

I 'VE A PROPOSAL FOR YOU

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Graduation project proposal

Introduction, context, process

After putting together a final version of my proposal v.03 [here](#), I've managed to build the fundamental building blocks to the proposed piece before the due date for the final submission (now). As per my project log ([here](#)), I have assembled a working prototype of the described sniffing/capturing system using a router and openWRT software (I've amassed about 1.5 GB of packet data archived [here](#)). The original intent was to artificially engineer an environment where people could choose to connect to a wireless signal and in exchange, gave away their privacy. One could then listen to the inner workings of this system via an audio recording to understand it's reasoning.

After a few days of having this system up and broadcasting an open wireless signal in and around my house, (which worked very well – the 1.5 GB was collected in just a few days), a rather simple problem with the nature of what I had built started to dawn on me. No matter how hard I tried to emphasize the consequence of giving away your privacy (for example : changing the wireless SSID to “PAY_WITH_YOUR_PACKETS”), people seemed not too concerned about my router scraping their data. Connecting to an open network is fairly common and consequences of doing so in this particular context were not entirely clear. I was also expecting most traffic to come from secured sources (https), but this was not the case, as certain people appear to have purchased plane tickets, surfed to their favorite news site and sent emails over the air, in clear, readable text.

In the light of this experiment, I identified two main problems which needed to be addressed. Firstly, the potential reward for accepting to indulge in a digital system must be contrasting with the consequence it entails. This creates a stronger sense of dilemma and forces the individual to query its internal values before taking action. Secondly, one's feeling of responsibility seems to often be reduced when consequences concern solely our own person and does not involve others (i.e. “it can only damage me, so *I* don't care that much). By dragging others into the equation, our moral compass suddenly twirls a little more, sharpening the contrasting forces on either side of a choice (i.e. “if things go wrong, they go wrong for *others* too”).

Taking these issues into consideration, I've decided to revamp my proposal considerably. The choice of exposing

oneself and others to undesirable consequences in the hopes of reaping a reward will be central to the proposed project. I will also base my proposal largely on my previous experiments and recently gathered data in regards to people's different behaviors when engaging with digital technology.

Summary

I propose to create a simple game which can be played by anyone with a mobile phone. My intention is to create a dilemma in which a reward can be won but at the cost of small price. The most important part of the project is to balance these two elements in order to attract, or seduce as many players as possible by setting a price that is hard to disregard and by offering a reward which makes the price worthwhile playing. I envision a simple installation which comprises of three parts :

- 1) a docking station for one's mobile phone
- 2) a screen projection for instructions and feedback
- 3) a clear box showing at all times the prize to be won.

A hypothetical interaction scenario could be as follows :

- A welcome screen invites a user to play the game. This user reads the rules, and agrees.
- The rules are the following :
 - The price to play this game is 10 contacts, randomly chosen from your phone. Once you have granted access to the phone, I grab this data and it belongs to me. (*Important note : there is no mention of what will become of these contacts. This has been left out purposefully*).
 - You have 1 chance out of 100 to win a 100 Euro bill, displayed in front of you, in a clear box which is secured by a combination padlock.
 - If you win, the screen will show you the combination to the lock and the prize is yours. In any case, your 10 contacts belong to me.
- The user connects to his/her phone to the docking station
- The system accepts his/her phone, chooses 10 contacts, displays them to the screen to show the user that he/she has paid.
- A random algorithm is triggered and the result is shown to the user.

Reward

In the last few weeks I have gathered empirical data, asking different people what they would perceive as a seducing prize. The individuals I have asked ranged from experienced phone application developers to “new” users to fervent defendants of private data and people who consider themselves just “normal phone users”. I've described the setup to them and presented a range of different possible prizes to be won, asking which would be most likely to convince them to play the game. Among the options were a broad array of physical objects (food, electronics, clothes), digital rewards (free applications, data from other users, credit to different reward websites) and plain cold cash. Although I was slightly disappointed but not very surprised to hear it, most people cited money as being the most appealing to them. Most respondents agreed that for 1 out of 100 odds, when paying with a their personal information, somewhere between 50 and 100 Euros would be enough for them to play. While some seemed to be fine with 15 or 20 euros, others would never of done it for 100.

Interestingly enough, it seemed like the 50-100 Euro bracket caused people to reflect on their choice for a longer period of time than other amounts, presumably because the other respondents (under 20 and over 100) had an immutable answer already made up in their minds – thus showing no sign of hesitation.

