

Profiles as Conversation: Networked Identity Performance on Friendster

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Abstract

Profiles have become a common mechanism for presenting one's identity online. With the popularity of online social networking services such as Friendster.com, Profiles have been extended to include explicitly social information such as articulated "Friend" relationships and Testimonials. With such Profiles, users do not just depict themselves, but help shape the representation of others on the system. In this paper, we will discuss how the performance of social identity and relationships shifted the Profile from being a static representation of self to a communicative body in conversation with the other represented bodies.

We draw on data gathered through ethnography and reaffirmed through data collection and visualization to analyze the communicative aspects of Profiles within the Friendster service. We focus on the role of Profiles in context creation and interpretation, negotiating unknown audiences, and initiating conversations. Additionally, we explore the shift from conversation to static representation, as active Profiles fossilize into recorded traces.

1. Introduction

The body is a complex site of communication, allowing information to be expressed through subtle nuances of voice and gesture. Our ability to read and perform these myriad acts is so natural that, in practice, we rarely stop and parse each cue to think about what it is helping the system portray as a whole. Conversations emerge when social individuals weave performance and interpretation into an intricate dance. Deconstruction of everyday conversation must move beyond words and observe the rich data of the voice and body as a whole; communication is not only a linguistic process, but also a multimodal exchange of meaningful information.

Performance scholars hold that communication is inherently embodied and contextually dependent; the performance studies framework integrates theories from sociology and anthropology, linguistics and philosophy, as well as dance, art and theatre. The study of dance is explicitly concerned with the staged conversation that occurs through the body [9] while

psychologists who study the face are interested in understanding what goes on behind the words through the manipulation of thousands of tiny muscles [5]. For example, while emotions like disgust and fear may be present in the spoken conversation, their existence in the face is inevitable and this is an active part of any conversation. The context in which conversations occur plays an active role in the conversation itself [4]; interpreting conversations requires understanding the interplay between conversation, bodies and other elements of context.

Embodied interaction is taken for granted in everyday communication, but mediated conversations require individuals to write themselves into being [13]. The architectural structure of digital life alters the ways in which conversations can and do occur. Historically, research on digital conversations has focused on the most literal form of text, a reflection of the typographical written culture that dominates digital communication [11]. This is logical given the prevalence of such expressions, but with increased bandwidth, mobile technologies ill-suited for textual expression, and a proliferation of multimedia capture devices, digital communication now incorporates multiple forms of media bridging the physical and digital. Researchers from diverse fields are converging to analyze digital communication through a broad set of theoretical and methodological approaches.

For example, blogs and photosharing communities have presented new issues for thinking about conversations. While both are recognized as forms of conversations [6,8,15], the simultaneously public and private nature of this media for sharing complicates traditional conceptions of communication. Analyses of conversations are usually concerned with the speaker(s) and the recipient(s), implicitly assuming that the speaker has a conception of the audience. In digital environments, the lack of presence makes it difficult to know who is listening. Thus, *how are unknown audiences negotiated?*

Not only is an identifiable audience missing from digital environments, so are other essential contextual cues. Because social context is culturally embedded in physical architecture and reinforced through the

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audience, the lack of walls and visible audience creates a gap in context. If context is necessary for conversation, *how is context transferred, created, and interpreted in digital environments?*

In order to initiate a conversation, people must not only have an audience, but also have a sense of what approach might be effective so that the conversation does not flop. Given the issues of audience and context, *how are conversations initiated online?*

Once a conversation has begun, it requires regular intervals of performance and interpretation, sensing when shifts must be made. Conversations often have a goal, either to accomplish some form of information exchange, speech act, or interpersonal bonding. *What are the goals of digital conversations and how are they maintained?*

Digital expressions have properties not normally considered in everyday life; they are easily copied, searched, or archived. In digital conversations, *what are the possibilities and consequences of replicability, searchability, and persistence?*

In order to begin addressing these questions, we focus our analysis on performative communication in Friendster, a social networking service built out of Profiles. Communication on Friendster happens at many levels and through multiple mediums, and we highlight how multiple channels are used throughout the conversational processes identified above.

1.1. What is Friendster?

Friendster is a social networking service with over fifteen million Profiles linked together through a network of articulated "friendship" connections. Designed as a dating service, users are required to craft Profiles that indicate demographic information, interests and relationship status along with a photograph and a self-description. Users signal their relationships with others by mutually referencing the others' Profile. Such relationships are marked as Friends and appear on both users' Profiles. Friends may write Testimonials to each other; after approval, these also appear on a user's Profile.

By adding Friends and Testimonials, Friendster shifts the typical dating profile. Combined with a structural limitation of only being able to view Profiles that are four degrees away, these additional

features were designed to improve the level of trust within the system by allowing people to signal their valuation of others in the system. The underlying assumption was that people feel more comfortable and have more success dating friends of friends due to established context and trust.

While Friendster was certainly used for dating, a much wider array of behaviors occurred, particularly during the early adoption period. By inviting people to perform identity to friends, Friendster motivated people to grapple with explicit presentations of self, creatively build playful networks, and engage their competitive and voyeuristic tendencies.

