assumed that there is value in reconnecting with long lost friends. For some, this is not true. One interviewee removed her account on *Friendster* when her high school boyfriend contacted her – she "didn't want [the] past dredged up." People often link to these found old Friends, even though they may now have little in common and cannot vouch for one another when friends want to connect.

Beyond individual connections, groups of people have organized FlashMobs, developed private "elite" clubs and started weekly pub gatherings through *Friendster*.

Fakesters have connected in rebellion. In one somber situation, a man with a *Friendster* account passed away in his sleep. His unconnected friends were able to pass on information to one another via the site.

Dating Via Friendster

The ways in which people connect for dating highlight the value people place in the network, and how they circumnavigate trust issues in order to develop intimacy.

Hookups

As with any online dating site, people surf the site for hookups as well as potential partners. While the suggested theory is that friends-of-friends are the most compatible partners, hookups often occur regardless of the network. Or rather, many looking for hookups prefer to be 3 or 4 degrees apart so as to not complicate personal matters. In addition to in-town hookups, *Friendster* users tell me that they also use the site to find hookups in cities to which they are traveling. This behavior is undoubtedly what instigated the mock site *STD-ster*.

Who's your Friend?

Sometimes, people unintentionally fail to introduce their single friends to one another. By having a public articulation of one's network, it is really easy to look at Friends' Friends and bug the intermediary about potential compatibility. While 3 and 4 degrees are often meaningless to people, there is a decent amount of trust in second-degree connections, simply because they can be easily confirmed via a shared connection.

Familiar Strangers

When Stanley Milgram coined the term "Familiar Strangers," he was referring to the strangers that one sees regularly, but never connects with [5]. Given additional contexts, an individual is quite likely to approach a familiar stranger. For many, *Friendster* provides that additional context. In browsing the site, users find people that they often see out. From the Profile, one can guess another's dating status and sexuality as well as interests and connections. Often, this is enough additional information to prompt a user into messaging someone on *Friendster* or approaching them offline.

Commercializing Connections

Two users, believing in the value of their network, decided to try to *eBay* connections. In their ads, they promised both *Friendster* and real-life connections to hipsters, artists, musicians, record labels, etc. One was far more serious, while the other was simply eager to make a point:

Selling access to your friends network [...] concretizes the commodification inherent to *Friendster*. [...] The only real shortcoming is that the 'self' you're packaging on *Friendster* is a strictly delimited individual - but when I'm selling my network on *eBay*, the value is determined by my extended self, defined by its relationships and surfaces rather than content - in other words, the true

me, in its full, fragmented, postmodern glory, all the more true the instant a dollar value is placed on it!

FRIENDSTER AS A SITE OF INTIMACY

As a site for intimacy, *Friendster* has complicated the notion of trust. On one hand, it reveals one's most intimate relations, mixed with acquaintances, familiar strangers and past associates. Additionally, the site tries to capture one's most intimate notions of self, but fails to allow the individual to negotiate how that is publicized. Yet, by limiting access to those within 4 degrees, *Friendster* implies that a user's visibility is only available to trusted connections.

Friendster fails to realize that the trust implied in one's social network cannot be easily imported into a space modeled on performed identity and publicly articulated social networks. Yet, the site is ill-equipped to handle how people might connect via this new architecture.

Fakesters have created a playful space to explore identity and relations beyond authentication. Of course, this further highlights weaknesses of trusting articulated selves. Although intended to alleviate the blatant devaluing of connections, *Friendster's* "Fakester genocide" is seen as squashing creativity and trying to control the ways in which people regulate privacy, relationships, and self, so as to protect themselves in a public space.

As we think about intimate (ubiquitous) computing, we must reflect on how architectural changes fundamentally alter the ways in which people connect socially. While simply trying to help people connect in a more efficient and meaningful manner, *Friendster* has inadvertently uncovered a hornet's nest around articulated public identity, reshaped how groups of people verbally identify relationships, and solidified the importance of creative play in social interaction. Yet, amidst the confusion, intimacy flourishes, although often in unexpected forms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Peter Lyman and Scott Lederer for support, all Fakesters and Realsters for their stories, and Tribe.net, KR D, and Washington Post for funding the focus groups.

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