

Foundations of Game Design

Part II Personal Report — Ask.me Social Network Simulator

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this report, I will be discussing the development process and initial evaluation of the first prototype of Ask.me, the Social Network Simulator.

To begin with, I will be discussing the roots of the project's design. Initially, the game was intended to tackle the use of Facebook as its target platform. While the concept had potential, it was faced with a number of complications that were unfortunately infeasible to solve.

The project's eventual abandonment led to reconsideration of our approach towards the topic. As will be discussed, the original topic was rife with context that could detract from the intended message, and since it was the project's main problem from the beginning, it led to a more focused design for our game concerning social media.

In our second major iteration, we shifted our sights to another popular social media platform, ask.fm. I will discuss briefly what this social network consists of, and what the related message we wanted to deliver with our game was. Its resultant design was far more directed on several of its governing aspects.

Following its implementation, we considered the evaluation of the game. Thanks to the platform we designed it for, evaluation could be easily embedded directly into the game itself, so that it would check its own efficacy even while it is being played; requesting feedback from the players and saving them in an online repository for our perusal.

I will also discuss the resultant feedback and collected data from the first full playtest of the prototype, delving into greater detail wherever appropriate.

2 FIRST ITERATION

Our game, intended to tackle the topic of social media, started off by targeting Facebook as its intended subject; specifically with reference to its responsible use and the repercussions of misuse.

Its initial design was problematic; most subjects we considered shared a common achilles' heel, which, even within the group itself caused severe issues during discussion: the context-sensitivity of situations and scenarios we might consider. In spite of this apparent challenge, we attempted to simplify the problem as much as possible.

The primary mechanic that we decided upon for our game would be fairly straightforward. The game would provide a scenario at various stages of different protagonists' lives, and they would be faced with a decision. Given the decision they take, they will then see the outcomes unfold. However, those outcomes would unfold from a different perspective; namely, that of the other person involved in the scenario.

What this was intended to achieve was relatively straightforward. Given the situation at hand, the player would have to start considering possible outcomes a bit more carefully. The outcome's message would not be interpreted, with the exception of bringing about subtle changes to emphasize any targeted comments to the player depending on their new perspective, i.e. passing a comment about a person would have the recipient's name replaced with "you" when the perspective shifts to that of the recipient. This greater emphasized the perspective change.

This was all meant to be done without telling or claiming what is bad or good, but rather allowing the player to experience it themselves and draw their own conclusions[8, pp. 198-200]. This process is far more powerful than spoonfeeding, as it would avoid making the players feel patronized and reject the message being put forward.

It was also decided that, following the perspective change, the player would adopt the new person's identity for the following scenario. That following scenario would also take place at a later stage of life, changing the context and points of contention specific to the scenario. In the final scenario, after having been through the process of action and feedback several times, the player would be subjected to one last scenario where they themselves (their original identity, rather than the character they are playing in the scenario) are subject to a compromising situation, hinging on a decision made by the protagonist, who the player controls. The main principle revolved around learning through experience, rather than being told the outcome via impersonal narrative, in order to make them more relatable[9, pp. 22-25].

This cyclic set of scenarios aimed to emphasize, as much as possible, the consideration of the player on their decisions. This repeated process would hopefully condition the player to always try to make the decision that was supposedly the lesser of two evils, until finally they had to tackle a hypothetical scenario where they themselves would be in jeopardy.

2.1 DESIGN ISSUES

Immediately, a number of issues can be seen with this design. After our first fully fledged playtest, our design was found to be far too dependent on context. Players involved in the playtest would either disregard the options entirely due to a lack of choice, or, in the final

scenario, the situation was hardly poignant enough to cause consideration of the options available.

One other issue that players pointed out was particularly severe, namely, that the entire exercise had very little connection to social networks per se. All the situations that we put the players in could and would easily be encountered in real life, simply that the situations would far more easily and quickly escalate online. Completely rewriting the scenarios, with slight exception to the first one, would be necessary for it to work — and even then, there was no guarantee that most players would find the message relatable.

Given that the concept itself would need to be reconsidered extensively in order to salvage the idea within the time available, it was decided that the Facebook project should be abandoned. Alternative solutions, such as tailoring the outcomes better to the players, or creating the option for players to type in their own answers were deemed infeasible.