Friendster launched in beta in 2002, growing exponentially throughout 2003. Its popularity spread by word of mouth through urban social groups, initially gay men, bloggers, and attendees of the Burning Man Festival (Burners). By 2004, the service was dominated by individuals living in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. While early adopters are still present on the service, their active use has declined dramatically. During the peak, some users were spending 12-16 hours a day on the site. Friendster had significant subcultural capital [14] and was critical to acceptance in urban social circles. Today, most early adopters have eschewed the service, calling it "so 2003."

Nevy Valentine is your friend
you have 49 friends in common

Nevy Valentine joined Jun 2003 | last login 05/27/2005

message | new! chat | add testimonial | submit photo | bookmark

Gender: Female
Interested in Meeting People for: Dating Men and Women, Friends
Age: 25
Location: San Francisco, CA
Zodiac Sign: Sagittarius
Hometown: CT
Occupation: Corporate time-bomb
Hobbies and Interests: rock climbing, ballet, impractical footwear, high-profile luncheons, uncovering fetishes, memes vs. social pathogens, couture, polymory, flopping, costume events, makin' love/expecting rain
Favorite Books: love in the time of cholera, the god of small things, a heartbreaking work..., widow for one year, anything by zora neale hurston, mrs. dalloway, animal dreams, where the wild things are, the little prince, the lover, multi milan kundera novels
Favorite Movies: breathless, the princess bride, pulp fiction, la cite des enfants perdus, los amantes del circulo polar, until the end of the world, todo sobre mi madre, sex y lucia, girl on the bridge, the blowup, amelie, the lover, tampopo
Favorite Music: tori amos, outkast, old R.E.M., stevie winwood, breaks, liz phair, massive attack, common, ani difranco, radiohead, pi harvey, paul simon, the roots, karsh kale, manu chao, sheryl crow, keith jarrett, k&D, mr. bob dylan, nina simone, joni mitchell
Favorite TV Shows: eek south park, simpsons, sex in the city (but i have no tv)
About Me: trouble. right down to the manolo blahniks.
Who I Want to Meet: it would be smashing good luck if a rebel rebel came along and rocked my gypsy soul.

Testimonials

from	testimonial
John 12/10/2004	I will always be indebted to Nevada. She woke me up to a world of love, passion and intrigue. I learned that I should value myself and others more than I had in the past. She encouraged and supported me through many challenges. Her creativity and spirit are not to be overlooked.
Stephen 02/06/2004	Warning! Prepare your senses to be assaulted when this fiery one walks in the room with her sexy attitude, wild hair, crazy costumes, and booty shakin attitude. Don't let all the action distract you; she's more than just the life of the party. If you can get in close enough, dodging her high kicks, piercing squeels, leather toys and poutettes, you'll find the devoted, reliable, and loving friend I call "Wife."

Friends Of Nevy Valentine

Susan | Heather | SpaceCowbo | John
see all (198)

Figure 1: Example Friendster Profile. Note: This Profile has been altered for demonstration; elements have been deleted and layout altered.

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1.2. Methodology

In order to study the dynamics of Friendster, we used two different methodologies: ethnography and visualization. The ethnographic component consisted of a 9-month participant-observation during 2003, including interviews, qualitative surveys and focus groups with over 200 Friendster early adopters [2]. 1.5 million member profiles were collected in late 2003 using a breadth-first-search from three source profiles and archived.

Informed by the ethnography, we then developed an egocentric interactive visualization for exploration and analysis of collected profiles. The visualization design supports the practices we found most common in Friendster use – surfing through Friends, browsing photos, exploring Profiles, and searching for common interests. Our visualization allows connections between numerous friendship groups to be revealed within a single frame, while providing facilities for community analysis, search, and visual analysis of Profile data. For more details of the visualization, readers are referred to [7].

The visualization played two different roles in our analysis. First, it gave us a visual means to confirm ethnographic observations, particularly concerning the presence and composition of dense network clusters. Visual analysis was particularly important given the prominent role of user-provided photos within the service. Second, by deploying the visualization to Friendster users, we were able to elicit additional narratives. Interactive visualization is a valuable ethnographic tool because it allows participants to view their behavior from an altered vantage point. Friendster users could now see a holistic view of the structure of their network and that of their friends. By using the tool, early adopters helped us understand different network clusters, how they formed, and their history both within and outside of the service. They also provided information about their practices by commenting on what did and did not work in the tool. In tandem, ethnography and visualization allowed us to assess and confirm different underlying practices. This paper draws on narratives collected during both phases to discuss performative conversations.

