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# Circle of Truth: Griefing as Gaming Within Online Social Networks

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**Abstract**

Built with concepts of griefing and online self-representation, Circle of Truth (CoT) is a gaming concept deployed within online social networks and Web 2.0 applications. Each player is assigned two identities, one to keep in earnest as one's own profile and one to log-in secretly to grief. The goal of the game is to discover the identity of their griefer.

**Keywords**

Griefing, Grief Play, Games, Artificiality, Systems, Rules, Facebook, Social Network

**ACM Classification Keywords**

K.8 Personal Computing: Games. General Terms: Human Factors, Experimentation, Theory.

**Introduction**

Circle of Truth is a game that consists of a group of players and a game master. Players are assigned two profiles on Facebook: one to maintain and one to grief. Players are initially encouraged to set up their profile as they see fit and to creatively assail the efforts of the player they are griefing by changing their profile. The game master issues a daily challenge to help provide a modicum of insight into the griefer's true game identity.

If a player believes she has identified her griefer, she must submit a formal guess to the game master. If the guess is correct, the player is then awarded a point and she assumes her griefer's identity while maintaining the duties of her original identity. If the guess is incorrect, then the player receives a strike. Three strikes will lead to that player's elimination.

Games like assassin and mafia, or social activities like secret Santa, are firmly planted in a spatial, temporal setting. CoT provides a similar alternate reality game within the digital medium. This gameplay also intends to subvert online social networks as an accepted extension of reality. The goal of CoT is to provide new insights into the role of griefing in games, and to investigate concepts of self representation in games and online social networks. This paper describes the CoT game model, the details of one play session, and the theoretical implications of the game and play.

### **Circle of Truth: A Sample Play Through**

#### *Game Summary*

The first trial of Circle of Truth consisted of six players, two game masters and spanned a period of five days. Four additional identities were maintained, albeit casually, by the game masters. Three challenges were issued and two of the six players were able to successfully discover the identities of their griefers. One of those players subsequently guessed the identities of four other griefers and at one point was responsible for five identities.

#### *Deployment*

Facebook is an online social-networking application engaged by millions of users. While some Facebook

applications may be considered games, Facebook as a whole is considered a platform for social interaction. With the popularity of MMORPGs and Second-Life, it is interesting to consider Facebook as an online game space. Facebook was chosen for its wide array of expressive affordances (link sharing, video sharing, profile information, photo hosting, chatting, etc.). Additionally, it was an interface that would be familiar and easily navigable by the players chosen, all of who maintain Facebook accounts.

#### *Player Identification and Selection*

Acquaintances of the game masters were approached and solicited to participate. The player's familiarity with Facebook was also a strong determinant in being chosen for participation. All players chosen keep and maintain their own personal Facebook profiles. Familiarity and interactions among the players outside of the game provided an interesting dynamic, this is discussed later within the gameplay analysis.

#### *Profile Creation*

Facebook requires a valid email address to register for a profile. One afternoon was devoted to creating 12 email accounts (10 for players, two for game masters) and registering for Facebook accounts. The profiles were created with the minimum amount of information necessary. Animal names were chosen to serve as profile names as a theme for the game (i.e. Suzy Chimps, Franco Gibbon, Samuel Kitty cat, etc.). Essentially, all players logged into their profiles to find names, birthdays, a single profile picture, and a complete network of the game's players and game masters.



Milo Fox's Wall on the first day of play, 27 October 2008.

#### WHY ANIMAL NAMES?

The use of animal names in the game became important during each challenge, because it offered additional information that clues could be attached to. In general, throughout the game players tended to offer clues that referred to their animal names, rather than their human names.

The use of animals created a commonality between the players that was a frequent topic for chiding and joking. In one post from Milo Fox to Alice Elk, Milo wrote: "I'll murder you too if you're in league with that monster Lee Gazelle. You've got a long neck for me to bite." Anthropomorphizing these characters allowed players to be playful and fill a character role.

