

Performance and Creativity in a Digital Playground



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[This is an expanded version of my prepared speech for Barcamp Vancouver. Due to time constraints, I used my time to have a focus group discussion on Facebook. There are corresponding slides that accompany the text]

[Title slide] Good afternoon and thanks for coming. My name is Phillip Jeffrey and my presentation is entitled “Performance and Creativity in a Digital Playground”.

[Slide 2:Structure] This presentation is broken down into 3 sections. You will notice that throughout my presentation I have included screenshots of Facebook applications such as (fluff)Friends to better immerse everyone into the Facebook Applications mood. Also at the top of some of the slides I have included quotes from Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook. I will close with a group discussion regarding questions about the Facebook Platform applications.

[Slide 3:My Facebook Life] I am a University of British Columbia (UBC) grad student and my research relates to user-generated spaces and tagging behaviour in digital spaces such as del.icio.us and Flickr. I have been a member of Facebook since Fall 2005 and I remember sending an email to Facebook that summer to request that my university be added so that I could use Facebook. I also remember sending out my first friend request to Eva, the only person at UBC that I knew that was also on Facebook. Since that time, I have written articles on Facebook, given a variety of presentations, and I have been called into the studios of CBC Radio One Vancouver to provide expert opinion on Facebook.

[Slide 4:Tapping] Facebook is a social utility that facilitates the flow of information between users and their “friends” with whom a real-world connection exists. This connection may be family-, school-, or professionally-related. When launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg (then 19, now 23), his goal was to create an environment for college and university students to connect while providing exclusivity (restrict viewing and access to one’s school using an .edu email address) and control (each member can determine what aspects of their information will be shared – e.g. mobile number only visible to friends).

Over time, requests came for ivy leagues universities to be added, next came other US colleges and universities, and then high schools. One of the behaviours noticed within Facebook was that students were spending time messaging and writing on friends’ wall rather than sending them email. In addition, students were spending time in Facebook interacting within the space (commenting on group walls, surfing through friends and friends of friends profiles, and poking one another).

In a August 20-27th 2007 Newsweek article [Levy, 2007] entitled “Facebook Grows Up”, danah boyd discussed why she perceived that Facebook was successful out of the blocks. She stated that it provided an interactive social network, with a slight degree of social stalking, while being restricted to one’s college. What this did was create a familiar space for students to interact with their friends. As you could only view profiles at your own college (e.g. only see Harvard students), it may have created an enhanced perception of a comfortable, safe space. In addition, underlying these was the high trust factor among students. For example, as many students know, it is not uncommon to ask a fellow student to watch one’s laptop while taking a washroom break in the library.

[Slide 5:“What Facebook needed...”] In the Newsweek article [Levy, 2007], Mark Zuckerberg discusses the concept of a social graph. This is his notion that there are real-world connections with everyone being a node that radiates links to the people a relationship exists with. According to Zuckerberg:

“The social graph is this thing that exists in the world, and it always has and it always will. It's really most natural for people to communicate through it, because it's with the people around you, friends and business connections or whatever. What [Facebook] needed to do was construct as accurate of a model as possible of the way the social graph looks in the world.”

This social graph moves into the digital realm when you are on Facebook with your friends and enables you to get an enhanced experience out of these connections – more so than what you would have expected. It becomes especially interesting when you begin expanding your circle through your friends of friends,

[Slide 6: Facebook by the numbers] Facebook has grown rapidly since allowing anyone with an email address to join last September. There are now more than 35 million active users worldwide (meaning that they log in once a month), there are 3.3 million active users in Canada. Sixty-eight percent of active users log in once a month. It is the top website in Canada with 8.5 billion page views per month. The fastest growing demographic are those 25 years old and older and there is a 3% growth rate a week since January 2007.

[Slide 7: "There are a ton"] These are a list of my applications that I have at present. I will describe a few of the Facebook platform applications. The "free gifts" I had to add as my friend sent me a free gift and it was the only way I could view it. Twitter is a way of sending out notifications, in a sense microblogging, about whatever you want in 150 characters or less. Ma.gnolia is a social bookmarking service that I use to share URL I find.

What Zuckerberg wanted to do was provide a way for people to spend time in Facebook. The applications enable that by providing a way to utilize the social utility of Facebook. For example, you can write a Note and then tag it with your friend's name so that they will be notified that a note has been written that is of interest to them.