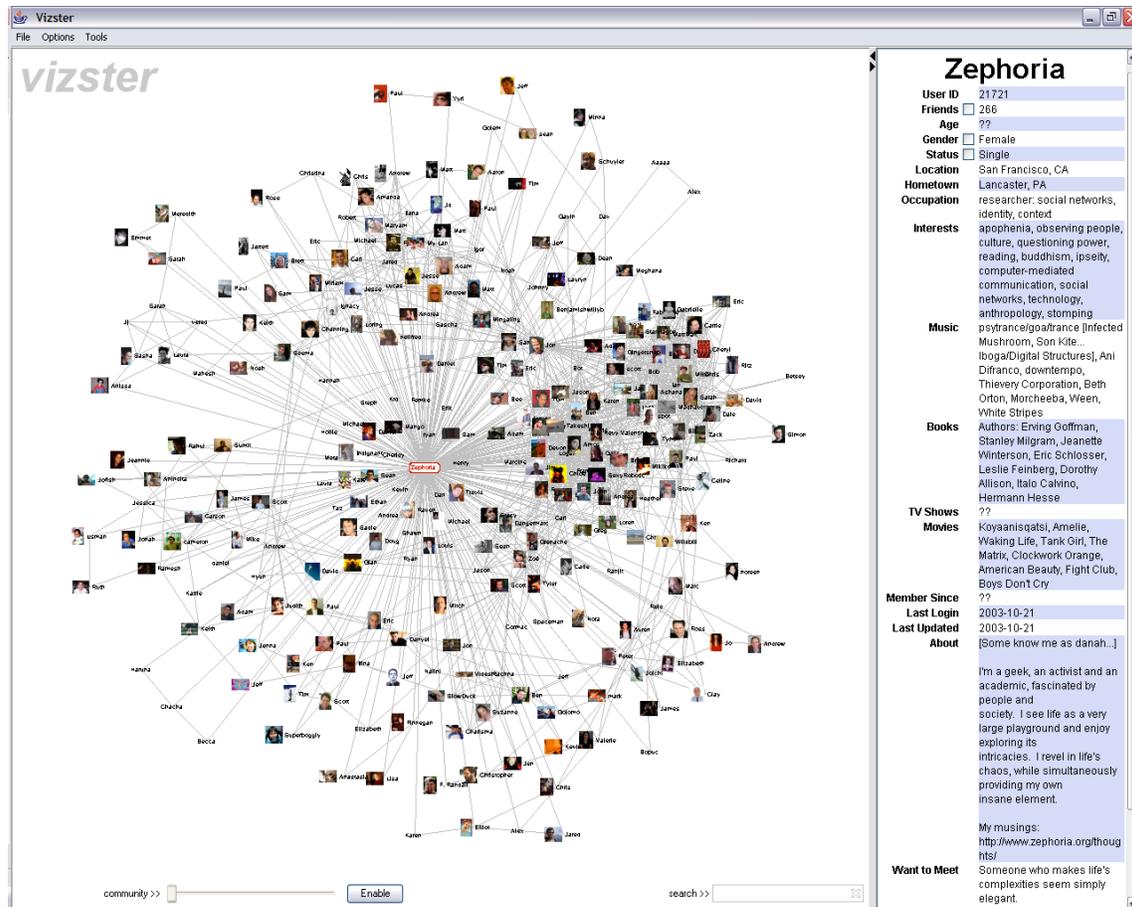


Figure 2: Friendster network visualization tool. The egocentric visualization was used to explore hypotheses from the ethnography and to elicit additional feedback from Friendster end-users. The dense cluster on the right represents a tightly-knit group of “Burners” in Zephoria’s network.

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2. Creating and interpreting context

When conversing, people actively read the context of a situation in order to determine what is socially appropriate. In physical environments, people intuit social norms based on the cues present in both the architecture and people present. The information available in user interfaces does not typically have the same resonance. Physical architectures change over time and people's interactions with them leave traces, providing additional meaningful information [16]. By contrast, digital interfaces are dead – they do not show the wear of use and are often too generic to convey meaningful social cues.

In order to derive contextual cues, people must rely on what is available in a particular place. In lieu of the physical, artifacts of digital performance create the digital body. Through interaction with other digital bodies, the artifacts of performance create the context of a digital environment. People must interpret those performances in order to understand the social context and thus, what is socially permissible and expected.

2.1. Network effects

Participants typically learned of Friendster through friends and joined after receiving multiple invitations from different friends. Once inside, they are able to view the articulated performances of their friends and those friends' friends, defining the context appropriate for their own Profile. In the case of Burners, newcomers would see that their friends used their "Playa name" (nickname used at the festival), uploaded photos from Burning Man or other related parties, and listed a set of interests resonant with Burner culture. In turn, newcomers would do the same, reinforcing the Burner-esque sub-culture within Friendster. Navigating the network via friends lists, users get the impression that the service is relatively homogenous; from an egocentric perspective, it is.

Using our visualization tool, it was possible to visually confirm the locally homogeneous nature of Friendster. Homophily, or "birds of a feather stick together," is present on Friendster, just as in everyday social networks [10]. Friend groups are also densely connected with numerous bridges between groups from the same sub-culture, regardless of geography. Given homogeneous visual appearances, users primarily invited people who they felt would "fit in," reinforcing internal homophily.

