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Facebook graffiti credit by Paul Yan

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[This is an expanded version of my speech at Artcamp 07]

[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. I will first describe what Facebook is, its history, and some stats regarding worldwide and Canadian usage. I will then discuss the different Facebook features and applications by demoing live. Next, examples will be provided of creative expression that I have observed within Facebook. I will close with an analysis of why’s today’s youth and young adults are using digital media for self-expression. Afterwards we will have a group discussion about how Facebook and digital media are/are not meeting the needs of the art community.

You will also notice at the top of some of the slides I have included quotes from Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook.

[Slide 3:Facebook Experience] 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), control (each member can determine what aspects of their information will be shared – e.g. mobile number only visible to friends), and access to information (e.g. what is Bob’s dorm room number).

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 talking 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:A tour] This is an example of my friend’s profile page. – Cyprien Lomas. At the top is Profile, clicking on it will take you to your profile. Clicking Friends will show you all of your friends, Networks will show the networks (if any) that you are on (it shows that I am on two – Vancouver and UBC), and Inbox is like email, where you can send a private message to any of your friends.

On the left hand side are displayed Applications in which clicking that link will display all the different applications that are available in Facebook – both those created by Facebook (e.g. Events) and those on the Facebook platform that are created by independent developers (e.g. Magnolia – a social bookmarking site). Below, you can see Photos, which when click will display the existing photo albums you have as well as your friends’, clicking Groups will show any groups that you have joined as well as your friends, Events are simply activities such as birthdays or parties and like groups you can search for any event in Facebook, Marketplace is where you can buy and sell stuff like textbooks or search for housing, Mobile enable you access Facebook on your mobile phone, and Video is where you can see videos that have been shared by friends or that you have created.

Beneath Cyprien’s profile picture, I can click the ‘message’ link to send him a private message or I can poke him (a type of notification absent a message). There may also be a link there to display the number of photos in which Cyprien have been tagged either by Cyprien or his friends. ‘Tagging’ just means that someone attached my full name to a picture using a drop-down menu of one’s friends. You will also notice that there are tons of icons for the various applications that Cyprien has added to his profile.

On the top right , Cyprien has written a message regarding his current status: “Cyprien Lomas is reading a novel ;p” . Below is some basic information about me such as the UBC and Vancouver networks that he is on and his hometown.

I would now like to comment quickly on these next features and I will be elaborating further on in the presentation. Below his profile picture are profile pictures of mutual friends (we have 17) and his friends at UBC. You can see that he is a member of a number of groups – most related to digital technology (e.g. New Media BC).

On the right hand side are the mini-feed which show actions (called stories by Facebook) that he has performed in Facebook (e.g. Cyprien added the Course application), Information are things such as his activities (e.g. photography) or contact information. People write stuff here so that friends know more about them. In addition, each word is actually a hyperlink so clicking his Photography” link under will display all the people that also have that written in their profile. The Wall is where friends can leave comments for him which are visible to anyone that can view my profile. Education and Work shows his education background and work experience, Notes are notes that he has written or blog entries that have been imported. Video are personal videos that have been uploaded. Throughout his profile you can also see numerous applications that he is playing with (e.g. Dopplr, Friend Block, and My Flickr). As his interests are digital technologies he likes to try out a variety of applications to see how they work.

The purpose then of one’s so profile page and the various features and applications is to remain connected with your friends – to keep up to date on what is going on in their lives or even just socially interact with them through Facebook.

[Slide 8:Photos] This is a photo of Lawrence Fishburne that my friend Kris Krug took at the Vancouver Police concert rehearsal and uploaded to a photo album on Facebook. The two comments that accompany the slide offer feedback to Kris regarding his picture and are both positive (e.g. “That’s a great job. Looks like he’s cut right out of the background.”). On Facebook you will find that some amateur and even professional photographers will share their photos in order to either showcase their personal talent or let others know about a model or location being photographed. Examples of creative expression between friends suggest that this digital media is being used to showcase one’s creativity. The photo application in which photos can be uploaded and shared is not only being used to display pictures with friends, but also to share one’s skills in photography such as fashion photography.

The feedback features in which members of the Facebook community can leave comments provides the opportunity to receive tips on improving one’s skills and encourages the photographer. It also provides motivation for budding photographers viewing the pictures on Facebook.

[Slide 9:Notes] This is a note that one of my friends posted. I thought it was pretty creative and a fun example of her cool writing style.

