Online Social Networking: It’s all Just Geek to Me
By Angela Lewis PhD

Abstract
In this article we examine some of the popular and relatively new ways of having a presence online through the use of websites such as MySpace and YouTube, as well taking a look at the opportunities offered by the online ‘alternative life’ community known as Second Life.

While globalisation is thought of more in terms of economics, the Internet has lead to the emergence of a more socially oriented aspect: the ability for people to communicate and form relationships with people and groups they may never meet in real life. This is part of a trend referred to as Web 2.0, and describes free online services delivered through a web browser, such as social networks in which users blog and share photos and other media1. The social networking site is an online place where a user can create a profile and build a personal network that connects him or her to other people. In the past five years, such sites have rocketed from a niche activity into a phenomenon that engages tens of millions of internet users (Lenhart and Madden 2007). But as in the case with any new technological advance, we should also consider the implications of online social networking on friendship as we currently understand it, as well as our current notions of privacy, authenticity, community, and identity and this will be discussed further.

While they vary in how they are set up, in detail and in function, most of the social networking sites work on the same premise, in that they allow a person to use a virtual environment to create a social presence, make connections, communicate or make friends with those sharing common interests or goals. Some such as Second Life (as I will discuss below), take it a step further and offer much more than social networking in their ‘life as we wish it was’ virtual environment.

What is MySpace?
MySpace, a website created so that people could communicate easily with their networks of friends or family, also functions as an online community in which people invite their friends to meet each others’ friends online. While some MySpace profiles allow for meeting strangers, the most popular way to use it is to communicate within a private community, which is based on a restricted ‘invitation only’ model, though some people will make their profile and information public. This online community could be likened a little to a gated housing community, which only allows invited guests through the entrance. In a similar way the person with the MySpace page has to grant permission to others to view their page and communicate with them. The typical MySpace page contains photos and videos, the user’s favourite music tracks, links as to friends, a blog and information such as ‘my favourite TV shows’ and ‘my favourite music artists’.

1Web 1.0 on the other hand is generally used to describe the first decade or so of the web’s existence which concentrated on commercial and information based activities.
providing what they describe as a free and simple way to keep in contact with friends both near and far. Newman (2007) MySpace also has a myriad of different special interest groups such as pets, music, health, etc and as such has something to offer for most interests.

Statistically it has been reported that MySpace is starting to change its demographic from predominantly young users, so that more than half of the MySpace visitors are now 35 and older (Comscore 2006). However other research disputes this, describing teenagers and young adults as continuing to be the most frequent users of these sites (Nyland, Marvez, Beck 2007). I also found this to be the case, with my MySpace in search in older age brackets (e.g. women 40 – 50), revealing there were an inordinate amount of teenage girls appearing with ages 40 plus next to their names, which makes me think those statistics may be skewed by the fact that teenagers are careless about filling in online forms.

And really if you think about it, it takes time and effort to upload new songs, make links to friends and drop in every day to ‘blog’. It is highly probable that adults with a career or family are less likely to invest their already scarce time in those types of activities. However, as a recent post on the ‘forevergeek’ website pointed out, (Racoma 2006), some young professionals are utilising these sites for more than “friend collection” - they use them as professional networking opportunities to get leads for business deals, look for jobs or promote their own businesses and this can make sense given the opportunity for contact-making to span continents. A recent online article from Melbourne IT (Richardson 2007) advises that to get the most out of a social networking service (from a business perspective) you should:

- Ensure you create the online profile for your business, brand or service using company logos, colour and content.
- Promote your social networking site by adding links to it on your website and vice-versa.
- Actively invite current customers or potential customers as a ‘friend’.
- Join online groups that are relevant to your business and post useful, free information for the users of these forums. If you are helpful enough, your social networking credibility should grow substantially as a result.

The aspect of linking to friends is highly prized by young adults and my teenage son and his friends are a good example (in fact the collection of a high number of ‘friends’ is a definite preoccupation for some). They all have MySpace pages and have made links to each other. Each person in turn has then invited their friends to link their friends via the MySpace network and whenever one of them meets someone new or has a new boyfriend or girlfriend, they and their new friend’s network is invited in. This means when you go to my son’s MySpace, there are pictures of all his friends, and his friend’s friends and links to their MySpace sites – yet he may well not have met or communicated with some of them at all.
Where in the ‘old days’ we might have gone to a nightclub and exchanged phone numbers on scraps of paper with a new acquaintance, when my son and his friends go out to a pub or nightclub, they exchange MySpace addresses (and email or MSN addresses) and then those people’s pictures and information appear on his page and his information appears on theirs. It is a bit of a ‘6 degrees of separation’ type of affair and people actively try for as many links to other people as possible, rating and cataloguing them as they go. Anecdotally, people in my son’s age bracket use the instant messenger service on MySpace as much, if not more than an instant messaging service such as MSN messenger.