Conversations I've had with my interviewees seem to point to the fact that setting up such a game reminded them very much of a gambling mechanism (rightly so). Perhaps this explains why money would be perceived as a natural prize to this end. Another observation was made during these conversations : setting a more lavish prize aroused suspicions as to what would be done with the gathered data. There was a direct correlation between one's level of fear about giving up personal data and the reward for risking it. Guessing this kind of reaction to be somewhat natural, it is also purely speculative and simply inferred from relating to other traditional games similar to this one – where one's “bet” is directly tied to the “reward” to be won, or the amount to be lost. Hence, by offering a more generous prize (even if the odds of winning shrank considerably), it was assumed that consequences would be more severe.

I understand that I am currently only writing a proposal and will definitively stay open to other ideas as the project matures. I believe whatever feels more appealing to the average phone user should be used as a prize in the end.

Consequence

As I am not building a traditional gambling machine and my interest lies in the amount of data people will be ready to sacrifice in order to gain something, I thought the perfect currency would be to use people's personal smartphone

information. It is probably the one other thing most of us have in our pocket alongside wallet and keys, meaning that almost anyone could play this game. I'm also hoping to make very clear the act of "giving up" personal data by having people physically "connect" the device and expressively granting access to their phone. I think many users would not agree to such a thing – hence the importance of setting a reasonably high reward in exchange for this gesture.

Once again, my research here pointed to a very clear pattern when it came to which "price" one would pay for a shot at winning. Most users didn't care much about application data (geolocation, information consumed, games played, etc.) and it seemed almost everyone I asked would be ready to sacrifice any amount of it, even for a very low sum of money. When asked if they would sacrifice their own information (name, phone number, email, etc.) most of them hesitated, but a bit more than half said they would agree anyways. Finally, when asked if they would play when it meant putting other people's privacy in danger (namely, their contacts), almost everyone hesitated and then asked "but what will be done with the data?". When I refused to give a clear answer (I didn't have one anyways), there was often more hesitation, then responses varied wildly.

It was very educational to see how, when confronted on a choice that depended on them only, but impacted other close people, almost everyone has to perform an internal check to weight in the reward and the consequences VS the odds of winning. In the same way I am not yet completely convinced that contact data would be the most effective currency to make people pay for playing, I am leaving the door open for different configurations at this level too.

Objectives : generating dilemma, forcing choices

As pointed out in the last 2 sections, the cornerstone of such a project is the dilemma which arises from the contrast between two conflicting variables. Regardless of what these variables end up being, they should balance out in such a way to force an internal ethical debate and push oneself to compromise in either direction. By simply acknowledging the existence of such a system, one can decide to ignore it – which is a choice in itself too.

I feel like creating this type of opportunity would actually make others feel like they are giving up, instead of gaining something. Having knowledge of a potential reward is easy to discard when the cost is measured in the same way as the dividends (money for example, in a traditional gambling experience) and odds can then be easily inferred (i.e. people choose not to play at a casino, knowing the odds), but this changes when your payment currency is different from the rewards'. It is much harder to rationalize what price is right when the possibility of winning money is put up against the disclosure of other's personal information – these things are indeed difficult to gauge, and I'm looking

forward to pushing people to trust their gut feeling to make a decision, as reason can hardly be invoked in such a situation.

Finally, it would be beneficial for such a project to emulate traditional gambling apparatuses, as there is a known “addictive” force to these types of games. By using ludic interfaces, simple graphics and constant feedback to keep the participant alert (read here : arcade games), it is possible to draw this participant into the constructed narrative and provoke irrational decisions.

Storyboard

An rough version of what the instructions could look like, screen by screen. This has been added as an appendix (A).

Objectives, measurement of success

Keeping in line with my previous proposal, I will be having similar benchmarks to measure success

- A system that is very, very simple to use and essentially performs one single action
- A system that is seducing, inviting
- A system that forces reflection of one's values in relation to a risk/gain situation
- A system that mirrors a larger ecosystem that currently exists (more on this below)

Opting in and the price to pay to participate in digital culture

More broadly speaking, I'm trying to synthesize one of the difficult choices all of us are faced with on a regular basis – namely entrusting our personal information to third parties and organizations of which we know nothing about in exchange for a service they provide. I'm highlighting the importance of this choice by creating an unusually large prize, a particularly high cost and somewhat low chances of winning, but I'm hoping to make clear that these choices we make are mainly ethical ones. It's practically impossible to be part of modern life and not participate, at least to some extent, in this economy of data. In an era where not using third-party webmail solutions, not having social media accounts and not signing up to online services is merely unthinkable, the question becomes : what digital price becomes unreasonable to pay for the privilege to use this service?