Bowker and Star state that "[w]e are all in this sense members of various social worlds—communities of practice—that conduct activities together. Membership in such groups is a complex process, varying in speed and ease, with how optional it is and how permanent it may be" [1]. Players in the game are on one level members of the Facebook community but also participants in the subset community of the CoT game. This more specific "community of practice" is maintained and reinforced through the rule system imposed on players, interaction between the individuals, and the shared lexicon of animal names, providing a conceptual space for interaction to occur [1].

The players can culturally frame the animal characters provided. Animals, in our mythologies, narratives and collective subjective experiences offer fodder for interaction. We know raccoons to be bandits, foxes to be cunning, gazelles to be graceful. That said, animal

identities are also subject to our casual knowledge of biology and taxonomic classification. That is why it makes sense to reference the animal's diet, morphology or preferred niche (does it live on the plains or is it arboreal? does it have a long neck or sharp teeth? is it carnivorous or herbivorous or both?).

#### Gameplay Analysis

On the first day of game play each participant was assigned the user name and password for their main profile and their target's profile. Two accounts, Daniel ShaneLion and Robert Adam Eagle, were created for the moderators.

The game tracking was done using a Google Site. This provided a means for the moderators to account for player log-in information and passwords. Six players were assigned accounts (Peter Raccoon, Jeremy Ostrich, Milo Fox, Alice Elk, Suzy Chimps, and Franco Gibbon) and a given an account to grief (see **figure 1**).

After the initial email announcing the start of the game, the players were given a day to familiarize their selves with the new social network and begin editing their own profiles and their target's profiles. From an outside perspective there was no way to tell which aspects of the profile reflected the player or the griever.

On October 28th at 2pm the first challenge was issued to the players:

*"Subscribe to a feed on your targets Facebook account. This feed should be something that your character would be interested in. For example, if Robert Adam Eagle were following me (Daniel ShaneLion) he would log in as me and subscribe to a feed for*



**Figure 1:** This chart displays the player assignments on day one of the game and the grief relationships between avatars.

<http://www.americablog.com/>. This shouldn't be too obvious or you will be guessed and be knocked out of the game."

This challenge was sent via email and postings began soon after and continued into the night. Two guesses were made on the same day, one of which was correct. This challenge was interesting because Facebook does not display the feed name or source in an obvious manner. In order to track down a feed that has been added a user must click a story, scroll to the bottom and choose "view original post." They are then taken to the story at the homepage of the feed.

The player responsible for Peter Raccoon's account successfully guessed the identity of their griever, Franco Gibbon, after the first challenge was completed. Franco posted the feed: "Sailu's Food - Indian Food" to Peter's profile. After an Internet search, Franco was able to determine that gibbons are eaten in India. This was a thoughtful clue, but fairly easy to research.

Alice Elk incorrectly guessed that Peter Raccoon was her griever after a feed for the blog "Confessions of a Hoarder" was posted to her account. Alice's griever was in fact Milo Fox.

The next day Jeremy Ostrich correctly identified Peter Raccoon as his griever. The player inhabiting Peter Raccoon's account had already made one correct guess and was in control of another profile, Franco Gibbon, so he was not yet out of the game (see **figure 3**).

Throughout this period players were fully utilizing their grieving abilities by changing profile information and pictures, and by posting comments on each other's

walls (which were often vulgar or unconventional, see **figure 2**). The anonymity of the players and the ability to use others' accounts promoted this behavior. Much of this behavior was conducted for diversion, exclusive of any quantifiable goal. Many players realized boundaries that existed in their actual Facebook profiles did not apply in this situation and they took advantage of the opportunity to taunt their friends anonymously, even though their friends were also anonymous.



