Chapter 8

None of this is Real
Identity and Participation in Friendster

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Stepping into a chic San Francisco café in June 2003, I was struck by the number of patrons whose laptops were directed at Friendster.com. When I walked into a used bookstore later that afternoon, the hipster clerk was surfing Friendster. As I watched, two customers engaged her in conversation about Friendster. Together, they surfed the service to find common friends while discussing the recent popularity of fake characters on the network ("Fakesters"). That evening, at an electronic music venue in the warehouse district of San Francisco, I overheard conversations about Friendster every time I approached the bar. Afterward, a voicemail was waiting for me—a friend had gone to see an indie rock band whose lead singer encouraged everyone to join and be his "Friend." Seemingly overnight, Friendster had swept through my San Francisco social circles.

Friendster is a social network site that invites people to post profiles detailing a range of personal information, and to link those profiles to others on the service ("Friends"). Soon after its launch in fall 2002, it became a phenomenon among large numbers of educated 20- to 30-something urban dwellers, initially concentrated in San Francisco and New York. Friendster networks grew rapidly through word of mouth and through email invitations from community members themselves. Originally intended as a dating service, this aspect quickly gave way to a playful—and often voyeuristic— exploration of the new territory of social relations possible in online communities.

Our thinking about digital communities is still arguably in the shadow of the "global village," the powerful metaphor that describes how new communication technologies empower personal relationships across vast geographic and cultural differences (McLuhan, 1962). Recent research, however, suggests a different social emphasis: Rather than initiating relations with strangers, instant messaging, email, and other digital communication tools are used primarily to maintain relationships with people in close physical and social proximity (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005). Friendster tried to combine these approaches by building a community site around a social networking architecture: in effect, it provided a tools for scaling up social networks rooted in proximate social relations and—equally significantly—for representing this dynamic to the community in new ways. In this context, Friendster provided a unique window onto the communities and network structure of the global village (Wellman, 1999). Within the service, participants model local social contexts and communities. Through the network structure, these are woven together on a broader scale. Although the service models a (potentially) global network structure, single participants have only a limited view of this scale—the network representation is limited to four "degrees" of separation (friends of friends of friends of friends). On the one hand, this keeps the fun and challenge of social networking on Friendster manageable (four degrees exposes much more of our social environment than is normally possible); on the other, it motivates some to want to see the global picture.

Visibility has its cost; in order to make broader social networks visible, Friendster flattens those networks, collapsing relationship types and contexts into the ubiquitous "Friend." More problematically, Friendster does not provide ways of mapping or

interpreting the contextual cues and social structural boundaries that help people manage their social worlds. Physical distance, to abstract from the obvious, is not just an obstacle to building social relations but also the dimension in which different social contexts and norms are deployed. The distance between the office and the pub is not just a practical convenience but also a tool for interpreting and maintaining boundaries between connected social worlds. Because Friendster draws from everyday social networks, it incorporates these differences and boundaries while greatly diminishing people's abilities to manage them. This was hardly fatal to the Friendster phenomenon, but it helps explain many of the subsequent developments within the network. It illustrates an inverse relationship between the scalability and manageability of social networks—a *structure of participation* that marks these very early stages of social software development.

Not surprisingly, participants responded to the lack of differentiating texture and shared reference points in Friendster's flattened social networks by negotiating new social norms and rules of conduct, communicable through the existing features of the system. This articulation of identity and relationships was a new challenge for most participants, and accompanied by uncertainty about how to formalize or broadcast their social judgments without rupturing trust or destroying relationships. Partially flattened social structures are a fact of everyday life (e.g., when friends and family and colleagues come together), but experiences with them are often uncomfortable, particularly when the collision of separate networks is unexpected. Digital worlds increase the likelihood and frequency of collapses and require participants to determine how to manage their own performance and the interactions between disparate groups.

Wading through new forms of individual and community interactions can be both terrifying and exhilarating. Although adults have become accustomed to ritualized ways of interacting, the foreign nature of social structure is a fundamental part of childhood. Children play in order to make meaning out of social cues and to understand the boundaries of social norms. Because Friendster requires participants to reassess social boundaries and limitations, it is not surprising that play became an essential aspect of participation, as users worked out social norms and re-inserted valuable missing social cues. The early adoption of Friendster was riddled with playful interactions, most notably the proliferation of "Fakesters"—invented profiles used, among other things, to help signal group and cultural identification and allow people to play within the system.

Drawing on ethnographic data and personal observations, this chapter analyzes the growth of Friendster and the negotiation of social boundaries amongst early adopter populations. How did Friendster become a topic of conversation amongst disparate communities? What form did participation take and how did it evolve as people joined? How do people negotiate awkward social situations and collapsed social contexts? What is the role of play in the development of norms? How do people recalibrate social structure to accommodate the conditions and possibilities of online networks?