2.2. Negotiating unknown audiences

When people speak, they typically have a sense of to whom they are speaking. Even in a public setting, speakers gauge the potential audience and the volume of their voice to derive an expected audience. Digital

environments do not afford this luxury. Projections into the persistent digital public are accessible to anyone present now or later. Thus, even if one can evaluate the audience at a given time, it is impossible to gauge future potential audience.

As the service grew, the population diversified and people were often faced with the presence of groups that would not otherwise be bridged. Bosses now had access to employees' friend groups and it became increasingly difficult to determine the social context. Users had to address multiple disconnected audiences simultaneously.

In everyday life, people typically maintain facets through a segmentation of place. For example, work and the pub are (often) geographically disjoint. Friendster does not have the architectural walls of the physical world. Thus, while users generated local contexts on the service to serve the needs of a particular cluster of people, as the clusters converged, so did the contexts. The only structure is the social network and, thus, the office and pub become one. While users reacted by taming their Profile data to be generally acceptable, Friend and Testimonial data prove far more incriminating. Without leaving them, an individual cannot escape the effect their Friends have on their performance. In negotiating unknown audiences, people must be prepared to explain both their performance and that of their Friends.

The dilemma of collapsed contexts and unknown audiences can best be illustrated through the story of a 26-year old teacher in San Francisco. She created her Profile when all of her Burner friends joined the service. After a group of her students joined the service, they approached her to question her about her drug habits and her friendship with a pedophile. Although her Profile had no reference to drugs or even to Burning Man, many of her friends had both. Furthermore, one of her friends had crafted a Profile that contained an image of him in a Catholic schoolgirl uniform with Testimonials referencing his love of small girls. While his friends knew this to be a joke, the teacher's students did not. The teacher was faced with an impossible predicament. If she removed her Profile or disconnected to her friends, she admitted guilt. Yet, there was no change she could make to her Profile and it was inappropriate to ask her friends to change theirs. Although teachers keep strict physical distance from their students during off-hours, it may prove impossible to maintain a similar distance in online environments.

While some users may sense their audience at a particular point in time, they have no conception of who might have access to their expressions later. Furthermore, while the network was growing rapidly, users were not aware of the new branches in the

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network that were emerging. When the audience shifted to include bosses, parents, colleagues, and students, many users felt discomfort. Yet, users were not aware that headhunters were actively lurking on Friendster in order to document candidates' "extra-curricular" life. From advertisement agencies to journalists, a plethora of users lurked in Friendster in order to capitalize on the network. Nevy Valentine (Figure 1) was horrified when she opened the *San Francisco Chronicle* to discover that her Profile was featured, including her occupation of "corporate time-bomb." Her potential audience did not include all *Chronicle* readers and she was not prepared to explain her Profile choices to people like her boss.

2.3. Disruptive playful contexts

While some early adopters viewed Friendster as a serious tool for networking, others were more interested in creating non-biographical characters for playful purposes. Referred to as Fakesters, these Profiles represented everything from famous people (e.g., Angelina Jolie) and fictional characters (Homer Simpson) to food (Lucky Charms), concepts (Pure Evil), and affiliations (Brown University). Some Fakesters were created to connect people with common affiliations, geography, or interests. The most active and visible Fakesters, however, were primarily crafted for play.

The Fakester Profiles were viewed as artistic creations; their creators spending numerous hours crafting engaging Profiles meant to inspire and entertain. Appreciative users surfed the network in a treasure-hunt fashion seeking out amusing Fakesters and linking to them, either because they could identify with the representation or because they wanted to share particular Fakesters with Friends.

The economy of Fakesters was built on attention. Fakesters linked to anyone who would reciprocate, building tightly knit networks of Fakesters and appreciative users. Making Friends helped Fakesters be more visible both by being listed on numerous Profiles and by increasing the number of Profiles that are within four degrees. Early on, the "most popular" (visible) Profiles were listed on everyone's homepage and many Fakesters strived to be on that list. When this feature was eliminated, the competing Profiles were "Burning Man" and "Ali G" and each had over 10,000 Friends.

Although some users valued Fakesters' antics, Fakesters actively irritated more serious users and the company itself. Fakesters collapsed the network, making it hard to tell how connected two people were because there was typically a Fakester between them. Their extensive networks also taxed the server, magnifying Friendster's endemic database problems.

The company responded by deleting Fakesters, initiating a whack-a-mole competition where Fakesters and Friendster competed for dominance. Irritated by the deletion of Fakester Profiles, a group of active Fakesters formed the "Fakester Revolution" to end the "Fakester Genocide." One tactic was the development of Fraudsters, or fraudulently crafted Profiles that duplicated others on the system in order to wreak havoc. Profile farms recreated deleted Fakesters and developed Pretendsters—realistic looking Profiles using random photos from the web. Pretendsters and Fraudsters supported the Fakesters by linking to them and helping expand their networks.