**Figure 2:** Suzy Chimps' profile picture as chosen by the profile's griever, 28 October 2008.

The second day's challenge was issued at 10am and involved posting a video:

*"Logged in as the person you're grieving, post a video on your begrieved's profile that relates to your real profile. For instance if Daniel ShaneLion was grieving me, Robert Adam Eagle, he'd post this on my page: [Video: The Eagles, "Lyn' Eyes"]."*



**Figure 3:** This chart displays the state of the game after challenge one was fully realized.

The hint in this case is in the title (Lyn' = Lion), but the hint can exist in any number of contexts! Like music in the video, a cameo, etc. As our last challenge showed, you all have no problem being clever."

Later that day, the trailer to the movie Office Space was posted on Peter Raccoon's account. The player with that account made an initial incorrect guess of Milo Fox because the movie was made by Fox Movies. Later that day he made the correct guess of Franco Gibbon, realizing that the main character in Office Space is named Peter Gibbon.

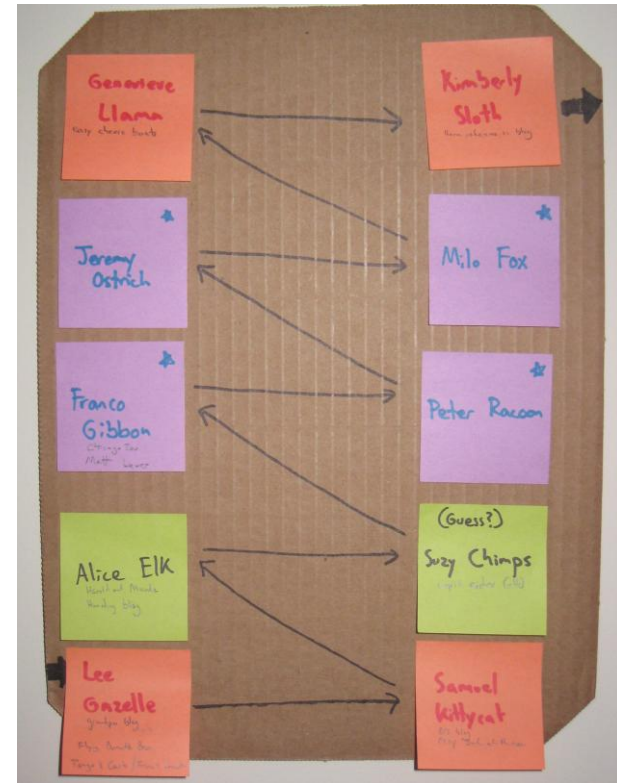
Prior to this, the players inhabiting the Peter Raccoon and Franco Gibbon accounts used Facebook's chat service to talk with each other. This chatting was between two individuals that knew each other outside of the game, but the chat was occurring anonymously allowing the players to taunt each other concerning their identities and safely make rude comments without much fear of reprisal.

After discovering the Franco Gibbon clue, Jeremy Ostrich had two correct guesses and owned the log-ins for Peter Raccoon and Franco Gibbon. Being the most active player in the game, this player continued to edit aspects of all three accounts in order to not give away any information that may be useful to other players. In fact, this player kept a physical diagram to track player activity (see **figure 4**).

On October 30th at 1pm the third challenge was issued:

"Your challenge today is pretty wide open. Logged in as your grieved character, edit some aspect of their profile

'info' that has been left blank. If every aspect has some form of information, choose a category and change the information. The content should be subtly indicative of your "regular" character's profile, personality or interests."



**Figure 4:** Chart made by eventual winner to determine grief relationships among competitors.

This challenge was difficult because profile changes are clearly shown on the Facebook feed, so players must be



**Figure 5:** This chart displays the player assignments on the final day of the game.

clever and think of clues that are not easily decoded. The items that were added to Alice Elk's profile were Snowboarding, Wildlife Reserves, and Chocolate Milk. The player who was winning at this point guessed correctly again when their profile was changed to include a favorite television show of "Where in the World is Matt Lauer." Franco Gibbon then inhabited Suzy Chimps' account. Matt Lauer has been in several countries but only a few of the animals overlapped with the countries.

Because of the accrued challenges, there were no challenges issued on the final two days of the game. At this point in the game, the winning player was able to look at all three clues that had accrued on Suzy Chimps page and correctly guess that Alice Elk was the next griever.