Friendster was not the first online tool to juxtapose and make visible global and proximate social contexts, but it was the first tool popular enough to test of the limits of the concept, in part by expressing emergent properties that changed the character of interactions on the network itself. This juxtaposition is at the root of many new forms of social software, from social bookmarking services like Del.icio.us to photo-sharing services like Flickr, both of which aggregate and connect networks of friends, family

members, and acquaintances. While Friendster is now not nearly as popular as in its heyday, it continues to provide a benchmark for understanding the continuously fluid relationship between designed systems and community appropriation.[1]

Methods

The flattened representations of social worlds characteristic of online communities can be difficult to study: Their limited frameworks both condense and obscure the complex social dynamics they map. I was introduced to Friendster in December 2002 and created an account in January 2003. I had close connections to the first three subcultures that made significant use of Friendster: Burning Man art festival aficionados, Silicon Valley techies, and the urban queer communities. My residency in San Francisco and frequent pilgrimages to New York provided me with many opportunities to track this process of adoption; early adopters were primarily from these two urban regions. Throughout this period, I wrote about the evolution of Friendster on my blog. The popularity of the blog led to conversations with venture capitalists, press, active participants and Friendster haters, providing another window onto the Friendster phenomenon. Readers sent me anecdotes and observations, answered questions I posed on the blog, and forwarded communications from other users and the service providers.

My data collection began as a personal project, as I was not affiliated with any institution. My ethnography took on a more structured style in June 2003, when Tribe.net hired me to analyze Friendster. I held six focus groups and interviewed or surveyed more than 200 users (either in person or via email/IM). I tracked public blog and mailing list discussions and spent countless hours surfing the articulated networks and reading

profiles. Because Friendster accounts were created in numerical order, I could detect which accounts were active or deleted. Although not all profiles were visible, my estimates indicated that I could view approximately 80% of active, connected users created before October 2003. Although this data collection had significant limitations, I was in an excellent position to observe the spread of the Friendster meme, both in terms of its core subcultures, its viral growth, and the practices of its early adopters.

Although Friendster continued to grow after 2003, this chapter focuses on issues and events that took place during that first year. During 2003, Friendster went from an unknown startup to a subcultural phenomenon to one of Fox News's phrases of the year (D'Angelo, 2003). By the end of 2003, the technology was failing and disagreements between participants and the owners resulted in the expulsion of many users. By mid-2004, early adopters had mostly abandoned the service and a new generation of users had emerged among teenagers in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This intriguing global migration falls outside the scope of this paper and my data collection.

Early Adopter Subcultures

Friendster launched in the fall of 2002 with only a word-of-mouth publicity strategy: Its developers told their friends, who told their friends, and so on. On June 4, 2003, the *Village Voice* ran the first major article on Friendster (O'Shea, 2003). By then, Friendster had more than 300,000 users. By October 2003, more than 3.3 million Friendster accounts were registered. Where did the users come from, and how did they know about the service?

Silicon Valley information technology professionals belong to an unusually close-knit social network dating back to the early days of the tech industry (Saxenian, 1994). It is not surprising that Friendster found fertile ground there. In 2003, still recovering from the dot-com bust, Silicon Valley software entrepreneurs were beginning to see new possibilities in "social software." Investment flowed into wikis, blogs, and social networking tools. Friendster was not the first online social network site. SixDegrees.com released a similar product in 1997, but the incentives for participation were hazy, and the service failed to attract a self-sustaining community. When Ryze.com launched in early 2002, it tried to clarify the incentives question by dedicating itself to business networking. With more than 250,000 users, it has enjoyed modest success in hosting and connecting such networks. Friendster's founders also perceived the incentives problem and launched their dating service as a complement to Ryze. The wild success of Friendster outside these original parameters represented a change for online social networking, creating a mass public for these sites, engaging people in a variety of contexts. In the wake of Friendster, social network sites have become much more common and their features are integrated into many other kinds other services. In terms of size, Friendster has been surpassed by several similar services, including MySpace and Facebook. At the time of publication (2007), MySpace has more than 175 million accounts and, in November 2006, ComScore reported that MySpace passed Yahoo! as the leader in US web traffic with 38.7 billion US page views that month (Jesdanun, 2006). Facebook launched in 2004 as a niche site dedicated to college students; it has since expanded to welcome a much wider audience, but by 2005 it was used by 85% of students on the college campuses that it supported (Toomey, 2005).

Figure 8.1. Example Friendster profile.
Note. This profile has been altered for demonstration; elements have been deleted and layout altered.

Friendster encouraged users to post personal profiles and associate them with other profiles on the network, thereby creating a list of Friends associated with the member's profile (see Figure 8.1). Using Friendster was largely an experience of surfing these personal networks. Profiles contained the usual dating-related personal information: interests and tastes in music, film and TV; age, sex, relationship status, and sexual preference; geographical and occupational information; photos and biographies. What differentiated Friendster profiles from other dating profiles (Fiore & Donath, 2004) was the inclusion of Friends and testimonials, features that constitute a social network site.

Participants could invite outsiders to join via email, and the recipient would become part of the sender's network upon joining. Alternatively, participants could add Friends from within the network. When both parties consent to Friendship, their photos are included under the "Friends" section in each other's profiles. Friendster Friends were not always friends elsewhere; who people choose as Friends in the system varies tremendously (boyd, 2006). Additionally, participants could write testimonials about their Friends that would be displayed on their profile.

Within Friendster, participants surfed the networks looking for current and past friends and for other entertaining profiles. The dating architecture quickly proved flexible and expressive enough to support a wider range of activities than originally anticipated. Some used the service for dating while others used it as their primary email and messaging tool; still others used it for drug distribution and race-based harassment (boyd, 2004). The most consequential and—arguably—inventive direction of user innovation, however, was the exploration of new ways to signal group affiliations and boundaries through the profile system itself. This culminated in the proliferation of Fakesters—fake profiles that signaled not the individuals behind the profile but communities, cultural icons, or collective interests.