[Slide 10:Facebook] On the Facebook Platform application page you can see the most popular applications as well as chose applications from a variety of categories (e.g. Gaming, Music, Sports). This is an example of one of the applications called Graffiti. You can see there are 3 developers, that 53 of my friends have downloaded it (although we don't know how many removed it), and the number of daily active users (about 500 000). There is a discussion board where Graffiti users can interact by posting Graffiti done with a mouse, or Disney art or any topic one desires. There is a Reviews sections where Facebook members can offer suggestions on new features or provide feedback on existing ones. What is cool is how the Platform applications have become more friend-centric. When the Facebook Platform was opened to developers last April, it was difficult to know to know which friends had downloaded an application as that information wasn't available on a particular application page. Now that you know which friends have downloaded an application, it may provide some credibility when you are deciding whether to try it out yourself.

[Slide 11:Creativity:Graffiti] I will show you live examples of the Graffiti application. This example of a cat picture by Jay Tang and he only used a mouse. What Jay did was create this picture save it, upload it to a photo album containing all his existing Graffiti and then tagged his friend "Koysarn" in the pictures so that they would notice what he had created. He also publicly shared the picture with 3 groups and provided tips to assist those interesting with step-by-step instructions.

Again, recall the importance of feedback. One person wrote "Unreal...I love this....great job". Under the discussion group for the Graffiti group you can see tons of positive feedback for people that have posted their Graffiti. These opportunities in Facebook to showcase one's work to members that may not have access to one's profile page, enables people to share their hidden talents (which may surprise some friends) and gain feedback. This may help with one's ego and inspire others, which is especially important for the students using this application. A separate sub-culture has been created from this application. If you go into some of the groups, you will actually find contests that one can participate in, which is pretty cool.

[Slide 12:Self-Expression] These are examples of Graffiti by Tony Romano using his laptop touchpad that were on the Graffiti group discussion board. Again note one of the comments I have included "Those. Are. Freaking flipping outstanding...". Again, the idea of feedback within a public group that is accessible to everyone in Facebook encourages the creator of the graffiti as well as inspires those desiring to improve on their graffiti skills.

[Slide 13:Generation Me] This is a picture of 23 year old Justine Ezarik (called ijustine), who became famous on the Internet when she made a video of her 300 page iPhone bill from AT&T which is posted to Revver, a video sharing platform

[Ezarik, 2007; Revver, 2007]. So why are digital media such as Facebook popular among youth? Youth grow up around digital technology, they have a desire to share with others, and want to extend creativity beyond their immediate friends. One can see examples of this in video sharing sites such as Revver [Revver, 2007] where members create a short MeToday video or in YouTube [YouTube, 2007], in which youth as directors create fun skits for their subscribers (eg. LisaNova [LisaNova, 2007]).

[Slide 14: Strive for Identity] So my theory is that creativity is being expressed by teens and young adults within Facebook and I have a few references to share with you that I would like to use for support. One of the first books to explore the digital experiences of young people in Canada and the United States is called "Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation" [Tapscott, 1998]. It follows the children of the baby boomers, (born between 1977 – 1997) labeled the "net generation [N-Gen]" [p.2] and states that they are the first generation to grow up immersed in digital media throughout their daily lives [Tapscott, 1998].

More recently, "Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled, and More Miserable Than Ever Before" [Twenge, 2006], discusses how those born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s should be called Generation Me as the 'Net Generation' label hasn't seemed to have caught on. For "GenMe" [p4], the focus is on independence, feeling good about oneself, getting fulfillment out of helping others such as volunteerism, and a belief in self-expression.

According to a study of 9-17 years olds [National School Boards Association, 2007], young people today are spending a significant amount of their time online interacting with their real-world friends and engaging in activities that promote creativity through the creation, manipulation, and sharing of their content. These activities include: writing on message boards; sharing videos, photos, or artwork of their own creation; or creating personal online journal entries.

Goffman [1959] in the "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" wrote about the importance of self-presentation – especially for youth you strive to answer the question "Who am I". In one's daily life, this type of impression management and cultural activity is visible in youth's style of dress, personal tastes, hairstyle, and attitude. I would also expect today this behaviour to manifest itself in digital spaces.

[Slide 15: Merging of] Canadian youth aged 9-17 reported that they did not perceive the Internet as a separate environment [Media Awareness Network, 2005], instead believing that their virtual and physical spaces have merged. This may not be too surprising as the Internet become increasingly pervasive within Canadian society.

So young people are using digital technology to enhance their skills, extend creativity...they are being drawn to this communicate and shared spaces for interactions that are as natural to them as breathing. User-generated spaces such as Facebook are just another platform for self-expression.

[Final slide] This picture I took at this year's UBC Arts County Fair, a day of music and socialization on the last of class. Her shirt reads "I stalk you on Facebook" and she has taken profile pictures of her friends and put them on her t-shirt. I thought this was a fun example of creativity.

So, my name is Phillip Jeffrey, you can view my blog at fadetoplay.com and I thank you for letting me speak. I would now like to use my remaining time for a group discussion: How is Facebook, or more generally digital media, meeting the needs of the art community?

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