When the game was called, only two players remained, one having no correct guesses and one having four correct guesses. The winner owned five out of six of the accounts that were in play and nearly completely closed the circle (see **figure 5**).

### Theoretical Implications

#### *Circle of Truth as a Game*

CoT meets the criteria of Salen and Zimmerman's definition of game, "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" [8]: it has a system of interaction; it has players; it is artificial; it has conflict; it has rules; and there is a quantifiable outcome.

CoT's system, artificiality, and rules are the three aspects that are most relevant to this study. The online

social network Facebook serves as the game system supplemented by email discourse as a means of submitting formal guesses to the game master. The constraints and affordances of Facebook are the strongest determinants of gameplay.

The unique relationship between the system of the social network and the ad hoc nature of the game master's challenge system is worth noting. Rules are largely determined by the game master(s) and heavily informed by the constraints of the system. These complex relationships between systems and rules are all influenced by the artificiality of the game [8].

The significance of the game's system is important in relation to concepts of artificiality. Once treated as artificial, the system of Facebook becomes a means of investigating social behaviors enabled by operating in anonymity.

In their definition of game, Salen and Zimmerman identify the limit case of role-playing games (RPGs) as occupying an ambiguous terrain of play experiences not necessarily governed by quantifiable outcomes. Thus, they are on the periphery of the definition of games, which Salen and Zimmerman refer to as the "fertile ground for insight and investigation" that could challenge or expand the definition [8].

Without a points system, CoT would become an artificial social network where each member hosts a parasite. Identities could be built and knocked down over time, with individual players choosing to work collaboratively with or in opposition to their grievers. In such a state CoT could provoke an investigation of the ways the social network in its "real" state is a game.

### *Defining Grieffers and Grief Play*

Grief play has been studied primarily as a component or aspect of massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Most simply, grieffers play games to aggravate, harass and torment other players in the same system [2]. Foo and Koivisto contextualize the concept of grieving within MMORPGs by providing a "taxonomy for grief play," which consists of "harassment, power imposition, scamming, and greed play" [4]. The latter component, greed play, is identified as grieving without the intent to harass or disrupt, but rather as grieving in order to get ahead within the structure of the game.

Circle of Truth is primarily concerned with grieving as an exigence of play. Grieving as a practice within CoT demonstrates several elements of the taxonomy of grief play mentioned above. Most notably, the game's structure facilitates greed play, where a player, knowingly or unknowingly, annoys other players in order to succeed within the game. Additionally the scamming concept of identity deception, "when a player attempts to deceive by presenting himself as someone else," is at the core of Circle of Truth's game system [4]. Users have a dual representation of self: one overt and one covert. Neither of these relate directly to the player's "real world" identity.

In order to fulfill one of the most vital functions of gameplay, players must log in as an opponent and append something to that profile. Players are free at anytime to log in as their covert self and initiate discourse with other players, change aspects of the profile or learn more about the player they are trying to trick.

Within Circle of Truth players are encouraged to harass their opponents as a means of discovery and to get ahead. While it is not intended to be malicious or malevolent, harassment takes the form of multiple wall-posts or unintended messaging. It can be employed overtly, by the person officially inhabiting the profile, or covertly, by the person grieving the profile.

Though the notion of grief play came from the study of MMORPGs, the CoT game shows that grieving can operate as an integral part of a game system. Additionally, through the lens of the CoT system, it may be possible to discern broader appeals to the practice of grieving and expand the robust definition set forth by Foo and Koivisto.

### *Self-Representation in Circle of Truth*

Part of the goal of CoT is for players to determine the in-game identity of their grieffers. Lisa Nakamura states "Avatars are the embodiment, in text and/or graphic images, of a user's online presence in social spaces" [6]. This presence becomes important in CoT when player are confronting real-world friends in an anonymous guise. These identities, while masked within the guise of animal avatars, still reflect the disposition and self-representation of the individuals inhabiting each profile. In CoT users, regardless of their encapsulating identity, may still present themselves as individuals and lend aspects of their real-world personae to their gameplay.