Fakesters had a significant impact on the cultural context of Friendster. In their resistance, their primary goal was to remind users that, "none of this is real." They saw purportedly serious Profiles as fantastical representations of self, while the Testimonials and popularity aspect of the Friend network signified the eternal struggle to make up for being alienated in high school. Through play, Fakesters escaped the awkward issues around approving Friends and dealing with collapsed contexts, mocking the popularity contest. Their play motivated other participants to engage in creative performance, but at the same time, their gaming created a schism in the network resulting in a separation between playful participants and serious networkers.

3. Conversing through Profiles

The process of developing and interpreting context is simultaneously a foundation for communication and a conversation itself. Conversations occur when people exchange information in a communicative dance, sharing not simply for self-gratification but in order to engage the other person to share in return. A performance becomes a conversation when it is not simply to be viewed, but becomes a dialogue.

Context is not produced structurally but through the performative conversations of the collective. By altering their Profiles to engage with others, participants are setting the stage for conversation and communicating as well. Interaction in Friendster occurs in both semi-public and one-to-one private spaces. The basic form of private communication is the messaging system. These messages are similar to email except that each message comes with a photo and the relationship that one has to the other person, providing a valuable form of context for conversation. Testimonial and Friend requests also appear as private messages; users can decide whether or not to accept these invitations and move the private display of connection into a public forum. Semi-public textual conversations can be had through the bulletin board system. Profiles themselves are effectively public

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performances that are limited by the visibility constraints within Friendster.

Just as users are expected to perform and interpret identity through Profiles, the messaging system is designed to be the primary point of conversation. Users intent on dating through the service follow this expected behavior, but those who use the service for playful interaction do not. Profiles are used both as conversation starters and conversation itself. Not all initiated conversations are reciprocated and not all of those that are stay within the confines of Friendster.

3.1. Initiating conversations

"Which Suicide Girl are you?" After receiving multiple messages requesting her porn site, danah was able to uncover an example of how others were interpreting Profiles for interactions not deemed appropriate by the service. Members of the pin-up porn site Suicide Girls were active participants on Friendster. While they were not allowed to advertise their association with the site or their URL, their Profiles connect to Profiles of their fellow porn divas and their clients, mostly older white men. Because danah's Profile included links to Silicon Valley businessmen, links to her young half-naked friends and a risqué photo, her performance was interpreted as that of a porn star.

While images serve as conversational anchors [12], Profiles represent individual embodiment. The content provides both context for the service as well as information about an individual's identity. Profiles are interpreted as conversational anchors similar to clothing, providing valuable cues about the individual such as potentially shared interests. Yet, just as with clothing, Profile cues are culturally situated and can be misinterpreted. In some cases, Profiles unintentionally convey misleading information.

As participants learned to perform themselves on Friendster, they developed cues intended for particular audiences. Subversive information was often conveyed in a coded form. Teenagers, who were not permitted on the 18+ service, often identified themselves by altering their age. By signaling 61 or 71, they were able to find other 16 and 17-year-old users. Using juvenile humor, teens also collectively choose 69 as another common marker. By coding their age, teenagers could signal their identity and search for other underage users.

Given the service's root as a dating site, Profile content was regularly used to invite conversation. Relationship status and the "Who I want to meet" section allowed participants to explicitly convey their openness to conversation. Subversive information was often conveyed in a less-explicit form. Drug dealers in Baltimore used Friendster to distribute cocaine. By

describing upcoming parties on their Profile, they attracted users who were "in the know," vetting them via the messaging system.

Recognizing the power of Profiles as conversational starters, a group of men created "Anne" – a Profile of a desirable woman. At first, they simply linked to Anne to signal that they had attractive female friends. They figured that Anne could contact other women on the service to play matchmaker, explaining that her friend was shy but thought that she was attractive. Much to the guys' shock, their friends started asking Anne out on dates, revealing their manner of approaching women. Discomforted by this, they deleted Anne. While Profiles can offer conversational anchors, what they anchor is not always what users expect.

In each of these examples, Profiles convey different types of conversational starters, regardless of their intended expression. What motivates a user to contact an interesting person varies, but consistently, male users do the bulk of contacting and they usually write to members of the sex to which they are attracted, reinforcing the dating aspect of the service. For men seeking engagement, a "single" status is perceived as an invitation, prompting some women to indicate "In a relationship" to discourage interactions (a digital equivalent to wedding bands). Yet, by doing so, women were faced with having to explain their deceptive act to their friends and colleagues.

While some women were upset by the way in which their Profiles were read as conversational starters, straight men often complained about how rarely anyone contacted them. For them, the Profile was not a conversational starter, even though they wished it were. This dynamic parallels the ways in which men and women approach each other in heterosexual society, whereby the norm is for men to approach women and not vice versa.

3.2. Be my Friendster

While Friendster permits all sorts of performance and play, at its core, Friendster is socially awkward. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Friending process. Relationships are declared and in order to connect with someone, you must click a button that says "Add Friend." A message is then sent to that person. Until they deal with the request, a notification will be on their home page. To deal with it is algorithmically simple: "Add as friend: yes | no." Yet, what does that mean? Users struggled over what friendship meant in the context of Friendster, trying to decide if only close friends counted. Some felt uncomfortable turning away strangers. In the end, most people accepted Friend requests from anyone they knew, or even vaguely recognized.