3 SECOND ITERATION

Following the first major playtest, we agreed on an ultimatum; unless someone within the team could come up with a way to salvage the Facebook project, we would proceed to an alternative. This alternative had been discussed very briefly in the early phases of design and planning, but set aside since it was thought to be too simplistic.

Unfortunately, nobody could think of avenues to explore within the Facebook project, and so we took the alternate route of targeting ask.fm, another social media site. In this website, people can sign up for an account and allow people to ask them questions, anonymously or otherwise. It is quite common to find young teenagers on this website, seeking popularity and acceptance, to answer very revealing and personal questions under the assumption that it is expected of them.

This activity is a lot more distilled, and only has one possible format. Its risks are clear, and the message we could put forward is fairly straightforward. Rather than claiming whether or not this is causing any serious damage, our game could provide a clear demonstration of what these teenagers subject themselves to—by putting the player in the hotseat for them to experience firsthand. This is strongly grounded in the two principles we chose to abide by in the design of the Facebook project; namely, that the situation should be presented as-is, and for the players to go through the experience without too much elaboration.

In this way, a large part of the game's design was already predetermined. At this point we set about elaborating on the basic concept, to make it more engaging as a game.

4 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The design of the game, quickly coined as ask.me, was driven primarily by the appearance and functionality of the site we were intending to mimic, namely, ask.fm. The site offers a very streamlined and minimalistic interface, geared towards one task alone: the answering of questions. The interface itself is largely reminiscent of the game spent[5], with its columnar layout and very restricted set of options posed to the player.

To begin with, the game needed to have a goal—that is to say, a message to get across. We initially juggled the idea of encouraging teens to abandon or at least curtail the use of ask.fm. We decided that the message would likely fall on deaf ears, and chose instead to target a much larger knowledge gap; that of simple awareness. Many parents will tell you that they haven't a clue about these phenomena online, and it is arguable that this lack of parental knowledge about these online platforms is what puts teens at risk[1, par. 40].

Our approach towards designing the game, stemming directly from the idea of an Experience and a Message, is largely endogenous[10, p. 5]. For this reason, when approaching the DPE framework to consider the parts of our design, we began very much grounded in the aspects of the User Interface and Interactivity. On the opposite side, we also had a good idea of the Learning outcomes. To bridge the gap, our design was concerned primarily with the Mechanics and the Content[10, p. 7].

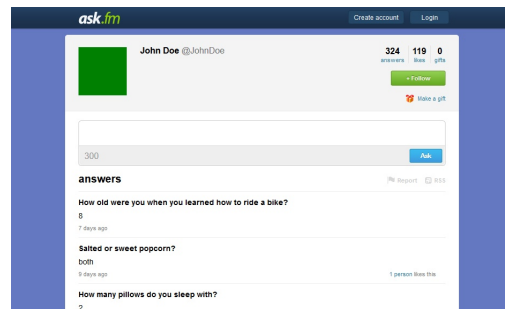


Figure 4.1: Typical ask.fm Account

4.1 MECHANICS

In the case of the mechanics of the game, it was fairly straightforward. What we already knew was that the player would have to answer questions as the main (and likely only) activity. This activity had to be encouraged somehow, even having some kind of pressure or constraint to it, if possible. Mimicking the process that ask.fm users go through, that is, answering questions to keep interest going, we decided that the player would have to answer questions in order to keep a constantly-depleting "popularity" gauge. Should the gauge end up empty, then the game ends.

This further paralleled the gameplay of Spent, where actions are made with the intention of maintaining the bank balance of the protagonist. This restriction of choice can largely be considered as a combination of Reduction and Tunneling[6]. Conditioning the player to focus on the task of answering questions would get them lost in the process.

4.2 CONTENT

Once the framework is established, the player is exposed to the actual content. To mimic the experience of an ask.fm user, the content was decided as consisting of questions, of different kinds, that are found on ask.fm. It was decided that the questions would be fairly benign and innocuous at first, in order to ease the player into answering simple questions at first. However, following the initial "training" period, the player would then have to answer increasingly personal and offensive questions; risking to lose the popularity game should they refuse to do so.