When social networks are contextually considered gamespaces, players are freed from the constraints of social mores and civility that are normally pervasive elements of online social networks. Thus, they are able to find alternative expressive voices, or expressive

affordances, that they wouldn't normally employ. The affordance of anonymity within the game encouraged several players to engage in alternative, sometimes vulgar, behavior [7].

This freedom of expression within the anonymity of the false Facebook profile allows players to express personality and identity playfully in a manner that is expressive of their real-world personae. Lev Manovich states that "New media objects are cultural objects; thus, any new media object-whether a Website, computer game, or digital image- can be said to represent, as well as help construct, some outside referent..."[5]. Each of the artifacts left on a player's profile or on a target's profile is a media object that references the personality and intentions of the individual who placed it there.

Returning to Salen and Zimmerman's concept of artificiality in games, CoT imposes artificiality on a social networking application, Facebook in this instance, that is commonly held to be an extension of reality or at least an earnest representation of the self in a digital space. The latter is evidenced by Facebook profiles becoming a regular part of consideration in the hiring process for many companies [3]. CoT as a game model lifts these restrictions on real world repercussions, enabling aspects of self-representation not normally available to players.

### **Suggestions for Improvements**

The initial run of the game went smoothly and provided several insights for possible changes in future game sessions. All six participants were satisfied with the experience and offered to play in future instances of the game.

The layout of the game allowed players who put in more effort to accrue more points. By allowing correct guessers to inhabit the losers' profiles, correct guesses allowed those individuals to stay in the game longer. While they didn't score points, the players who were not very active tended to survive longer. Because they were given 12 hours to fulfill their challenges, these players would post later than the others, somehow avoiding the initial frenzy of guessing. One player did not fulfill a challenge because of their inactivity or apathy. Currently the punishment for not completing a challenge is declaring the real person's name behind their account. This process could be better tuned to force players to fulfill their challenges.

The other major problem in the initial run occurred in evaluation of challenge fulfillment. At the end of the game, the surviving player who didn't win had posted very obscure clues that never seemed to point to Milo Fox. It is difficult to determine if a clue is acceptable because the game should not limit the creativity of a clue. Using Jousting to refer to the video game, Joust, which has ostrich characters, was very clever, but using Snowboarding, Wildlife Reserves, and Chocolate Milk to refer to a fox seems to make no sense. In the future, every posted clue should be reported to the game moderators, and the connection should be clearly explained by the player.

It would be interesting to employ different categories (office products, foodstuffs, automobiles, etc.) in future iterations of the game to see what connections and connotations people employ. Randomizing the characters would be doubly interesting. Would someone be better or worse off as Ronald Stapler in a circle that included Karen Rosebush and Rafael Porkchop?

In regard to the game's system of play, it might be worthwhile to allow players a probationary period to build their overt profile's identity. This could facilitate more nuances in game play as well as more opportunities for expression and personal investment. At the conclusion this probationary period players would be given their covert profile information and commence grieving.

Another aspect of the game system worth exploring is the quantifiable outcome. Stripping the game of its point system might make for a more open-ended exploration of self-expression and social networking.

Expanding the system to include other web-based applications might be another direction to explore as well. CoT is an extensible concept and could be deployed in any social network with secure logins. Ultimately, players could inhabit completely fictitious web-based identities that share friends on Facebook and MySpace, write essays together in Google Docs, and create photo groups on Flickr.

### **Discussion**

Circle of Truth explores concepts of games, grieving and self-representation online. It can be deployed at no cost on any web-based application. Playing CoT yields a wealth of insights on human interaction within the context of an artificial social network, subsequently

challenging notions of online social networks as extensions of the "real world." Through future iterations, CoT could serve to expand the above-mentioned concepts of games and grieving.

### **Acknowledgements**

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