As Julian Assange proclaimed in recent days (Dec 2011) : “iPhone, BlackBerry, Gmail users - you're all screwed”,

referring to the latest schemes uncovered by Wikileaks, where data surveillance software for these platforms are apparently sold and used by 160 companies in 25 countries. What Assange is saying, is the consequences of giving up our private information can be disastrous at times. It is also the case that technology is making the process of disclosure easier and faster than ever before. There was a natural barrier that prevented payments from a smartphone to proliferate 10 years ago (the infrastructure was simply not existent), but we now have such things as “one-click purchase” (Amazon) and phone-enabled credit card readers (Square) which make it extremely simple to buy products rapidly. In addition to this, many services also allow for “social signup” to their services, which means that you are simply prompted for email/password of a larger service you are signed up for (facebook, linkedin, etc.) and use their API to collect the personal information and create your new account with it. This is meant to speed up the process of creating accounts, reducing further the impression of a “high” cost to pay for the privilege of using a service. In this manner, the different variables informing the choices we are to make in similar situations of risk/gain get more and more difficult to assess.

Previous work

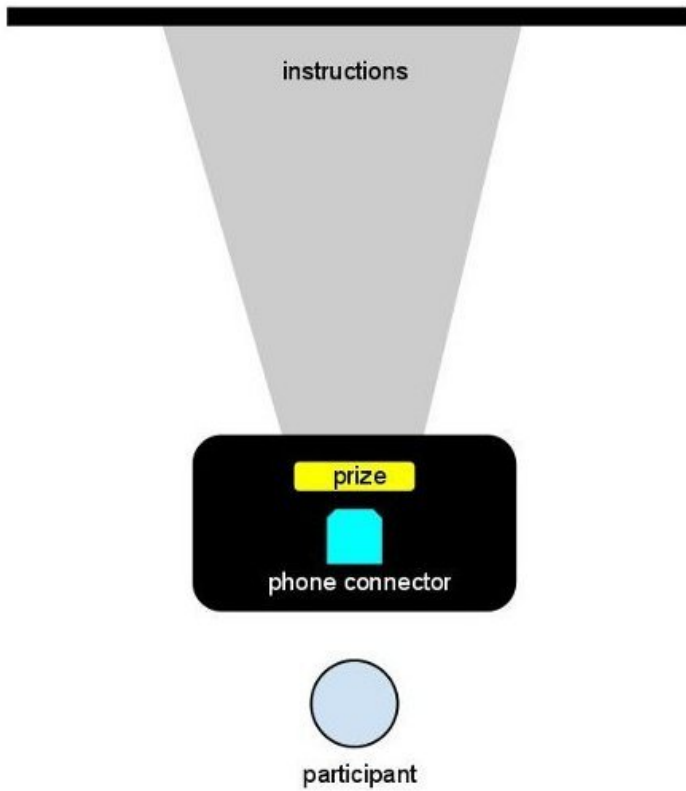
In the past year, I have made 3 projects. The first was a grumpy chat program that interfered with the normal flow of a conversation, the second one a subscription-based soap opera newsletter inspired by daily news reports, and the last one, an encryption/decryption algorithm that protected your message from scrutiny, but revealed your intentions of communicating under the radar.

My main concern while making these works was to highlight the mediation power held by technologies. Some works did this more literally than others, but my goal was often to try and make visible certain characteristics of technology that make us believe that it could be apolitical, agnostic to influence or simply objective. If there is anything inherent at all to Internet technology, I believe it to be its immunity to complete objectivity from social, political, economical and legislative pressures. In addition to this subjectivity I attempted to reveal, the works I've produced cast cyberspace in a particular light in terms of its constitution – I believe it to be a highly narrative, open-ended space with different norms, rules and affordances. Cyberspace thus relies on a new economy of data, trust and reputation which grows according to personal, institutional, governmental and private interests.

The three aforementioned pieces were somewhat a reflection of this economy while trying to envision different configurations of its constituency by altering the forces that shape it.