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Embedded in Friend requests is an invitation to converse. When users found old friends, they asked them to be Friends as a way of initiating conversation. Upon acceptance, users would often begin a dialogue. Of course, not everyone was happy to receive messages from long-forgotten acquaintances, yet it was also rude to ignore them. In addition to strangers and long-forgotten acquaintances, participants were faced with Friend requests from people known in a different social setting than the context they created within Friendster. Yet, how does one say no to a Friend request from one's boss?

Part of what makes this difficult is that on Friendster, all Friends are treated equally. There is no comfortable way to indicate the varying types of relationships, as no one wants to publicly indicate that one friend is more significant than another. In deciding how to handle a Friend request, one is faced with the significance of publicly displaying their relationships and the possible consequences of this, especially when people are not aware of a relationship between Friends. For example, after connecting with one of her graduate students, a professor started receiving regular requests for dates and hook-ups from her students' Friends, placing both her and her student in an awkward situation.

Although building a network of Friends was expected to support dating habits by increasing trust within the system, many users found that initiating conversations with complete strangers was far more comfortable. When looking for hook-ups, users typically initiated conversations with people four degrees away, as far removed from one's friend group as possible. It was assumed that this would limit the potential social harm of talking to Friends' Friends.

3.3. Testifying speech

Friendster was designed for identity performance to be public, but conversations to be primarily private. While bulletin board systems were initially public, Testimonials were conceived as simply another feature for identity performance. Yet, through Testimonials, Profiles became a site of performative conversations for playful Fakesters.

While some users were interested in developing private conversations, the Fakesters were interested in the opportunities for public performance. Although they would communicate privately between each other, they also carried out conversations through Testimonials and by changing their Profiles to reflect their interactions with other Fakesters.

Giant Squid's Testimonials (Figure 3) exemplify the playful conversations that took place in this form. It is common for Fakesters to connect their identity with the identity of the person for whom they are

writing the Testimonial about. Girl Drink's identity is critical to the form of her output – her Testimonials are always drink recipes reflecting attributes of the recipient. HelloBadKitty, on the other hand, uses Testimonials to discuss the imagined relationship between the recipient and herself. Her Testimonials are conversational and the second one is a response to Giant Squid's reciprocation on her Profile.

Some Fakesters developed their own brand of Testimonials, although the process was often long and drawn-out. Quotester leaves her mark by espousing

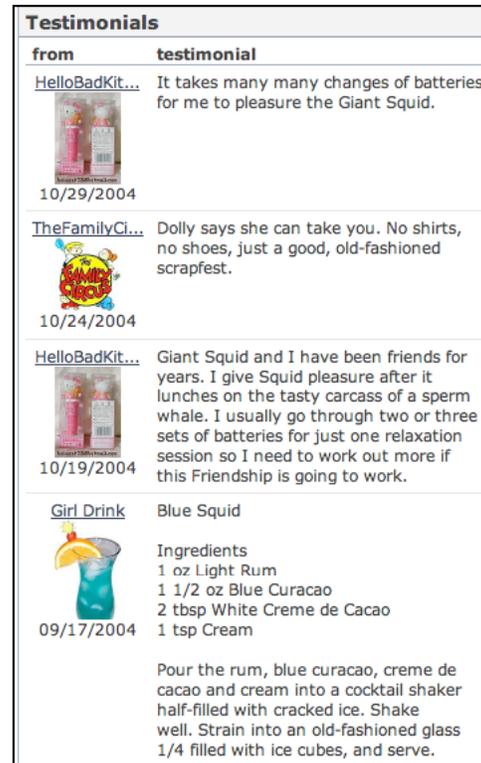


Figure 3: Giant Squid's Testimonials

obscure quotes. When others reciprocate or respond, she offers another quote. Her private messages always contain quotes as well. Two seasoning Fakesters – Salt and Pepper – wrote extensive love notes about how they complemented and challenged each other during the act of food making. In addition to the Testimonials they wrote on each other's Profile, they wrote Testimonials to other food items about their compatibilities and relationship with other foods.

Testimonial conversations occurred across Profiles in part because users could not respond through their own Profile. Thus, threaded conversations jump from Profile to Profile, tying together different characters and performing the bonds that connect. Profiles with multiple entries from one user are rabbit holes for finding conversations, inviting users to follow along.

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Testimonials represented the primary form of public conversation between Fakesters, although their interactions would sometimes bleed into other mediums. In-character theatrical exchanges between Fakesters would occur on external sites and mailing lists, keeping up the public performance. When Fakesters would message each other privately, they would often stay in character. The playful public sparring spawned friendships between creators. Although Fakesters reported not being interested in dating, relationships between Fakesters did emerge.

