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Rewind

In the past year at PZI, I have made 3 projects. The first was a grumpy chat program that interfered with the normal flow of a conversation. It made strange transformations to the text inputted and printed the whole conversation on a large roll of paper. The second was a subscription-based soap opera newsletter inspired by daily news reports. When subscribed, one would receive a small fragment of a larger story that essentially constructed itself in real-time. Lastly, I made an encryption/decryption algorithm that protected your message from scrutiny, but revealed your intentions of communicating under the radar. It was politically charged and highlighted the aggressive censorship policies of certain countries in regards to communication technologies.

My main concern while making these works was to put forth the mediation power held by technology. Some works did this more literally than others, but my goal was often to debunk the myth of technology as being 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 than its physical counterpart. 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 tying to envision different configurations of its constituency by altering the forces that shape it. Also worth mentioning is more previous work I have done at other institutions and on my own, which usually focused on critiquing new modes of sharing data over networks. Finally, I've also worked for an array of different private companies, co-ops, organizations and others in the field of software development, building systems which I will be referring to in this proposal.

The backbone of this proposal, and a bit of process

To sum up my last 2.5 months, I've made a previous version of this proposal many weeks back (see wiki), basically created a large part of the work described in it (see wiki) and learned a few important lessons in the process. In a nutshell, the project was to be a hacked router that provided free wireless access, but in exchange for this service, it watched and captured your data. You could then listen to the machine's machiavellistic internal reasoning through an audio recording while it performed its dubious actions. It worked well, enough that a few things stood out :

- The potential reward for accepting to indulge in, or trust a digital system must be contrasting with the consequence it entails. If the stakes are low, nobody cares that much, no matter what the service or consequences are.
- One's feeling of responsibility seems to often be reduced when consequences concern solely ourselves 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 (i.e. "if things go wrong, they go wrong for others too").

Summary

I propose to create a simple gambling contraption that can be played by anyone with a mobile phone. The accepted currency for it would be your personal data (undecided which part, specifically). My intention is to create a dilemma in which a reward can be won but at the cost of a 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 :

- an input device that interacts with one's phone (this can be a docking station, a connector, an app)
- a screen projection for instructions and feedback (the "gambling machine")
- a clear indication of the prize to be won.

The rules of the game could be the following (subject to change, more on this below) :

- The price to play this game is 1 contact, chosen from your phone. (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" (this has not been determined yet). Upon activating the device, a random algorithm determines if you've won or not.

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 privacy laws 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, digital rewards and plain cold cash. I was not very surprised to hear most people cite 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.

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 gambling 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. Which in a way makes sense, if you rob a bank, what you want is probably behind the thick metal door – although you might have no clue what exactly is behind it, the means taken to ensure "it" easily gives away how important "it" could be.

After further reflection, it occured to me that I could also simply not have any "prize", but rather rely on the addictive force of games to keep users interested. In the same way compulsive gamblers are often not so interested in the money to be won (even when they win, they keep playing), I could highten the chances to win and provide enough of a fullfulling experience to convince players to try it again (lights, music, etc.). If, for example, I lowered the price to pay at 1 contact, and odds were 1 in 5 to win, I'm convinced many players would be ready to "just try it".

I understand that I am currently only writing a proposal and will definitely 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 reap a reward, 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, no matter the setting in which it is placed. 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 or having them installing an application on their own.

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 prize. When asked if they would let go of their own personal data (name, phone number, email, etc.) most 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. Once again, I feel the need to ponder a few more options on this front, but I believe more testing here will be required.

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 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.

Having knowledge of a potential reward is easier 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 – or decide to play and take a chance anyways), 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, for example, is put up against the disclosure of other's personal information – these things are indeed subjective, 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 it 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).

(Edit : these have been subsequently removed, as they appeared to be misleading in some instances. By trying to give a glimpse of what this could look like, I might be confusing some instead. I'm aiming for gambling machine-like graphics with hopefully buzzing sounds and colorful interfaces. Further details need to be fleshed out)

Gambling as generative art?

Very recently, an insightful discussion on the Generative Art mailing list erupted, causing a mini-stir and prompting some of its users to question the current state of what we call generative art. If we consider the latest defintion offered on the list, *"Generative art refers to any art practice where the artist cedes control to a system that operates with a degree of relative autonomy, and contributes to or results in a completed work of art.",* could the result of this "randomized" gambling experience be influenced by the processes of generative art? I intend on exploring this idea further by looking at semi/autonomous art pieces and try to consolidate some aspects of them with my original goals.

Bibliography

- Lawrence Lessig ("code v2")
- Benkler ("The wealth of networks")
- Zittrain ("The generative internet")
- Nudge (Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein)
- The Net Delusion (Evgeny Morozov)
- Philip Galanter (generative art)
- Inke Arns (software art, generative art)
- Alan sheridan