Although Friendster gained an initial foothold among residents of Silicon Valley, its explosive growth was closely tied to a second phase of adoption by technology-savvy Bay Area and New York subcultures. The capacity to model, visualize, and extend social networks proved very attractive for these groups. In particular, two subcultures—gay men and "Burners" (people identified with the annual Burning Man arts festival in the Nevada Desert[2]) were the most active in defining the early culture of Friendster. By

February 2003, gay-identified Friendster users concentrated in New York, and Burners in San Francisco (home of many of the festival's founders) dominated the service. This virtual geography mirrored prominent offline social networks connecting Silicon Valley and San Francisco, and San Francisco and New York. Recognition of this larger network geography, however, was diminished by the limited social overlap within these subcultures: Gay men often perceived Friendster as a new gay dating site, while Burners assumed it was a tool designed for them. Both groups were broadly ignorant of each others' presence, as well as of the Silicon Valley geeks on the service (although the geeks were typically aware of both Burners and gay men). Because access passed only through those "in the know," Friendster initially acquired cachet as an underground cultural tool.

The spread of Friendster both reflects the broader cultural values of the participating social groups and reveals the structure of their networks. Prior to the extensive media coverage in 2004, knowledge of Friendster spread almost entirely through personal networks. Individuals invited friends who they felt would "fit in," simultaneously interpreting, defining, and reinforcing subcultural dominance of Friendster. Gay men, believing Friendster to be a gay dating service, tended to invite other gay men. Burners invited people with similar interests. As already indicated, technical reasons limited the visibility of social networks on Friendster to four degrees of separation,[3] meaning the horizon of any person's network was limited to friends of friends of friends of friends. While this limitation made it possible for participants to see most of the people that they knew, it also made the service appear more homogenous than it was. This limitation magnified perceptions that Friendster was a space for narrow communities of interest.

Most of Friendster's early adopters were educated urbanites in their 20s and 30s. After the Burners and gay men, the Friendster meme quickly spread to other identity-driven communities in urban regions, including ravers, goths, hipsters, and other members of taste subcultures. The apparent homogeneity started to break down. Although subcultures are often perceived as distinct, their social networks are frequently connected through shared late-night venues, music and clothing stores, and political activities. Many individuals bridge multiple scenes, resulting in labels like "graver" (goth + raver). Friendster made many of these interconnections visible and gay men started to see Burners and vice versa.

Participatory Performance

The flow of knowledge about Friendster affected not only who chose to participate, but also *how* they participated. The first act of a new participant is to create a profile and to connect it to others on the service. Most people join after being invited by a friend. Upon entering the service, newcomers visit their friends' profiles to see how they chose to present themselves. The profiles signal social norms within groups and newcomers generally follow suit in crafting their own profiles. In the case of Burners, these norms included the use of "Playa" names[4] uploaded photos from Burning Man or related parties (which have their own style involving little clothing and lots of colorful adornment), and the presentation of interests that resonate with the values of the Burner culture. Through this process of integration, Burner culture on Friendster is reinforced and reproduced. The process is dynamic, as described by one of my respondents:

> "I change my profile if I see something on someone else's that I might have forgotten (oh yeah! I love that movie, too!) or if I get a sense from scanning others' profiles that mine is too detailed, not witty enough, leaves out parts of my personality I hadn't thought to cover, etc." —Alie

The performance of identity relies on the active interpretation of social contexts. Familiarity with a context increases a person's ability to navigate it—to understand what is appropriate or advantageous within it—and thereby shapes choices about the persona one tries to present within it (boyd, 2002). Contexts are not static backgrounds, but constantly evolve through this process (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). Digitally mediated performance is no different, but the novelty and narrower channel of interaction affect our capacity to interpret context. Without a long-standing history and set of material cues, people must collectively develop the norms and build the root contextual framework through their performance and interactions. Although every Friendster profile has the same layout, the freedom to select photos, self-descriptions, and other elements creates a performance space in which norms are established and interpreted. Early adopters had a relatively clean slate with which to make meaning and build context.

Although participants play a strong role in the development of cultural norms, Friendster is still a privately controlled environment. The company sets guidelines for acceptable practice, via both rules of conduct and architectural constraints. A ban on nudity in profiles is one such rule, although many participants push that boundary. Participants are further restricted from linking to their personal web sites and they are expected to use real names and upload photos that depict them in natural settings, without digital alteration or copyrighted material. Friendster enforces its policies by removing infringing material. Tensions emerge when participants perceive themselves as the primary norm setters and the developers' actions as restrictions of presumed freedoms.[5]

Despite these boundary issues, the service provided considerable latitude for experiments in enacting identity and could do little to constrain the interpretation of those performances (Donath & boyd, 2004).

Friendster's social networking tools support a powerful process of community formation around shared values and tastes. Social groups tend to converge collectively on a coherent presentation style and encourage, if not pressure, other participants to follow the collective norms (e.g., regarding photos). The domination of the early Friendster by a few distinct and relatively homogenous subgroups simplified this process. As the network grew and diversified, and as the Friendster developers promulgated more rules about acceptable content, participants developed new ways of structuring and signaling collective identities.