The overall design was satisfactory, in that the situation is fairly devoid of context (aside from the scenario set at the start, which is unequivocally grounded in reality) at no point does

it state whether what is happening is good or not. To add to the legitimacy of the experience, the questions could also be populated from actual ask.fm accounts, of which plenty could be found.

5 PLANNING

By this stage, our team's dynamic had been fairly well established. My role was primarily the project manager, which I took on out of necessity—our team had a lot of talent, but we were sorely lacking in organization at first. Given also that I have had a hand in the majority of the fields we needed to delve into with our project, I was in a good position to manage things while helping out wherever it was needed. While the core concepts of the game's design were discussed amongst the entire group, I was involved in most discussions that delved into greater detail with the different aspects of the project.

With regards to how the project was divided, we considered it as two major components: the framework, and the content.

The framework, as the team agreed, would be implemented as an actual website, accessible online. This was a decision taken mainly on the fact that William has worked in the web development industry for several years, so he was the best equipped for the task. While I was aiding William in the technical design, David, Luke and myself would deal with content creation.

The content consisted of questions for the game, and supplementary written content in the form of information, tutorials, and questionnaires for feedback. This would have to be designed appropriately to ensure that the game is played within the right context, else the game would be fairly pointless or, worse still, difficult to grasp for the player.

6 IMPLEMENTATION

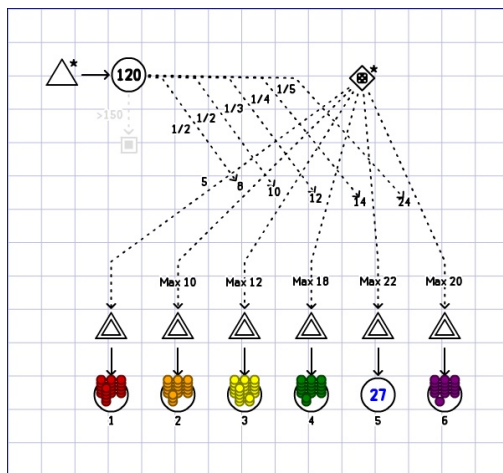


Figure 6.1: Probability Machination

Implementation was largely uneventful.

Most of the work that I was involved in directly was drawing up detailed technical specifications for William to follow, in order for him to be able to plan his work accordingly. This process turned out to be very effective for both of us, as it ensured that the game was designed accurately, and that William knew exactly what was required of him.

Amongst the tools and methods we used to aid communication between ourselves, we also made use of the Machinations framework[3]. With it, I made a simulation of the probability distribution for randomizing the questions in the game. It helped

considerably in describing to William the algorithm he needed to implement for the randomization feature of the game, as well as serving as a tool for adjusting the algorithm together.

Similarly to the coding, content creation progressed without many issues. I assisted in bridging the two by converting the data into XML, in order for it to be usable by the website's code, while helping David and Luke as they prepared and collated all the textual content. David also thought to find articles related to the subject, which we would put in the conclusion of the game to better emphasize our message.

The biggest pitfall in our implementation, as we would find out later on, is that we did not consider a second preliminary playtest similar to that which led to us abandoning the Facebook project. During the entire development and adjustment period, we were only consulting each other regarding the balance of the game, and this would later result in dissonance between us and our playtesters, as will be discussed later on.

Once all the components were ready, we uploaded the game to an online host. The game is currently hosted at <http://fragnet.net/ask.me/>.

7 EVALUATION METHOD

With regards to the evaluation of our game, we thought it would be beneficial for the game to incorporate its own feedback system, so that it may evaluate its effectiveness as soon as it is played. In this way, we designed a simple questionnaire for before the game, as well as a questionnaire for afterwards. Both were made to be simple as possible, and considering that our aim is simply for the sake of awareness, we agreed that the efficacy of our game can be measured on two simple aspects: that (a) the player learns about ask.fm and the activities that take place on the site and (b) that they may consider a need for better informed parents about the risks of the internet. In both of the questionnaires, we make extensive use of the Likert scale[2].

In this regard, the questionnaire prior to the game gauges, very simply, the person's experience with the internet and social networks in general. It also asks about the value of Internet use for teenagers. The questions were mixed in with some other marginally related topics, to avoid putting too much emphasis on the topic of online bullying. We do not mention ask.fm within the questionnaire itself, however the site is designed to introduce them to the concept as soon as they visit it.

