

3° and the Net Generation: Designing for Inner Circles of Friends

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ABSTRACT

We describe the design and implementation of software codenamed 3° that connects a small group of close friends and family, people who know and trust one another, so they can extend real-world social interactions and do fun things together in a whole new way. 3° is a beta test of an innovative application based on new networking technology developed by Microsoft.

Keywords

computer-mediated communication, shared browsing, emotional design, social translucence, co-presence

INTRODUCTION

The 3° user experience was inspired by our research on the computing habits of the “Net Generation”, people under the age of 24 who have grown up using the Internet. This is the first generation to which the Internet is commonplace, so ubiquitous as to be incorporated into their daily lives. As a result, their attitudes and behaviors are radically different compared to previous generations. They have internalized technology and will be doing new things in new ways. “NetGenners” are important early adopters of technology, and understanding their needs is critical for understanding future technology directions.

NETGEN RESEARCH

We have learned that the NetGen user’s online social behavior reflects their offline behavior, which tends to revolve around friends, fun and music. They are spending less time watching TV [3], and more time interacting with technology and the Internet. Their technology usage is more extensive, integrating many different forms of communication, entertainment and productivity. They expect technology to connect them with their inner circles of friends and enable them to interact with them in interesting and expressive ways. Our research has shown that NetGenners want to socialize, do things together, meet new people through trusted context and express their identity and moods with their social cliques whenever and wherever they are online.

Communication

While face-to-face communication is ideal, the NetGen have told us that cell phones and instant messaging (IM) are preferred for real-time interactivity. In fact, this generation is a master of “continuous partial attention” – They have up to seven IM conversations going while listening to music, surfing the web and talking on their cell phone.

Email has decreased in popularity and is often used for communicating with family, teachers and coaches, and long-distance friends in different time zones. Many have moved on to create online journals as a way to keep everyone informed at once. They say it gives them an easy to use, trusted forum for expressing their thoughts, emotions and rants to their friends, and their friends can check in at their leisure.

Identity

Just as this generation’s online social behavior is similar to their offline behavior, so is their expression of identity. Their online personality is aligned with their offline personality, and therefore, is not concerned with hiding their identity online. They prefer to connect to the internet with one, proprietary screen name, but will use different screen names as means of social management when they don’t want to be bothered or appear online to certain people.

Privacy

For the NetGen, privacy is not a “top-of-mind” concern for most of the NetGen. While they may fill out a profile, they often leave out their last name and address to avoid being contacted by strangers. They may also block people, particularly strangers, but this is usually seen as rude.

Several reported that when they think of needing privacy, it is to keep their parents, siblings or unwanted friends out. For example, they like the fact that they can control who can read and comment on their online journals. They are wary of giving credit card information online while shopping, with unwanted email seen as primary consequence.

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

3° combines the atmosphere of face-to-face communication with the flexibility of digital media by providing a group setting for people to interact – just like being at a private party; letting them invite their friends to hang out and catch up. With 3° you can...

- Throw a personalized animation (“winks”) on friends’ desktops
- Easily send digital photos to friends
- Initiate group chat with MSN Messenger
- Listen to a shared play list simultaneously with a module called musicmix, created from music that they own. (A similar experience to being at a private party where everyone brings their own CDs.)

User Experience Design

With 3°, people establish groups with IM buddies and do fun things together with up to 10 people; the application is persistent on the desktop and the group uses shared group icons and skins. Each group is represented by an icon on the desktop, from which they can launch group chat, “wink” by throwing an animated gif onto friends’ desktops, send photos, listen to music together and a variety of other activities are in the pipeline. Through this process, friends keep in touch with friends.

In order to support small group behavior, the user experience is designed to let natural social negotiation and group formation emerge. Anyone in the group can invite new members, change the group icon or change the group name. This way the group can grow without having to wait for others to come online. While a member cannot be deleted or removed from the group, the user can leave the group. The same is true for musicmix -- the skin and playlist is shared and anyone can change or add to the experience. The heart of the user experience is shared and synchronous – what I see and hear is what you see and hear.



Figure 1: Desktop with several 3° groups with activity notifications and a musicmix session

What’s most important is that the relationships are at the center of the computing experience and the activities plug into the people – the opposite of what happens online today. We’ve shown many customers to get their feedback and evolve the product – one customer explained it best. He said, “It makes me feel like we’re in the same room together”.

Peer Networking

3° is built upon the Windows platform including the Windows XP Peer-to-Peer Update that was made available in the second quarter of 2003. The Windows XP Peer-to-Peer Update is a set of platform technologies designed to run on Windows XP to enable the use and deployment of distributed, peer-to-peer applications based on new Internet standards. In addition to the Update for Windows XP, there is a software development kit that will become part of the Windows Platform SDK.

CONCLUSIONS

The 3° beta has been available over 6 months now and we are getting great feedback from users. We have received anecdotes that users are meeting new people and discovering new music through their friends. Small group organization feels organic and natural, similar to the way they are formed in the offline world. We’ve also heard that a visual language is emerging amongst groups of friends through their use of winks. One user sends a “good morning” wink to her best friends group every day to let them know she is there and ready to play. Another said he uses a “fart” wink to poke fun with his co-workers when things get stressful.

Users say they like the shared, synchronous experience because it allows them to negotiate amongst themselves in a way that matches how they interact offline. Just like at a party, if a person doesn’t like someone or the music they are hearing, they walk can away. Blocking or deleting people is considered rude, so with 3° groups we’ve heard that “cyber ditching” is happening. If someone is annoying or not liked, then members leave the group and create a new one with the agreement that this person is not invited anymore.

We are also learning that it is not just the NetGen that finds this kind of social experience compelling. Families are using with each other and other generations are using it to discover new music as well. We’ve heard that such an experience could also support productivity activities. Businesses are interested in using it for small work groups, and teachers are interested in how it could support group projects.

Since most information is anecdotal, we would like to get more quantitative information. We plan to run a research study to better understand exactly how the application is being used and what impact it is having on relationships.

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