In September 2003, I began receiving messages on Friendster asking for my "Suicide Girl" name and the location of my porn site. This puzzled me until I started visiting the profiles of self-identified Suicide Girls and began to appreciate the collective dimension of

Figure 8.2. Performing Suicide Girl.

my picture

"old white balding guy"
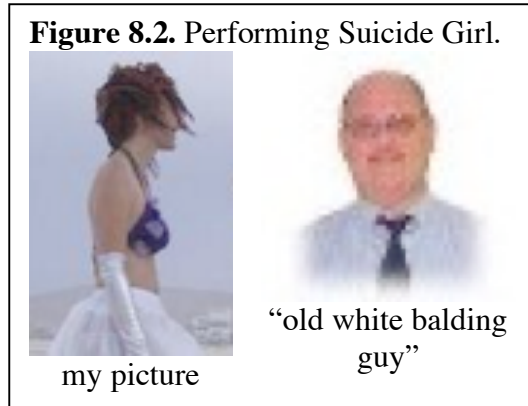
Friendster's "personal" performances. SuicideGirls.com is a for-pay porn site for "Pin-Up Punk Rock and Goth Girls" where individual Suicide Girls keep pornographic pictures, journals, and videos. There is an active community of women who identify with the brand, almost all of whom have profiles on Friendster. These profiles typically display their fellow "pin-up" girl friends and the flocks of older men who subscribe to their site. Looking for patterns, porn aficionados interpreted my performance as akin to that of Suicide Girls because my network contained fellow Burners, older businessmen, and a half-naked photo. When a friend and fellow social software analyst selected a random photo from Google and depicted himself as an "old, white balding guy from the Midwest," my profile became visibly similar to those of the Suicide Girls (see Figure 8.2). Because his photo was prominently displayed on my page as a Friend, his choice in photo dramatically affected my performance. On Friendster, impression management is an inescapably collective process.

Conventional understandings of how identity is performed often assume a high degree of individual agency: People *convey* impressions, and these are usually deliberate. Sociological accounts have generally emphasized the interpersonal context of such meaning. For Erving Goffman (1956), impression management was fundamentally a

process involving the performer and the reader, although teams could also consciously

work together to convey particular impressions. Friendster participants quickly

encountered the limits of the latter process.

As the numbers of participants in Friendster grew, so too did the diversity of the social

networks represented. A growing portion of participants found themselves

simultaneously negotiating multiple social groups—social and professional circles, side

interests, and so on. Because profiles presented a singular identity to the entire network,

however, this diversification brought with it the potential for disruption of individuals'

carefully managed everyday personas. Photos were the most common problem; those that

signaled participation in one group were not always appropriate in another. The

prominence of Friends on individual profiles meant, moreover, that the difficulty of

accommodating one's profile to different audiences became complicated and often

irresolvable problem of controlling the performances of others—a negative network

effect.

As Friendster grew, conflicting standards became a common problem. The border

between professional and personal relations was the most frequent source of difficulty:

"Cool" photos of social adventures clashed with generic headshots. Most often,

participants chose to professionalize their profiles in the same way that early web

developers did when the sites became more accessible to their colleagues. On Friendster,

this significantly impacted the forms of sociability underlying the service.

Because Friendster flattened multiple local social contexts into a single

performance space, it neither represented nor provided the means of managing the multi-

faceted performances that characterize most people's lives. Although social networks became visible in new ways, the new relational structure created social juxtapositions without context and created problematic social borders that people otherwise negotiated with relative ease. Teachers, for example, are required to separate their personal and political lives from their educational roles. Participating in Friendster under these professional conditions carried with it unexpected risks.

In June 2003, a young San Francisco teacher joined Friendster to connect with her Burning Man friends. Her profile was uncontroversial—diverse personal interests matched with a photo taken while hiking. In September some of her 16-year-old students approached her with two questions: Why do you do drugs, and why are you friends with pedophiles? Although her underage students could not legally join Friendster, in practice this was no impediment: They joined and found her profile. The drug reference came not from her profile but from those of her Friends, some of whom had signaled drug use (and attendance at Burning Man, which for the students amounted to the same thing). Friends also brought her the pedophilia connection—in this case via the profile of a male Friend who, for his part, had included an in-joke involving a self-portrait in a Catholic schoolgirl outfit and testimonials about his love of young girls. The students were not in on this joke. The teacher faced a predicament—if she deleted her account or her links to Friends, she signaled guilt to her students. Asking her Friends to alter their profiles to suit her needs seemed complicated and burdensome, and unlikely, in any event, to erase the earlier association. She resolved to stop using Friendster, hoping that the controversy would simply go away.

Articulated Participation

Transparency—of social networks, of personal histories, of judgments of others—is a powerful idea that drove much of the early exploration of digital networking. Digital systems raised the potential not simply to expand access to information but also to unfailingly record the history of that process—a point that underlies Geoffrey Bowker's argument about databases (Chapter 2, this volume). This had an appealing liberatory dimension in that it seemed possible to disintermediate information from its institutional managers, placing it directly in the hands of individuals. One of the basic lessons of social informatics and social system design in the past decade is that such transparency makes a poor end in itself. It can be pursued or enabled in ways that prove destructive of the social fabric that underlies functional sociotechnical systems. Many social processes depend on forms of selective disclosure, strategic ambiguity, and/or mediation within networks. Maintaining the privacy of sensitive information is a common goal but not the only one in such contexts. Lack of clarity is often a key to agreement. In other cases intermediaries play key roles in filtering or translating information between groups with different perspectives or conceptual frameworks (e.g., technical and clerical staff within an office).

Although transparency of information poses an interesting challenge, where the information comes from is also a problem. As Jenny Sundén (2003) noted, digital embodiment requires writing yourself into being. On Friendster this means an explicit articulation of who you are and how you relate to others, using the predefined mechanisms for expression. Through a series of forms, profiles must be crafted to express some aspect of identity and relationships must be explicitly acknowledged in order to

exist within the system. Unlike everyday embodiment, there is no digital corporeality without articulation. One cannot simply "be" online; one must make one's presence visible through explicit and structured actions.