The game itself also collects data during gameplay. Since the experience we want to create depends on the player experiencing at least twenty questions in the game, we can gauge the efficacy of the resultant opinions of the player based on how much of the game they experience. The game keeps track and records the age of the player, for the sake of demographics, the number of questions they answered, as well as the time they spent playing the game.

Following the game's conclusion, it provides information pertaining to ask.fm, in the form of articles about bullying and some suicides that have been partly attributed with abuse of the site. In hindsight, it would be far more sensible to provide statistics of some kind, or examples of the sort of activity we want to highlight, more so than the few extreme cases. Although the extreme cases are shocking, they comprise only a miniscule percentage of the user base of ask.fm. On the other hand, the amount of teens subjected to the kind of treatment we want

to highlight makes up the vast majority of those on the site.

In conclusion of the game, we prompt the player to fill out another questionnaire, in which they are asked for their opinion on internet monitoring and security, as well as gauging their knowledge of different "niche" social networks. In addition, we also give the player a chance to ask a question back to a stranger, to see what they would do, given the chance of anonymity.

The questionnaires are included in this report, in the appendix.

8 RESULTS AND FEEDBACK

Our game was played by approximately 12 people. I say "approximately" due to the fact that the game does not identify individual players from one another, but only individual play sessions. Another reason for this uncertainty is due, in part, to the resultant feedback of our playtests.

The majority of our playtests were conducted in a "real" environment, meaning that, given that our game is available for use online, we were able to link it to many people over the internet as well as conducting playtests in person. I will first deal with the statistical data that we collected. Since it is a fairly small sample size, it is more valuable to discuss notable patterns on an individual basis, wherever appropriate.

8.1 QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Amongst the participants, we found general consensus within the second questionnaire. Many, if not all, agreed with the statements put forward, with the exception of the matter of information. Respondents of the questionnaire were quite spread out on this, even in spite of the majority agreeing strongly.

Although it is still quite a small dataset, a slight correlation was found with the response distributions of that to those who consider the internet to be generally safe. Although not a perfect relationship, those who disagreed with there being a lack of information were shown to be more likely to consider the Internet a safe place. This may have something to do with the individual's familiarity to these niche platforms, namely, they feel safe since they are well versed with the general online culture.

In terms of gauging the game's success, it is a little difficult to tell at such an early stage. Although, as already mentioned, the majority of participants agreed with our statements regarding online safety and anti-bullying, it is not far-fetched to consider that all our participants already had a strong agreement even prior to playing our game, especially considering that all but one of our participants were over 20 years of age.

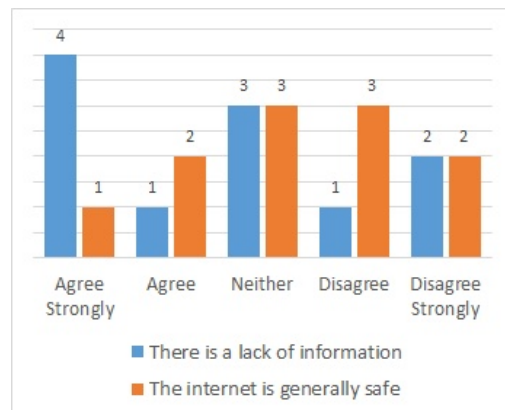


Figure 8.1: Response Distributions

In spite of the data itself being fairly inconclusive due to its size, I am confident that our chosen methodology to gauge its effectiveness is functional and sound.

8.2 GAME DESIGN FEEDBACK

More important for our playtesting, however, was the feedback that we received regarding the actual gameplay. Given that, as already mentioned, we did not subject our game to another preliminary playtest session, the mechanics and balancing of the game were severely off the mark.

Many players complained that the game failed to convey what they were meant to do, and why they were doing it. This feedback was received even in spite of us adding a short (albeit purely textual) tutorial before the game starts, which made it clear that the guidance provided was not sufficient. The overall experience led to the players feeling severely alienated and overwhelmed by what was going on—so much so that, when asked, some could not explain the intended message of the game.

Based on the feedback received, it was evident that several aspects of the game would need to be reworked. However, the changes needed are more than feasible, given enough time and resources.