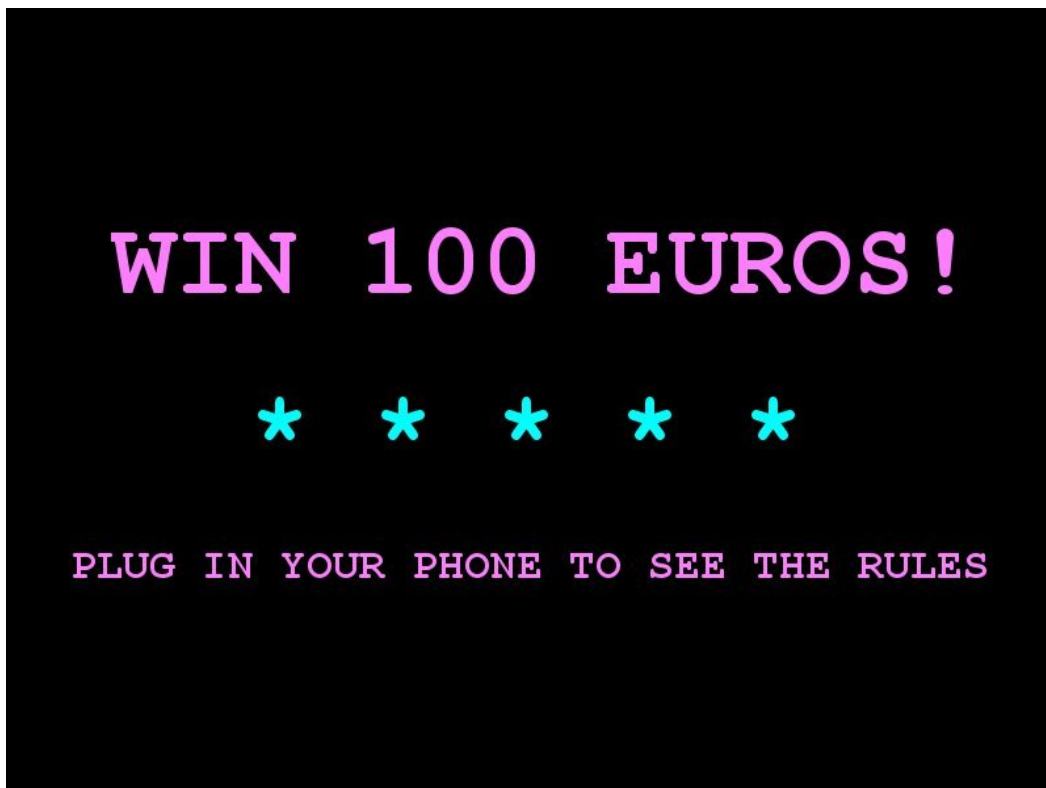
Appendix A : storyboard

Aerial view of hypothetical setup (the gray part is a projection, yes)



(to keep in mind, the following screens would be projected!)

Intro screen



Participant plugs phone

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*****
*                THE RULES!                *
*****

YOU HAVE A 1 IN 100 CHANCE TO WIN

THE COST TO PLAY IS 10 OF YOUR CONTACTS CHOSEN
RANDOMLY BY ME. ONCE YOU ACCEPT, THEY ARE MINE.

THAT'S IT! WHEN READY, PUT YOUR PHONE TO DEBUG
MODE, AND WE'RE GOOD TO GO!
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Participant grants access to the phone

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*****
*                PROCESSING YOUR PAYMENT        *
*****

...GOT JOHN DOE (+31 06 12 34 56 78)
...GOT MARK SMITH (+31 06 43 24 65 32)
...GOT BARACK OBAMA (+31 06 24 34 12 54)
...GOT BRITNEY SPEARS (+31 06 23 43 12 22)
...GOT JOHN DOE (+31 06 12 34 56 78)
...GOT MARK SMITH (+31 06 43 24 65 32)
...GOT BARACK OBAMA (+31 06 24 34 12 54)
...GOT BRITNEY SPEARS (+31 06 23 43 12 22)
...GOT MARK SMITH (+31 06 43 24 65 32)
...GOT BARACK OBAMA (+31 06 24 34 12 54)

DONE! NOW LET'S SEE IF YOU'VE WON!
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Drumroll...

5...

4...

4...

2...

1...

AW :(SORRY, YOU LOSE
THANKS FOR PLAYING!

Or

5...

4...

4...

2...

1...

WOOHOO! YOU WIN!
CODE TO PADLOCK: 46981

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