

Chapter 13

Online Interpersonal Interactions Utilizing an Extremely Limited Communication Interface

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research examines the influence of a very limited communication interface on interactions within an online backgammon game context. The ways in which four factors controlled by the player (level of play, language selected, use of the preloaded chat interface, and game play) influence interaction are described. The ability of players to engage in impression management and express social presence within such a limited communication environment is considered in both positive and negative game contexts.

INTRODUCTION

I learned to play backgammon in college. My circle of friends included a small group of backgammon fanatics; they were demons at strategy and speed play. Soon, I invested in a modest imitation leather set and joined them at every opportunity – the dining hall, in the dorms, on a mountaintop during an ecology club hike. We didn't play for money, but simply reveled in the thrill of the game.

After college, no one in my life particularly shared my interest in moving little brown and white buttons around inside a box. I taught friends and family the basics, but Monopoly, Tetris, and

computer-based role-playing games seemed to be a bigger draw. So I was thrilled when my new computer came pre-loaded with Internet Backgammon. I don't know why I had never sought out an online backgammon game before, but now I discovered fellow travelers available at the click of the mouse. I was ready to play; I was ready to re-enter the board game camaraderie I remembered of old.

Not pausing to read the instructions, I eagerly clicked on play and began my journey. All the old rules were still there in the mists of memory, and all my favorite rolls still came quickly to my fingers. 5-3 to the home board. Double sixes to cover the bar points. Take a risk with a 2-3 instead of playing it safe and moving 5 spaces to an already-covered

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point. Keep a pair in the back board and turn the game around at the last moment.

Eventually, I realized that I was indeed playing with people from around the world and that they were somehow ranked. The terse info box informed me that I was competing against “*Expert, English*” or “*Intermediate, Turkish*” or “*Beginner, Spanish*.” I felt oh-so-cosmopolitan as I imagined a sophisticated Frenchman or brooding Norwegian responding to my moves. I was part of something larger than myself. The global village was real.

Some of these people even talked to me. That is to say, messages from “Brown” or “White” appeared in a space below the board. It took me a while to notice this, as my early collegiate training had emphasized focusing solely on the board and not wasting game time with idle conversation.

One day, I surfaced from the competition long enough to explore the interface on my computer. Lo and behold! I could set my own ranking. Modestly, I moved myself up from the default “Beginner” to the more experienced “Intermediate,” never dreaming that within a week I would redefine myself as an internet backgammon “Expert.”

At the higher level, the game changed. The slower, more deliberate play of the Beginner was replaced by a faster paced, more aggressive game worthy of an Expert. No quarter was given, no mistakes were made (at least by the other side; I found myself desperately clicking the mouse to take back an ill-considered move on more than one occasion). This tougher playing field reminded me of my college days, but with one important difference. In those days, a tough game or match would end with smiles and joking threats to “get even next time.” These games simply ended in defeat...when they ended at all. Sometimes the other player would disappear in what I could only assume was a huff after I took his piece; other times my opponent left the game abruptly for no reason that I could see.

I began to take note of each player’s self-identification and check my own stereotypes.

With such a limited communication interface, one quickly leaps to a social decision based on any available information, no matter how limited. I found myself categorizing other players based on their game play as well as the conversations we held. The very limited nature of the available communication interface is the point of the research; communication within such a highly-constrained environment requires far greater creativity on the part of the participants than a simple free-form instant messaging interface. This paper explores communication in such interactions through an autoethnographic analysis of a yearlong journey playing online backgammon. In all instances, I played as “Expert, English” and responded to conversational overtures made by other players, but did not initiate conversations myself.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE PLAY FRAME

The social order is often reflected in play. Play is free (i.e. not obligatory), separated in time and space, noninstrumental, governed by rules yet with an unpredictable outcome, voluntary, and fictive (Caillois, 1979; Huizinga, 1950). Signs mark the beginning and end of playfulness: overt invitations to play and/or the simple commencement of play activity signal the onset of the play frame (Glenn and Knapp, 1987; Goffman, 1974). Play and games offer important reflections of the societies in which they are situated and play communities may become permanent even outside of the game context. “Contests in skill, strength and perseverance have...always occupied an important place in every culture, either in connection with ritual or simply for fun and festivity” (Huizinga, 1950, p. 195). Games are recreational activities characterized by organized play, competition, two or more sides, criteria for determining the winner and agreed-upon rules. As games satisfy no survival needs nor provide any direct environmental

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