It is hardly surprising that many participants find social interactions on Friendster formulaic. The social structure is defined by a narrow set of rules that do little to map the complexities and nuances of relationships in other contexts. Formula-driven social worlds require everyone to engage with each other through a severely diminished mediator— what I have elsewhere called autistic social software as a metaphor to signal the structured formula that autistic individuals learn to negotiate social contexts (boyd, 2005). This is not an appealing prospect for most people and some joked that the "Are you my friend? Yes or no?" question that most social networking services asked resembled the kinds of questions frequently used by Dustin Hoffman's character in *Rainman*. Participants' language evolved to reflect this perceived deficiency (e.g., "She's my Friendster but not my friend!").

To an American sociologist, the term *friend* signals a strong tie relation in distinction to weak tie relations or *acquaintances*. In everyday vernacular, *friend* does not represent the same tie strength across all people and cultures. In more gregarious societies, the term often represents a variety of different relations and tends to confer respect more than tie strength. In American youth culture, there are hierarchies of friends—friends, best friends, bestest friends. These terms signal social judgments, or personal feelings about the value of the relationship. While these labels can signal the significance of the connection, an individual's internal model may not reflect what is said out loud. Relationships rarely have clean boundaries, yet social etiquette often requires us

to not make our true feelings known publicly. Plausible deniability allows individuals to "save face," rather than admit to differences in social judgment. For example, when someone inquires about why they were not included on a guest list, an appropriate response would be "Oh my, I'm so sorry—I totally forgot!", rather than "I didn't want you there." Expressing social judgments publicly is akin to airing dirty laundry and it is often socially inappropriate to do so.

Friend requests on Friendster require people to make social judgments about inclusion and exclusion and—more to the point—to reveal those decisions. Approval means that the new person will be listed on one's profile, available for everyone to see. Denial, in contrast, implies no correspondingly public humiliation, or even direct acknowledgment to the petitioner. Yet, because it is impossible to log in without being reminded of pending requests, the petitioner can assume that they were denied, should the recent login date be updated. The lack of strategically ambiguous excuses for denying a request means that refusal has a potentially high social cost. Many participants feel pressure to accept connections with people they do not regard as friends simply so that they do not have to face the challenges of rejection.

The perfectly reasonable original intent of the Friend structure—to expand the circle of known relations who could help in matchmaking—did not survive this disambiguation of social networks. Yet, the process of articulating Friendsters condenses all the ambiguities of the embedded relationships and expresses what is traditionally socially uncouth.

Although the process of articulation presents an issue of social embarrassment, there are further social costs to having the information visible. Although people are

providing the system with meaningful data, they may or may not be prepared for how that information is interpreted. Consider the case of Cobot, a robot that collected social data in LambdaMOO (Isbell, Kearns, Korman, Singh, & Stone, 2000). When the system began sharing what Cobot learned about who spent the most time talking to whom, the social structure of the system collapsed. Even though the quantitative information said nothing about the quality of relationships, having that information available made people doubt their relationships with others on the system. Trust collapsed, and the culture of the community was undermined by transparency. What systems know and how they are interpreted are often unrelated. On Friendster, participants are often unprepared for what their relationships may signal to readers or to the system.

Social network analysis depends on knowing the strength of individual relationships and on having a consistent representation for that strength within the system. On Friendster, tie strength made ambiguous by the label "Friend"; Inconsistency in marking relationships is rampant. Consider the network

Figure 8.3. Common ties
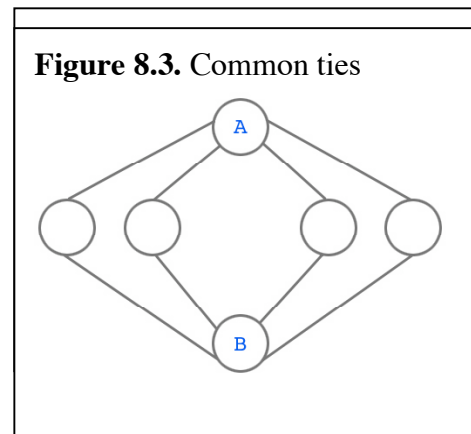
scenario that motivates Friendster—connecting people who share common ties. Figure 8.3 describes a situation when two individuals (A and B) are not directly connected, but share ties to numerous third parties. Feld (1981) argued, plausibly enough, that individuals who are connected this way have a higher probability of having traits or qualities in common, particularly if the third parties do not know each other. The Friendster creators thought that this made for an ideal dating situation: If A and B meet,

they will share much in common. In practice, however, Friendster social networks guarantee no such thing. Connections on Friendster do not signal strong relationship ties; people often connect to others whom they simply recognize, a connection that would never appear in a sociological network. Moreover, numerous common ties in Friendster tend to means one thing: exes. If A and B share a lot of friends but do not connect to one another, this is most likely due to a severed personal connection, not a social opportunity. This rather basic social fact cannot be rendered. The Friendster network is not modeling everyday social networks, but constituting its own, with distinctive rules and patterns of interaction.