There is no fee for being a member and the user simply has to sign up and create a profile where they describe themselves, their hobbies, interests, musical tastes (or if it is for professional networking their business, their professional profile etc), and then they invite others to join their personal online network. Senator Hillary Clinton has official pages on social networking sites MySpace, LiveJournal and Facebook, as has Democratic rival Senator Barack Obama. Aside from knowing what people are up to online, you might also consider setting up a MySpace to advertise your services and start linking to other practitioners or affiliates. If you do this you need to ensure you check your site regularly, as people may ‘message’ you, leave requests to link or leave comments (and it is polite to respond quickly, keeping in mind your reply can be read by anyone online). You can visit the site at www.myspace.com.

Facebook
Facebook at www.facebook.com is probably the second most popular social community website and bills itself as ‘a social utility that connects you with the people around you’. Where it differs to similar sites such as MySpace is that it is designed more so for those that already know each other in the real world and the emphasis is not so much on making links to friends of friends or strangers. It was based on an American university yearbook, called a ‘face book’, that had pictures of all those that had attended in particular years. In keeping with this ethos of contacting those you already know, most people use their real names and identities when on this site. The leader of the Federal Opposition Kevin Rudd even has a page in Facebook as has ex-American president Bill Clinton.

What is YouTube?
Anyone with an Internet connection can now be a movie star, rock star or ‘adult entertainer’, thanks to the free video streaming website, YouTube. While it has been around for awhile, its entry into mainstream culture is evident when whole television programs are constructed based on its content, current affairs shows spruik how it is a marvellous way for girls to get modelling exposure, and our Prime Minister John Howard uses it to broadcast his climate change policy. YouTube allows a person to create and broadcast their own video messages and all that is needed is a basic web-cam or a digital camcorder. There are an amazing array of videos available, with many clips from movies and TV shows as
well as portions of instructional videos ranging from chess moves to how to do a
shimmy on a pole for would be pole-dancers. Without too much effort spent
searching, I came across a multitude of videos made by young women in their
bedrooms or homes that involved dancing, not much clothing and singing or lip-
synching into a computer microphone. YouTube requires you to sign up if you
wish to view adult material but has no charges for using any of its features. Go to
www.YouTube.com and either click on one of the featured clips on the
homepage, click the ‘video’ link to see a selection of the most watched videos or
do a search by clicking into the easy to use search box. My current favourite is
the ‘Mange du Kebab’ song; a video clip about making and eating kebabs by a
group of guys who work in a kebab shop in Paris. As a result of posting this they
got a recording contract with EMI².

Second Life
As if having the one life to deal with is not enough, people can join ‘Second Life’,
a three-dimensional online environment where members (known as residents);
can do practically anything in a global virtual community which boasts itself as
close to 4 million members from around the world, (though skeptics say this
figure would be far lower if continued use as opposed to ‘one try only’ was to be
counted). It is an interesting concept: using web technology it is possible for a
very large number of people to gather and interact in what is described as a
visually rich and responsive virtual space. If you want to replicate, alter or
reinvent your life, lifestyle or very being, with an an Internet connection and
plenty of time to sit in front of your computer, the opportunity is there to create a
customised ‘second’ life online. By joining Second Life, it is possible to live an
alternate virtual life in which you choose who you want to be, how you look and
the ability to sell, buy or build what you want. Artists use it as a place to
showcase their work, people who are unable to buy land on earth can build a
virtual real estate empire, and entrepreneurs can start the businesses they’ve
always dreamt about. Hate your hair, body or face? – well use your Second Life
currency known as Linden dollars to buy a new online self, known as an avatar.

Many global retailers and tertiary institutions have identified the Second Life
concept as important enough that they have invested in creating virtual
presences in Second Life, including organisations such as Amazon, Sony, BMW,
Reebok and Nissan. With the rush to be part of this world, the cynic would ask
what the return on investment has actually been, if any. Some real life problems
have surfaced on Second Life, with The Nissan Second Life virtual building
‘bombed’ online recently and Intelligence agencies such as the CIA regularly
monitor the Second Life environment for virtual terrorist training and recruitment.
According to recent media reports five Jihad groups have in fact already been
identified operating there.

