Engineering Sociability: Friendship Drive, Visibility, and Social Connection in Anonymous Co-Located Local Wi-Fi Multiplayer Online Gaming

Carrie Heeter, Michigan State University, USA
Chandan (Dan) Sarkar, Michigan State University, USA
Becky Palmer-Scott, Michigan State University, USA
Shasha Zhang, Michigan State University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this study, the authors show that online multiplayer gaming via local Wi-Fi can be used as a “social lubricant” to increase social connections between co-located strangers at a café. In a field experiment in real world cafés, they recruited people who were sitting alone at the same café to play an online game together using iPads, from wherever each happened to be sitting. Some pairs could see each other; some were facing in opposite directions, some were in separate rooms. Visibility influenced how and how much players communicated outside of the game, but had no impact on enjoyment or self-reported experience of social connection. The authors measured “friendship drive” and found that social yearners were more interested in gaming with a stranger and more likely to hope to see their gaming partner again than were socially saturated players. Friendship drive did not impact communication between players or feeling social connection.

Keywords: Anonymity, Co-Location, Friendship Drive, Multiplayer Online Gaming, Social Connectedness, Visibility

INTRODUCTION

People are becoming more connected through technology – or are they? According to recent statistics, more than 800 million people are active Facebook users, with more than 50% logging on every day (Facebook, 2012). About 150 million Facebook users are in the United States; on average, each user has 130 Facebook friends (Parfeni, 2010). American Internet users have an overall network of 669 social ties, compared to 506 social ties for non-Internet users (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). Internet users also have more close ties (people with whom they could discuss important matters) – an average of 2.27, compared to non-Internet users who average 1.75 close ties. In sociological terms (Putnam, 2000), Internet users have more “bridging social capital” (connections to diverse individuals in large, weak networks) and
more “bonding social capital” (small, strong networks with strong emotional support) than non-Internet users.

Steinkuehler and Williams (2006), examined the utility of virtual communities in MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online games) to act as “third places” (separate from workplace and home) for informal sociability. They found that MMOs provided bridging social capital connecting diverse individuals in large, weak networks that served as a sociological lubricant but offered little in the way of emotional support. Conversely, MMO communities tended not to provide bonding social capital (small, strong networks with strong emotional support). The concluded that although MMOs are not particularly socially useful for individuals seeking emotional and substantive support, MMOs can open windows to new people and ideas, expanding players’ social bridging capital (loose social ties to diverse individuals that yield access to novel information and resources). On the other hand, Pearce (2009) and Taylor (2004, 2006) have extensively documented the emergence of culture and community in MMOs. Casual players may gain casual social connections, whereas more committed and involved players create and experience deeper community.

Although people now have increased opportunities to communicate online, studies show this sometimes makes them be less likely to interact with co-present others. Mobile devices and Wi-Fi hotspots make it possible for individuals to go online while they are in coffee shops and other public spaces rather than talk to the people near them, rendering these public places less public (Goldberger, 2003). Before a conference presentation or class begins, audience members can be seen checking email or browsing the web, rather than chatting with the person beside them. Hampton and Gupta (2008) refer to this kind of use of technology to create a private sphere of interaction within a public space as “public privatism.”

Laurier, Whyte, and Buckner (2001) conducted ethnographic research in a neighborhood café, observing that cafés are public places where common codes of conduct are adhered to. Cafés often provide a different social status to strangers. Café environments are conducive to strangers interacting. Local Wi-Fi in a café might increase communication among strangers, or it might inhibit such interactions. Hampton and Gupta (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of how Wi-Fi was used local cafés in Boston, and Seattle. They identified two types of users: “true mobiles” who use the café as a space of productivity to continue their work and “placemakers” whose primary activity is not to engage in paid work but instead to interact with the café and its inhabitants. Placemakers were regular customers who lived nearby and usually arrived alone. True mobiles withdrew into public privatism, whereas placemakers used technology but also engaged with café staff and other patrons.

Local Wi-Fi Enabled Paired Gaming Study Design

Placemakers already do engage to some extent with café staff and other patrons. But could technology be used to increase that engagement? In our research, we examine how a Wi-Fi enabled gaming environment could be socially engineered not merely to allow but to actively promote local social connections. We simulated a multiplayer local Wi-Fi gaming service designed to serve as a “social lubricant” for café patrons who are interested in reaching out to other people at the café they may not already know. The idea is somewhat akin to a checkerboard in an old general store — the game is not important in itself, but has value as a mode of bringing people together. Coffee shops and family restaurants often provide physical board games for patrons to play. However, it is likely that these games are going to be played by people who already know each other. Strangers would be unlikely to walk up to someone, chess board in hand, and propose to play.

Location-based multiplayer online gaming (via local Wi-Fi) could potentially lower the barriers to initiating play between strangers. Our field research simulates what could happen in a coffee shop where local Wi-Fi gaming was
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