Publicly performed social networks are fundamentally different than what sociologists study because they represent more than tie strength. Impression management is encoded into articulated networks. The variable ways in which people interpret the term *friend* plays a critical role, as does the cost of signaling the value of a relationship. Friendster's developers viewed the inconsistencies in participants' practices as malicious acts meant to foil the service's globally defined norms, failing to recognize that people were grappling with the norms present in a flattened world and weighing the costs and benefits of exposing their social judgments of others.

Individual clusters within the network set the norms on Friendster. One's choice in profiles is affected by the choices of those around them, setting the tone both for performance and interpretation. As people seek to make meaning from the profiles and determine what is appropriate to do in cases of socially awkward situations, they rely on the perceived norms built up from those around them. Some individuals complained about people having too many Friends while others felt as though collecting Friends was

the primary purpose of the service. When these two norms collided, terms like "Friendster slut" and "Friendster whore" emerged. In turn, some participants chose to celebrate their "slut" and "whore" status, viewing promiscuity as something to reclaim. Ryan Schultz, in a blog called Friendster Slut (*friendsterslut.blogspot.com*) tracked his efforts to connect to as many people as possible in order to see as much of the network as possible. Testing the limits of Friendster's architecture, Schultz made social networking a game devoid of everyday referents and motivations beyond that of manipulating the network structure itself. The norms Schultz operated under came from the Fakester community, although he engaged in collecting people from his representative profile.

Fakin' It: The Rise of Fakesters

Because participants have to write themselves into being on Friendster, there is no necessary correspondence with the embodied person. From the earliest days, participants took advantage of the flexibility of the system to craft "Fakesters," or nonbiographical profiles. Fakesters were created for famous people, fictional characters, objects, places and locations, identity markers, concepts, animals, and communities. Angelina Jolie was there, as were Homer Simpson, Giant Squid, New Jersey, FemSex, Pure Evil, Rex, and Space Cowboys. People connected to Fakesters as a way of enriching their own performances and in order to signal interests or tastes to others. Many Fakesters began as practical endeavors to connect groups of people; alumni networks were constituted through Fakesters representing universities, and Burning Man was crafted to connect Burners.

Fakesters were a way of "hacking" the system to introduce missing social texture. These purposes were not limited to group networking: The vast majority of Fakesters were exercises in creative and usually playful expression. They structured social activities, not just social groups, such as treasure hunts for the most interesting or creative Fakester. They introduced a public art form within Friendster, creating a culture *on* Friendster to complement the site's mapping of subcultures.

On a public mailing list dedicated to Fakesters, users explained their motivations:

"Bored at work one day, I found some beautiful pictures of steaks and other raw meat, thus was Meat born. It was sad to see it [deleted]. For once I had created something people took joy in, if just for a few minutes." —"Meat," September 9, 2003

"After a few weeks on Friendster, all of the profiles began to look alike, except the Fakesters… Fakester profiles clearly gave more scope for creativity and expression, and, were, in fact, MORE revealing than otherwise." —"Quotester," September 10, 2003

"It seemed like the natural thing to do. All the cool [profiles] were fake… Then I found out [Fakesters] were getting killed and I started making more and more. Bullwinkle, Slush Puppie, Stonehenge, Hippie Jesus, Zakeel, Mr. Gobbles, I can hardly remember them all." —Hilary, September 9, 2003

"Well, I thought Friendster was pretty boring for the first few weeks. Then I came across Whitney Houston. It wasn't Whitney that got me hooked on Fakesters, but a testimonial from Little Jon-Bennet [*sic*] Ramsey. Jon-Bennet said 'Whitney wrote "It's not right, but it's OK" about my tragic murder.' I was laughing so hard when I saw all of the testimonials for JB. She was so adorable. It was great to see the comments from people leaving messages about her evil mom. Anyway, I HAD to have my own little fakester, and since I think Patsy Stone is such a fabulous rebel, she was the perfect choice." —"Patsy Stone," September 10, 2003

Consistently, creators of Fakesters referenced their desire to have fun with the Friendster process and the positive feedback they received. In addition to the most active and prolific creative Fakesters, there were also users who would construct profiles that were a mix of their interests connected to a fake name and a fake photo. The goal of these profiles had less to do with creativity and more to do with remaining anonymous so as to limit the conflation of disparate social groups. These individuals would only link to a

fraction of the people that they knew on Friendster. For example, a young professor chose this route so that he could connect to his friends and play with the system without having to connect his students to his friends.

Fakesters also served a structural role in Friendster. Because participants could only see four "degrees" of separation from their profiles, connecting to popular Fakesters tended to expand the visible network. Without the complications of managing multiple social worlds, Fakesters happily linked to anyone; popular Fakesters collected thousands of Friends and were the most active Friendster "sluts." In the original implementation, participants would see a list of the most popular people in their network

Figure 8.4. Most popular Fakesters.

Burning Man   Ali G

on their homepage. Since popularity was based on the number of Friends, Fakesters collected Friends rabidly in order to be listed as most popular. Although the service eliminated this feature early on, two Fakesters dominated the popularity chart immediately and for the duration of the feature—Burning Man and Ali G (the gangsta persona of British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen; see Figure 8.4). These two reflected the cultural interests of groups of early adopters. For some participants, Fakesters altered the norms on Friendster, providing them with an excuse to collect Friends, play with their profile, and take the service less seriously:

> "It's like high school, only fun. It's like a cult, except you can leave. It's like human trading-cards."
> —Stacie, August 16, 2003

Although most participants loved the playful aspect of Fakesters, it further complicated the network structure and created an appearance of unreliability, which irritated both the company and individuals intent on using Friendster for serious networking. Friendster's servers were not equipped to handle the exponential growth. Some participants were spending 12 or more hours on the service per day, sending thousands of internal messages. Active participants would update their profiles and change their photos multiple times per day. Because of this and the expanding size of Friend networks, the database crumbled. By early fall 2003, Friendster was unbearably slow and regularly down, prompting anger from participants. Because of earlier efforts to regulate Friendster community norms, the service creators were widely mistrusted; many participants felt they were being punished for their fun. Paranoia emerged in the bulletin boards as word spread that individuals were being targeted for limited access; others argued that the problems were the precursor to a tiered fee structure.