² Type ‘Mange du Kebab’ in the search box to see it or use this link
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCBSqYOZzPM.
If you are a Second Life newbie, the first step to getting started after logging onto their website is to choose a name; first names are up to you but you can only choose from an offered range of surnames. After filling in some registration details you get to choose how you will look online (i.e. your avatar). Avatar choice is limited if you are joining for free to a set range of looks – e.g. ‘girl next door’, ‘night club girl’ etc. and of course wandering around with one of these looks clearly shows your status as a newcomer. To personalise how you appear you will need to acquire some Linden dollars, which you are given as a monthly stipend if you join as a premium member, or you can earn by starting to do some business in this world. Once registration is finished you need to download their software, called the ‘Second Life client’ and you are off. While this all sounds very straightforward it requires time sitting in front of the computer, manipulating your cursor around the screen to ‘visit’ shops, discos and bars. Running into others or having conversations relies on them being logged on and in the same space as you, so you need to be present at your computer in order to do any of this. Given that others may not be present in the same areas at the same time as you are, it is possible to feel you are largely alone, as a result some people report their experience on Second Life as aimless, boring and uninteresting.

Those who are regulars say that interacting and conversing with other citizens in this world is very similar to hooking up with friends on the web in chat rooms or forums. The major difference is that you can ‘see them’ as their online avatars, as opposed to just a screen name, and Second Lifers feel this boosts the potential for communication. What is different however, is that unlike other virtual communication spaces, you can also ‘see’ the avatars of other people going about their ‘day’ in Second Life, even if you are not communicating with them. Compared to web forums and chat rooms where people go because they share something in common (e.g. quilting or motocross), Second Life offers the opportunity of coming into contact with people from a wide cross section of society in a way that real life could not facilitate and this really boosts the potential of meeting different people. However the pre-occupation with ‘adult activity’ is so prevalent that the company recently created an alternative Teen Second Life site with strict rules against sexual content. ‘Doing things’ in SL requires some technical ability to do a type of programming known as scripting which is based on Java programming language (or having the money to pay someone to do it for you), so those who are not familiar with writing computer code or do not wish to learn it are limited to in what is accessible to them in terms of what they can do when they get there.

Basic account membership is free and includes access to events, shopping, building, basic scripting, so that you can begin to participate in Second Life. However if you want to engage in commerce you need to upgrade to what is known as a ‘Premium Second Life Account’, starts at US$9.95 a month. This

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3 For example if you are unfamiliar with the programming language you are largely limited to moving your avatar. You need to know about scripting so you can make an object do things like move, listen, talk, operate as a vehicle or weapon, change colour, size or shape.
allows users to own land on which they can build, display, entertain and live. People actually need to make money online (in Second Life they are called Linden dollars as mentioned above), as this allows them to furnish their homes, start businesses and purchase and upgrade their avatars. Giving yourself an nice avatar (your presence and representation) also takes money, as you may need to purchase designer online clothes or pay someone to redesign your face. For example, I may be a 75 year old grandfather but I wish to look like a 30 year old handsome man with sparkly eyes and big biceps, so my required avatar has to be created, designed and clothed – and for this I need Linden dollars. How the virtual money turns into real currency is that the Residents who have amassed lots of Linden dollars are matched with residents who want to buy Linden Dollars at LindeX (the official Linden Dollar exchange), or at other unaffiliated third-party exchanges. 300 Linden dollars can be exchanged for one US dollar.

Despite Second Life being referred to as a game, those who are involved in it would dispute this, as the nature of this community means that people need to spend a large amount of time and effort into maintaining their online life in order to make it successful and basically take it seriously. Anecdotally, there are people in Second Life who run their entire lives there and make it their sole source of income, while others run SL businesses that generate income and build lifestyles that are not possible in the real world. For example, there would be nothing to stop a person setting up as a counsellor in Second Life and charging their clients Linden dollars for sessions and then converting these to real currency.

While acknowledging the potential for communication in SL, others such as myself are genuinely mystified that there are people out there who can actually find the time to replicate an entire life in a virtual environment such as Second Life and continue to be functioning in the real world. Leisure time is scarce, and if the choice was to log into SL, sit in a virtual bar having a virtual beer with someone portraying themselves as a bouncing ball or as a parody of cartoon character ‘Jessica Rabbit’ versus sitting in my local Italian having a glass of wine with my husband and son, I know which I would choose. But if any of this interests you, there is a plethora of information available at www.secondlife.com that you can read before taking a tour or joining, or you can combine a YouTube and Second Life experience by going to YouTube and watching a video someone took of the American Newt Gingrich giving a lecture in Second Life, in which you you also get to view some of the participants and their various avatars. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOpOZ3Y9eD0&feature=dir

**Self-Portraiture by Pixels**

While they vary in intent and audience, I would have to agree with Newman's assessment that when it comes down to it, for many people these sites function simply for ‘the conspicuous consumption of intimate details and images of one’s own and others’ (Newman 2007, p.6). And despite the valiant attempts of those
with online spaces to stand out by showcasing their own lives - ‘look at my huge list of friends, my very cool CD collection, and get an update on my current mood, while I tell you what I ate for lunch and where I’m going on Friday night,’ (with in some cases scant consideration for personal privacy or safety); the world of online social networking is homogenous in the way all those participating are committed to creating maximum self-exposure. And as was mentioned earlier, all this takes time and effort away from school, family, community in the real world. In fact, Roberts, Foehr & Rideout (2005 in Nyland 2007) raised concerns that the use of social networking sites was creating situations where the busy young lives of youth were becoming what they term ‘media saturated’, with many teens feeling a pressure to create and maintain an online identity that had become what they term a ‘cultural requirement’, whether the teen really wants to be involved or not.