Some relevant history regarding applications:

2004

- *February* - Mark Zuckerberg and co-founders Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes launch Facebook from their Harvard dorm room
- *September* - Groups application is added; the Wall is added as a Profile feature
- *December* - Facebook reaches nearly 1 million active users

2005

- *October* - Photos is added as an application
- *December* - Facebook reaches more than 5.5 million active users

2006

- *April* - Facebook Mobile feature launches
- *August* - Notes application is introduced
- *September* - News Feed and Mini-Feed are introduced with additional privacy control
- *November* - Share feature added on Facebook, simultaneously launched on over 20 partner sites
- *December* Facebook reaches more than 12 million active users

2007

- *February* - Virtual gift shop launches as a feature
- *March* - Facebook reaches over 2 million active Canadian users and 1

- million active UK users
- *May* - Facebook launches Marketplace application for classified listings
- *June* - Facebook video launches
- *June* - Facebook platform launches
- *Aug* - 35 million active users

[Slide 8: “1 billion page views...”] This screenshot is taken from the News Feed that contains the actions on Facebook (called stories) of your friends. It is the starting point whenever someone logs in and is a good composite of someone’s life through the information that they share on Facebook. This underlies how your Facebook experience is based on your friends that are there. Although, there was controversy in Sept 2006 when the News Feed launched, there are now opt-out features so that you can determine which (if any) of your actions will appear there.

As Zuckerberg noted [Levy, 2007], there are two types of viral benefits that the News Feed provides: 1) The growth/spread of the actual applications (e.g. “Susan has added the ma.gnolia application” may lead Susan’s friends to do the same after her story appears in their News Feed. 2) The viral growth due to tasks performed using an application (e.g. “John is working on his Barcamp presentation” is a message that all of John’s friends see in their News Feed).

Remember again that so much of Facebook involves the activity and knowledge about what your friends are doing or interested in. Within your real-world friendship circle, you generally trust and value the opinion of these friends. For many people, their Facebook “friends” are also their real world friends, so it is expected that knowledge about these friends’ activities and interests, would be thought of as relevant and meaningful information.

When you become notified about an application that they are using, it may make it more likely that you will try it out too. We all know the importance of word of mouth advertising from friends (I am a Mac user because of it), and you can see it being played out in Facebook. When the News Feed tells you one of your friends are attending an event, you may check it out to see if it is also of interest to you. In a sense, there is a lot of serendipitous discovery going on as you learn different things about your friends then you might ordinarily find out about during a face to face meeting.

[Slide 9:Application Stats] To date, there are 1.8 billion photos on Facebook and it is the number 1 Photo site. There are 6 million active user groups and over 2300 approved Facebook Platform applications with 100 million downloads.

[Slide 10:”There are a ton”] According to Mark Zuckerberg:

“There are a ton of different ways that people can share information, and rather than trying to develop all those ourselves, we wanted to allow anyone worldwide to create any kind of application.” [Levy, 2007].

Why would Facebook want other developers to create applications for the Facebook Platform? Well, it would keep users within the Facebook environment longer. It may get boring surfing the profile pages of friends, their friends, and complete strangers to see who's interesting, but being able to play a game of Scrabble, for example, with your Facebook friends could be entertaining.

[Slide 11:Photos] This is the Facebook Photo application showing Kris Krüg taking a picture of a window where is written "Think Globally, Shop Locally" during a Commercial Drive photowalk last summer. The Photo application enables members to upload photographs, screenshots, or really any jpeg to photo albums. It is an example of self-expression within Facebook.

[Slide 12:Notes] This is the Facebook Notes application showing a poem written by a friend of mine. It is an example of performance within Facebook. She writes:

"You are amazing, sweet and and soooo good-looking
I bet you know
but I have just realized it once again, as if for the first time
how exceptionally good you are
how much I adore you
you, two-bite brownies..
yum..
yum.."

She has written a number of fun, creative notes in Facebook that she then shares with her Facebook friends.

[Slide 13:Performance] Another example of performance displayed by Facebook members is the gift giving feature. Members send digital gifts to each other. This feature began on Valentine's Day this year. The gifts cost \$1 US and can contain a public (visible to profile viewers) or a private message. They are placed above the wall section as a default making them visible to anyone that can view that particular profile. It is another way that a friend can show another friend that they are thinking about them. It also has a secondary effect in that the friends of the person receiving the gift can also become aware that someone has send them a gift either through the News Feed or by viewing that individual's profile.

On the News Feed page when one logs in, members are kept up-to-date on upcoming Birthdays (3 days in advance). This is one of the most helpful bits of information Facebook provides because sometimes you're so busy you forget the birthdays of family, let alone friends.