When Friendster eliminated the "most popular" feature in May 2003, they also deleted both Burning Man and Ali G, each of whom had more than 10,000 friends. This was the start of a Whack-A-Mole–style purge of Fakesters, in which Fakesters and Friendster competed for

**Figure 8.5.** Fakester Revolution imagery.

Fakester farms were created and Fakester owners would duplicate their Fakesters for reinsertion. In late June, a group of Fakesters gathered on the Friendster bulletin board (and later in a Yahoo Group) to begin "the Fakester Revolution" that would end "the Fakester Genocide" (see Figure 8.5). They crafted "The Fakester Manifesto" (Batty, 2003) "in defense of our right to exist in the form we choose or assume" which included three key sections:

1. Identity is Provisional
2. All Character is Archetypal, Thus Public
3. Copyright is Irrelevant in the Digital Age

Roy Batty, a leading instigator in the revolution and the author of the manifesto helped organize and publicize the Fakesters. In mid-August, both *Salon* and *SFWeekly* published extensive write-ups of the Fakester antics entitled "Faking Out Friendster" and "Attack of

Figure 8.6. Mer's self-portrait.
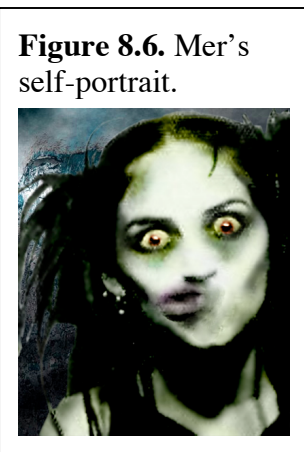
the Smartasses" (Mieszkowski, 2003; Anderson, 2003). The war between the Fakesters and Friendster was discussed on mailing lists, via the bulletin boards on Friendster, and over the watercooler. Needless to say, this incensed the company even more. As Friendster increased their crackdown, many of the practical Fakesters disappeared, even though few users objected to these Fakesters and most found them valuable. Regular participants who used nonrealistic photos (like "Mer" in Figure 8.6) were also deleted. Friendster capped the number of linked Friends as a stopgap measure against the Fakesters, resulting in more frustration and hysterical posts. One bulletin board message was titled "Friendster Won't Let Gay Pride Make New Friends!" (message from "Gay Pride," August 16, 2003).

In retaliation, Fakesters created Fraudsters, who impersonated other people on the service. Fraudsters were meant to confuse both the Friendster service and serious users. A Fraudster impersonating the site's creator, Jonathan Abrams, contacted many of his friends and other users on the service with fraudulent messages. Pretendster.com was created to insert another type of fake profile into Friendster. Pretendsters combined random photos from the web and random profile data. They were not fraudulent portrayals of any particular person, but automated Fakesters that mimicked real profiles.

Around this time, Roy Batty organized a handful of Fakesters in protest outside a San Francisco venue where Jonathan Abrams was speaking. Roy Batty often wrote polemic addresses for the Fakesters. In a message entitled "Hang Tough Campers," Roy Batty explained the movement's goals:

> "As I mentioned in my posting, a lot of the fun in what we do comes from the fact that we are not following Friendster's rules. If we're allowed, it undermines our status as outsiders. This 'revolution' has polarized people, and you can't give us that kind of thrill (the sheer amount of press coverage alone justifies continuing our battle—and there are also important points we're making about artistic and free expression). Our argument with Friendster gives us a focus for our passions. And no other similar site is as trafficked, so what we do, since many of us crave attention, is more visible there than anywhere else. ... Geekspeak translation: The Rebel Alliance has no purpose without Darth Vader to fight." —Roy Batty, September 11, 2003

The rhetoric of the most outspoken Fakesters activated the posture of resistance available in many Friendster subcultures, while simultaneously alienating the more mainstream users who did not recognize or appreciate the elements of parody in the Fakesters' activities. The Fakesters played on or parodied aspects of traditional subcultures, from deviant behavior, to active resistance, to the rhetoric of oppression. They used alternative channels for social networking that strengthened their collective presence outside the service and that made Friendster a site of collective action, rather

than a medium of communication. The Fakesters' tone was appreciated by users who identified with being marginalized; their attitude was more upsetting to those invested in maintaining the original hegemonic purposes of the system.

While Fakesters had taken on a collective impression of resistance, their primary political stance concerned authenticity. In discussing Fakesters, Batty was quick to point out that there's no such thing as an authentic performance on Friendster—"*None* of this is real." Through the act of articulation and writing oneself into being, all participants are engaged in performance intended to be interpreted and convey particular impressions. While some people believed that "truth" could be perceived through photorealistic imagery and a list of tastes that reflected one's collections, the Fakesters were invested in using more impressionistic strokes to paint their portraits. If we acknowledge that all profiles are performative, permitting users to give off a particular view of themselves, why should we judge Fakesters as more or less authentic than awkwardly performed profiles?