The first adjustment would be to slow the game down. While tweaking the difficulty, we did not realize that we were adjusting it difficulty from our own perspective. In this regard, we could easily adjust the pacing; the prototype in its current state is, in fact, much slower than it was initially. Conversely, another player who performed very well at the game commented that it would be beneficial if it ended at some point, as currently the game is endless. They observed, interestingly, that the endless nature of the game conveys "the idea of bullying being constantly there," which was entirely unintentional, but still quite interesting.

Further to this, the introductory and informational content should be formatted differently. It is far from unlikely that some of our participants did not actually read any of the textual content prior to the game's commencement, which led to their confusion. In this regard, consumption of these vital pieces of content could be made into a more passive activity, in the form of videos to introduce the players to what they are about to do. Representing the information in a more interesting way would aid absorption of the message and rules of play, even if they fail to play the game itself[7, p. 166].

One final adjustment that would aid the game in this regard is related to the layout of the game's interface. Some players commented that the popularity meter is placed too far to one side to be immediately noticeable. This was likely a side effect of our planned "Tunneling" being a tad *too* effective, manifested in the form of tunnel vision, if you will.

9 PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND OBSERVATIONS

One of the most notable parts of my experience while working on ask.me had to do with my role within the team. Although it was largely a self-appointed role, nobody in the team seemed to object to it and it worked well for keeping things moving along smoothly. It was a very positive experience working in tandem with the team; drafting up detailed technical

specifications for William's use and lending a hand wherever possible; all while making sure that the content I worked on along with David and Luke was appropriate for the system being developed.

We worked very well as a team, and although our first functional prototype was a fairly jarring experience for our playtesters, I am proud of our achievement within such a short time—especially considering that we had to start from scratch after abandoning our initial concept.

In terms of the experiences specific to developing a persuasive game, it is clear to see that there is a whole slew of other factors to consider, even over and above the ever present concerns with making a compelling, playable game. In our effort to preserve the intended message, we disregarded the importance of also having accessible mechanics and gameplay, and ended up smothering the message entirely. Thanks to a fairly robust design, however, it is easy to see how these problems can be dealt with.

One extremely pertinent observation to do with the feedback of our playtesters was that there were many who questioned whether or not it actually was a game. Definitely food for thought, and particularly revealing how some actually perceive how a game should be. I'm not certain whether or not identifying it as a game had an effect of our tester's opinion of ask.me, but it was still an interesting comment to receive.

10 CONCLUSIONS

As it stands, with a bit more work and polish, ask.me has the potential to be a very effective tool at what we sought out to do with our design. Although its aim is to raise awareness, it could potentially shed new light on people's thoughts on the actual impact and importance of social media.

Given the opportunity to feed back into the field of persuasive game design and development, I would emphasize the importance of the actual *game* within the persuasive game. While the message is important, neglecting to give the game the necessary attention and polish can ruin its potential, as we experienced first-hand. While the game should serve the message, the game should be able to stand on its own merits.

With the proper framing, even a humble game of Pong can carry a pertinent message[4].

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APPENDIX

PRE-GAME QUESTIONNAIRE

- [Single Choice] How much time do you spend on the Internet every day, including mobile access?
 - Less than an hour
 - Between 1 and 3 hours
 - Between 3 and 5 hours
 - 5 hours or more
- [0–5 Scale] How experienced are you with the use of social networks (e.g. Facebook)?

- [1–5 Likert Scale] Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:
 - Computers are useful educational tools
 - Regular exposure to social networks is important
 - The Internet is generally a safe place
 - Internet access is important for adolescents nowadays
 - It is acceptable to spend many hours a day using the Internet
 - It is valuable for teenagers to use social networks

POST-GAME QUESTIONNAIRE

- [Yes/No] Did you know about Ask.fm before playing our game?
- [Multiple Choice] Which of the following social networks have you heard of?
 - Snapchat
 - Tumblr
 - Walkie
 - Kik
 - Twitter
 - Instagram
 - Vine
- [1–5 Likert Scale] Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:
 - Parents should monitor the network activity of their children
 - Social networks should be more strongly monitored for cyber bullying
 - There should be ways for users to report cyber bullying
 - Parents should be more aware of the risks of Internet use
 - There is a lack of information regarding these kinds of websites
 - Access to social networks should be more age-restricted