From the day before someone's birthday you will see "Happy Birthday" messages on that person's wall from their friends. The wall on one's profile page

(which all of one's friends see) is used rather than a private message because the point of sending the message is to have it be seen by others. This is similar to sending birthday flowers to a girlfriend's workplace on her birthday or having balloons delivered to the dining hall on your roommate's birthday. The "Happy Birthday" message screams out "I'm loved", "I have friends that care", and it is especially touching from friends that are far away and that are not able to attend your birthday party (which you advertised on Facebook as an event).

[Slide 14:Platform] Last Spring, Facebook launched the Facebook Platform [Facebook Developers, 2007] which allowed anyone to develop an application for Facebook that would utilize the social graph of one's friends. There are nearly 3000 Facebook applications in the directory such as "My Questions" where you can ask your friends questions and receive answers on your profile page.

[Slide 15:Adding an Application] On the application page you can view which applications are most popular among one's friends. For example, in my case 53 of my friends have downloaded the iLike application. However, the number doesn't readjust when friends delete the application.

[Slide 16:Creativity: Graffiti] One of the coolest Facebook platform applications is the Graffiti application. Jay Tang [Tang, 2007] created this picture of a cat using only a mouse with the Graffiti application. This is a fine example of creativity within Facebook in which his skills are shared not only with his friends on Facebook but it can be accessible to anyone. He is able to share his graffiti pictures with everyone by creating a photo album where he uploads his graffiti jpgs to and then by making it visible to everyone in Facebook.

The Graffiti application has a message board in which Facebook members can share their art and provides for feedback from other members. One these members commented as shown above "*jaw drops" "Unreal...I love this...great job!". Another one stated "you guys are amazing and inspiring". This display of creativity in a shared forum provides for members to receive comments and encouragement through the feedback of others. Hidden talents become uncovered which may even surprise one's close friends. Similarly placing one's graffiti into groups such as "I heart Graffiti" and "The Graffiti Gallery" offer a similar opportunity for positive feedback and enhanced exposure beyond the profile page containing the graffiti art.

[Slide 17:Performance: Food Fight] I have a couple of examples of performance using the Facebook platform. The Food Fight application enables members that download it to "throw" food at one another and one's first name is associated with the food thrown on a person's profile page (e.g. a burger, hot dog, or donut). Again, this is a display of friendship towards a Facebook friend and is visible to anyone that can view the profile page of the person receiving the food.

[Slide 18:Performance: Super Poke] Again, this is the Super Poke from the Facebook Platform. It is an extension of the poke feature by Facebook which enable someone to “poke” another person. However, pokes are only visible to the person that received it. There isn’t any way to tell how many or from whom someone has received a “poke” by looking at their profile page. You should note that between Aug 2nd and Aug 11th there were actions between Liz and Jason and between Diane and Jason that were reciprocated. It is always fun to interact with one’s friends in a playful manner and this is contrary to the poke feature, anyone viewing Jason’s profile will see this application.

[Slide 19:The great thing] Mark Zuckerberg states that “The great thing about this website is that it is grounded in physical communities that exist in real life”. It has been designed as a social space where members want to interact with their friends in anticipation of the next real world meeting (e.g. sharing via an application or writing a note about a special moment in one’s life). The opportunity for visible expressions of affection lets a multiple of people know that another friend is thinking about them. One concern though is that in order to receive the benefits of an application such as Super Poke, one must download that application to their profile. This may lead one to debate how long they must keep an application such as Super Poke as deleting it from one’s profile will also permanently delete its contents.

[Slide 20: Emerging Technology] As both a student and a researcher of emerging technology, I have a constant dilemma regarding my profile page and the use of Facebook Platform applications. Presently, I have 3 applications created by outside developers: Free Gifts, because my friend sent me one after she went back to her home county; Twitter [Twitter, 2007], because I want to share my twitter message with my Facebook friends that aren’t don’t subscribe to my tweets; and Ma.gnolia [Ma.gnolia, 2007], a social bookmarking service that I use. Now as someone interested in cutting-edge technology I would love to try out a different applications and would probably have 10-20 applications if I wasn’t a student. However I am thinking about my student friends, many of whom are undergrads, and I feel they may get turned off on being my Facebook friend if they feel that my profile page has become too cluttered with applications that I am trying out.

[Slide 20: Let’s talk about Apps] Now I would like to spend time having a group discussion about the Facebook Platform applications. What benefits do people get from applications? What applications do people recommend others try? What do people dislike about the applications?

Thanks for coming.

References:

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