While the Fakester Revolution's antics were fun to watch, they lacked long-term momentum. Although the heavily publicized period of Fakesters ended in the fall of 2003, Fakesters never completely disappeared; there are still thousands on the service. When Friendster became popular in Asia, there was an additional explosion of Fakesters and Fraudsters. Yet for early adopters, the elimination of the initial Fakesters was the end of a period of freedom when the participants defined the context of their sociability.

Although Friendster initially rejoiced when the Fakesters and freak communities departed, their departure prompted a much larger user abandonment of the service. On June 24, 2004, Friendster began recruiting Burners to return. Later that year they

introduced affiliation markers in profiles and created sponsored Fakesters for advertising companies. In 2005 they introduced group identification and numerous other features to support dating. Some early adopters even returned to participate on Friendster in the manner intended by the designers, but the majority log in only rarely.

Conclusion

The performance of social relations is not equivalent to the relations themselves, or even to an individual's mental model of them. The proposition that drove Friendster was that the articulation of relations through the system would make everyday social structures more visible; in turn, this would help people negotiate those structures more effectively, or at least efficiently. As Lessig (2000) and others have made clear, software code is a form of social architecture. By cementing a model of social relations into the Friendster architecture, the service was not simply representing everyday relations, but designing an entirely new social structure in which interactions could occur. Participants found that the available structure for social networking introduced new issues in managing and negotiating social relations that affected the underlying relations themselves—and that fed back into the system.

In order to make social relations more visible, Friendster flattened complex social structures. The abolition of distance—the classic Internet virtue—rendered many social distinctions invisible; the impact of Friends' performances on individual profiles undermined the individual control over social performances; and the binary social network structure—Friend/not-Friend—erased a broad field of relationship nuances. Absent these strong orienting features, participants negotiated new norms and reintroduced new forms of social complexity. They developed new strategies for

signaling affiliation while maintaining boundaries—producing or linking to Fakesters, rather than to potentially compromising Friends. This allowed for a certain recovery of control over identity performances, but at the cost of the larger consensus about the norms and purposes of the system.

The persistent, searchable and semipublic nature of relationship articulations on Friendster had a further consequence: Unlike the ephemeral social contexts in which relationships can be signaled and negotiated (e.g., at parties), Friendster required participants to really consider the implications of their associations. Because of this, visible connections were not simply an expression of an individual's mental model of exterior relations, but an explicit performance of a social network intended for consumption by others, whether visible or invisible during the performance creation.

Although the shifts in social structure became apparent through participation, the desire to participate had both a voyeuristic and performative quality. Friendster created a stage for digital flâneurs—a place to see and be seen. Yet unlike the physical equivalent, people had no way of knowing when they were being seen and who was seeing them[6].

Friendster built on the widespread appeal of representing and extending personal networks, yet never quite resolved the social consequences of that extension. For a while the playful exploration of social structure and identity performance known to children emerged as a way of smoothing that tension. But just as children's antics exhaust their parents, the exploratory and playful games of some participants irritated Friendster's creators and many of the more serious participants. By waging war against play, Friendster took a long time to learn from those antics and help participants resolve the structural issues that play exposed.

Millions of people worldwide are now connected through networked digital infrastructures in forms that grow increasingly sophisticated and contextually rich. The notion of the global village remains powerful, but individual sociability will never operate on a global scale. Large social networks will always be mediated by and constructed through smaller communities and individual relationships. Among other things, Friendster demonstrates the inverse relationship between the scale of social network and the quality of the relations within them—a relationship rooted in the limits of human time and attention. It also demonstrates that digital networks will never merely map the social, but inevitably develop their own dynamics through which they *become* the social. The interaction of people with information systems is recurrently marked by play and experimentation, as people test the limits of their settings and manage the consequences of unexpected interactions and altered contexts. Digital social structures disrupt the boundaries that define social communities, but the reassessment of context and performance that accompanies it is endlessly generative.

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[1] In this context, my chapter and Shay David's (Chapter 11) investigation of "online knowledge communities" share some core concerns and take opposite tacks on others. Both pieces are concerned with the implications of the thin social texture of online communities—mine in a context where the thick field of offline social distinctions is the default referent; David's in a context where that distance is used to erase a priori social distinctions, such as expert hierarchies. David's concern with how to establish forms of legitimacy over knowledge production within online systems is not germane to Friendster, which is more invested in supporting sociability than information transfer.

[2] Information about Burning Man is available at *www.burningman.com/*.

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[3] The term *degrees* stems from the play *Six Degrees of Separation* and refers to what network analysts call a path length between nodes. Four degrees in Friendster terminology is thus equal to a path linking four nodes (or, in this case, persons). Although it is not a term proper to network analysis, I use it following the norm established by the participants themselves.

[4] Playa names are the nicknames that Burning Man attendees choose to adopt for the week in the desert in lieu of their given names. Playa names help maintain the fantasy that Burning Man is an alternate reality.

[5] The lack of a fee structure and the empowerment of certain kinds of actions (e.g., freedom of association) underwrites a persistent and—in online environments—common uncertainty about the "public" character of the service, and the status of individual rights in relation to it (see, e.g., Nideffer, Chapter 12, this volume).

[6] In September 2005, Friendster implemented an optional "Who's Viewed Me" feature. Users were able to access who visited their page provided that they allowed the system to inform other users of their profile visits. While this feature is available in other dating sites, many Friendster users felt that it was creepy and turned it off.