While the Testimonials of Fakesters were meant to be more broadly accessible, many "Realsters" included in-jokes and referenced physical encounters. While the content may not be accessible, intimate Testimonials clearly signaled the strength of people's relationship. While Testimonials were designed for friends to recommend each other as lovers, in actuality, they provided a different type of social glue. People mastered use of the pithy Testimonial to simultaneously recognize the value of the receiver, validate the relationship, and reflect on the writer. Figure 4 shows a sample of Testimonials from Jean, a 29-year-old participant from Los Angeles. Just as HelloBadKitty had engaged Giant Squid through back and forth Testimonials, Jenka's second entry is in response to Jean's reciprocal post on her Profile.

Testimonial authorship is not self-less. Reciprocity is expected and failure to gift a Testimonial in return signals disrespect at best. Herein lies the root to how Testimonials became conversational. While some users would not respond to a reciprocated Testimonial, others continue with the cycle.

Testimonials provide a logical site for ongoing performative conversations. While the Testimonial is technically between the author and the receiver, it is equally intended for third parties. Crafting a Testimonial is inherently performative and given their

public nature, authors worked diligently to craft witty inscriptions. While Testimonials appear on the receiver's Profile, users would often seek out Testimonials written by someone with an interesting Profile to get a better sense of who they were. Both Profiles and Testimonials are performative, yet the Testimonials one writes are perceived as better indicators of a person's personality than either their constructed Profile or the Testimonials their Friends write about them.

3.4. Communication through photos

Photos are the most noticeable component of Profile identity performance and active users update their photos regularly to convey various things about themselves. Because Friendster photos appear on all Friends' Profiles, they become a part of the performance of that individual. Although primarily identity markers and conversation starters, the photos themselves have conversational properties.

Following any spectacular event, it is common to see a shift in photos whereby everyone who attended uses a photo from that event to signal participation. While photosharing amongst friends is common, friends would often select particular images for each other to include on Friendster, creating another gifting structure. Upon receiving such a photo, it would be in poor taste to not display it. The most significant mass shift in photos occurred in September 2003, following Burning Man. Upon returning, users immediately uploaded photos of themselves in the desert. Including event photos is simultaneously a signal of friendship structure to outsiders and an expression of appreciation to friends. The conversational value stems from bridging the digital and physical worlds through performance in order to increase context rather than simply the dialogue through the photos.

Another form of photo communication occurred in the fall of 2003 after the controversial California Proposition 54 was put on the ballot. As a political statement, a few users changed their Friendster photo to include text that said "No on 54." This meme spread within Friendster and hundreds (if not thousands) of users altered their photos to communicate this message, prompting conversations on the bulletin boards and in private messaging from users who wanted to understand the statement.

3.5. Across channels

As a phenomenon, Friendster was deeply intertwined with physical communities and everyday life. Walking around San Francisco in the summer of 2003, it was impossible to ignore Friendster; the topic dominated bar and cafe culture and WiFi users would make a display out of surfing the site. Online, bloggers discussed the slowness of the service,

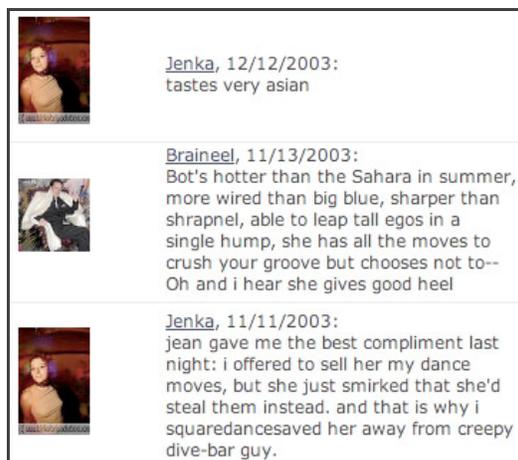


Figure 4: Jean's Testimonials

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Fakesters, and Friendster addiction. Innumerable stories connect the digital service with the physical world. In everyday vernacular, the term "Friendster" began to signal both the service and a Friendship with an acquaintance on the service. For example, "she's not my friend but she's my Friendster."

Friendster was used in various other ways to bridge the physical and digital. Online conversations would move offline and after returning from a club or bar, people would research the people they found attractive at the event, particularly to determine dating status. A group of Neo-Nazis used the service to track down people of color. Two users sold their Friendster network on eBay, promising to introduce their Friends to the buyer. In New York, there were invite-only Friendster parties for hipsters to meet the Friends they did not know. When a young man died unexpectedly in Massachusetts shortly after moving there, his new friends used Friendster to organize a funeral. Friendster bridged the digital and physical cultures that surrounded it.

While the physical is often brought into the digital, the ways in which the digital manifested itself offline reveals the role of Friendster in these communities. Friendster complemented the everyday social structure by providing an additional mechanism for communication and information.

4. Frozen performances

The persistence of Friendster data is variable. Because access requires a login/password, nothing is archived publicly except material that has been copied to the web. When users update their Profiles, old data is lost and the limit on photos means that users delete photos before uploading new ones. Profiles that were deleted by Friendster during the Fakester Genocide or by users are also permanently gone along with all direct records of their activity: written Testimonials, private messages, and bulletin board posts.