**Where to from here?**

Experts in the field of social networking are divided in how they see technology’s role in maintaining those networks. Some such as knowledge management specialist Wendy Flannery worry about the potential for increased isolation that the illusion of community, friendship and kinship the virtual environment provides when it removes people from the messy reality of having a face to face coffee, or chatting for an hour on the phone with a real person. A recent study by Zhao (2006) has found that while the majority of email users tend to communicate online with people whom they also contact offline, social network users tend to communicate with some of their social contacts exclusively online. Katz & Rice (2002) estimated that somewhere between 14% to 26% of Internet users have online friends they have never met or spoken to in person. This makes me think about what we define as ‘friendship’. When a person is only a friend online does this even count in the definition of what we commonly understand to mean a friend, or has the time come to redefine friendship to include the MySpace use of friend as a verb, such as ‘can I friend you?’ The use of the word ‘friend’ on these type of sites to describe someone you have hyperlinked to but never shared a drink with (to my mind) seems to demean the concept of friendship. Rosen (2007, p 10) actually describes this ‘impulse to collect’ as many MySpace ‘friends’ as possible not as a need for companionship, but as a need for status.

Dr. Andrew Rixon, an Australian communication and social network theory specialist, believes there are good reasons to consider the alternatives that technology is providing so we may engage, nurture and encourage our own and others’ social networks. He cites research which shows the importance of social networks for protective effects against Alzheimer’s disease (Nichols 2006), improved quality of life and recovery for cancer patients (Goodwin & Samit 1991), maintenance of psychological well-being, (Kawachi & Berkman 2001) and greater resistance to upper respiratory illness (Cohen et al 2003).

However as Ms. Flannery commented, while the geographically isolated or the ill may have higher needs for an online social network, a social network also needs
to be considered in terms of face to face and real time contact, without an over-reliance on technology to facilitate or maintain it. Brigham Young University (USA) recently surveyed 184 users of social networking sites and found that heavy users ‘feel less socially involved with the community around them’ (Nyland et al 2007, p. 5). And while a new study by Hardie & Tee (2007) found that those who are introverted, socially anxious or emotionally lonely are more likely to describe receiving support from online networks than average users, this may not be as promising as it sounds. Living a large portion of life online so that a significant portion of social and interpersonal gratification comes from the social contact made and kept online, is considered to describe one of the categories of Internet addiction (Widyanto & McMurran, 2004; Young 1996; 1998).

If like me you are shaking your head at the thought that some people are sitting in front of a computer screen and getting excited because a sexy avatar gave them a virtual bunch of flowers, but wouldn’t consider going to a singles night at the local hall because that is ‘too nerdy’, well I think you are probably not alone. I have seen teenagers sitting in the dark on a Saturday night messaging other teenagers who exist as ‘friends’ only via a MySpace page and defending this as having a perfectly acceptable social life and personally, well that bothers me. My own son who when I began this article a few months ago loved MySpace is now complaining about the amount of time it takes to constantly respond to messages and check his space and wishes he didn’t have it, but feels he has to remain active on the site or his friends will think he is ‘slack’ or worse that he has no friends.

While it is certainly wonderful to open your heart and mind to the global commons of the world, the Internet and environments such as Second Life and MySpace may well mislead people into believing they are part of a group or community, while they are sitting in solitude for hours at a time and creating an imbalance they are completely unaware of. It will be interesting to see how the regular use of these type of sites will affect social behaviour and relationship formation for the children and young adults who are growing up using these tools on a daily basis.

The Internet is the first major medium of communication that allows people to establish social contacts outside a face-to-face context as well as enabling the maintenance of existing ties formed in person. While the time to stand back and look at the Internet with awe is over, how it is changing the way we interact and what this means for both on and offline relationships and social networks should now be rigorously investigated, particularly as the phenomenon of social networking is relatively new and so few published studies exist on this topic.

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With thanks for their valuable input:

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Alex Lewis, young adult MySpace user

References


Donna Meyer, a grandmother from New York, and her avatar
As published in the The Economist article ‘Living a Second Life’ details above.