While early adopters updated their Profiles regularly, they did not sustain this practice. Bored of Friendster, many abandoned their Profiles, logging in occasionally to confirm Friend requests or answer messages. Without fresh material, the Profiles are static depictions of live conversations, frozen performances, outdated representations of self. They reflect a time when Friendster was "cool." In essence, these Profiles are a time capsule.

When 20-year old Mark Hull died in May 2003, he was very active on Friendster. To this day, his Profile remains – a ghost performing his identity in absentia. For his friends, this presence is eerie [1]. Hull's performance stopped mid-conversation; there are still Friends and Testimonials to approve. The Profile does

not reflect someone who has grown bored and turned it into something that can peacefully be static.

As Friendster's popularity amongst early adopters waned, activity died down. Profiles became lifeless and formulaic before their users stopped returning; no new Testimonials had appeared in months. The depletion of energy is written into the Profile, visible and lifeless. While energetic Testimonials are still accessible, newer ones seem misplaced. The most active public conversations were destroyed during the Fakester Genocide and bulletin boards were shifted to being for friends-only. Flourishing conversations retreated into the shadows and eventually off the service. Testimonials reflected the past. With the destruction of public conversations, what remains visible is largely neglected.

The persistence of this data has an eerie quality to it, not because of hypothetical potential harm but because of the frozen nature of it. How will these Profiles look in ten years? In twenty? Will it be a digital graveyard or perhaps a digital wax museum? Will it be a digital historical site that must remain or will it disappear unarchived if the company fails?

Often, the topic of persistent conversations raises critical privacy issues. What happens when your future boss accesses your information? What happens when a big company buys your data? What happens when your social network is modeled? Yet, Friendster enabled all of that in real-time.

Persistence is usually conceptualized as a long-term issue. When Google made 1983 Usenet data available twenty years later, people were outraged and yet little fuss is made over data currently being generated for posterity. With Friendster, time sped up. The rapid spread in popularity meant that a shift in context happened monthly and users experienced innumerable issues concerning persistence in rapid-fire secession. Contexts collapsed, conceptions of audience shattered, and the ability to negotiate without social awkwardness was rendered impossible.

4.1. Public / Private

For all intents and purposes, Friendster appeared to be a local gathering place for friends. The limited network view one could have at any specific moment cultivated a private feel. Yet, there's little private about four degrees of separation when six supposedly separates the world. As the network grew, users would laugh at having hundreds of thousands of people in their friend networks.

In everyday spaces, context informs people of the degree to which an environment is public. Online, one must assume that everything is public. Yet, public online connotes an entirely different form of public than its physical equivalent. Public expressions in the

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park are ephemeral and the audience is known; online, neither applies. Additionally, hearsay in offline environments is not the same as a perfectly copied conversation online. Persistence and exact copies are not something that people think to negotiate when they think about the nature of being public, yet these are features inherent to public expression online.

By conceptualizing a private context in Friendster, participants perceived a level of publicity that never was. As the service's popularity grew and the crowds came rushing in, conversations held in private were exposed to a much greater public than one normally imagines. Neither the teacher nor Nevy Valentine understood the degree to which their expressions were public and they were startled when their Profiles spread to different groups and different media.

5. Conclusion

The Friendster Profile, complete with descriptive data, photographs, articulated friendship links, and Testimonials, simultaneously constitutes a digital body, a social creation, an initiator of conversation, and a medium for ongoing conversation in multiple modalities. In aggregate, Profiles further construct a social context, expressing social norms and appropriateness. For many "Realsters," local context provided a sense of false security, as network contexts collided and the semi-public, persistent, and searchable performances of one's own Profile and those of one's friends were discovered by unexpected—and sometimes undesired—audiences. For Fakesters, the system proved a vehicle for playful creativity, reappropriating Friendster's architecture and writing into being fictitious characters whose performances proved strong catalysts for conversations with and between diverse network members.

Communication emerges when actors can interpret and create social context while sharing their ideas. Friendster provides a communicative environment, but the cultural structures developed both on and offline build the framework necessary for ongoing communication. In this paper, we have addressed how people developed a social context as a process of communication. Yet, the difficulties that individuals experienced in understanding unknown audiences, crafting culturally situated Profiles, negotiating public/private boundaries, and dealing with digital architectural features such as replicability, searchability, and persistence suggest that people are still only learning how to interpret performative digital contexts to communicate meaningfully online.

Applicable beyond Friendster, holistically viewing conversation as the interplay of performance and

interpretation within a mediating architecture can prove a valuable analytical lens for online spaces. Photo sharing, for instance, teams with persistent non-textual examples of constructing context, marking identity, and sustaining dialogue with varying levels of public visibility. As online sociality incorporates ever more forms of expression, the sites of digital performance—whether Profile or photo, avatar or ASCII text—remain at the heart of both context and conversation.

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