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Analyzing Social Networking Websites: The Design of Happy Network in China

Basile Zimmermann

In 2009, China was the country in the world with the greatest number of Internet users, and the overall amount of web pages in Chinese was estimated at over sixteen billion¹. As in the West, the development of the Internet --very strongly supported by the government of the People’s Republic of China-- had changed millions of peoples’ lives and work habits. Web-based platforms for online communities, also called Social Networking Sites (SNS), were part of this revolution.

In April 2008, a new SNS was launched in China: 开心网 (*Happy Network*). Its particular rhetoric, compared to existing social networking websites at the time, was that it focused on the idea of ‘having fun.’² In June 2009 the number of registered users of the site exceeded 30 million, and was growing at a fast pace. The company was eleventh in a list of top Chinese websites, and analysts called it China’s top Internet phenomenon of 2008/2009.³

Websites and web pages are paradigmatic objects for whom is interested in the question of global design as they are at the same time circulating inside and part of the structure of an international network: the Internet. Based on research beginning in July 2008 in Beijing, this paper presents on-going research about Happy Network’s web interface design process. It shows how the Network interpreted design concepts already used by other social networking websites, improved them by providing different ways of interaction between users, and developed its own means of advertising. Methodologically, it also suggests how web design can be analyzed using insights taken from two different theoretical frameworks in social sciences: the grounded

¹ Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China, p. 28, January 2009, Online. Available <<http://www.cnnic.cn/index/0E/00/11/index.htm>>, accessed September 4 2009. The 24th Survey Report from July 2009, at the moment only available in Chinese, doesn’t provide with an update of the number of web pages but indicates a growth of 6.4% for the overall number of websites in China between the end of 2008 and June 2009.

² The concept is presented as Happy Network’s main strategy in several sources in Chinese (see for example 百科, ‘开心网’. Online. Available <<http://baike.baidu.com/view/1629630.html?wtp=tt>>, accessed July 9 2009. Or in its competitors’ discourse: Louislau (ed.), ‘千橡开心网注册用户达800万 日均100万访问量’, 南方报业网, Online. Available <<http://tech.qq.com/a/20090413/000060.htm>>, accessed April 14 2009). It can also easily be observed by analyzing the site’s discourse, features, and main applications. The idea of going on the web to have fun, rather than for work or to look for information, is often described as one of the main characteristics of Chinese net surfers.

³ It is difficult to get real figures for Happy Network at the moment, given the complexity of the Chinese web and the very competitive environment which doesn’t encourage site owners to let outsiders know too much about their business. There are also some problems to evaluate the figures given by statistics since users of Happy Network often open more than one account in order to get fast virtual money by playing with themselves. The information summarized here comes from various sources I compared, as well as my own observations on the site (discussed in the paper). In Chinese, synthesized and fairly reliable information about Happy Network is available on Baidu (<<http://baike.baidu.com/view/1629630.html?wtp=tt>>, accessed July 9 2009), Wikipedia in Chinese (<<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BC%80%E5%BF%83%E7%BD%91>>, accessed July 11 2009), as well as in the press, e.g. 肖尧, ‘中国式社交网站解密: 15个月3000万人上瘾(图)’, 大洋网-广州日报, Online. Available <<http://news.sohu.com/20090616/n264548342.shtml>>, accessed July 11 2009). Statistics are available on China Websites Ranking: <<http://www.chinarank.org.cn/top500/Rank.do?r=1247120937158>> (accessed July 11 2009), or from Alexa <<http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/CN>>, accessed July 11 2009, as well as Google Insights for Search <<http://www.google.com/insights/search/#>>, accessed July 9 2009.

theory and the actor-network theory.

On-going research about on-going design

A key challenge of studying web-based design of all kinds, and SNS in particular, is conducting on-going research about on-going design. Web sites and web pages, in contrast to other design phenomena, experience rapid changes. To observe them and archive information about their design asks for the researcher's ability to deal with a moving (sometimes even disappearing) target. Rather than going through general statements about the issues at stake, I relate how I conducted --and still conduct-- this research, and I explain how decisions about the work process were taken. By doing so, I hope to provide readers with a 'research case-study' that will contribute how this type of design research can or cannot be conducted.

In short, two methodological points form the base of this research. First: the results take the shape of a description written using the first person singular, rather than the more "objective" or "scientific" voice in which the research is present but the narrator is absent. A sentence like "During the summer of July 2008, while staying at a Chinese friend's place in Beijing, I noticed he and many of his friends were spending a lot of time on a website I had never heard about before" differs in more than tone from "In July 2008, a new social networking website was spreading among Mainland Chinese net surfers." The second sentence hides both the subject and the subjectivity behind the research. The first, while sounding more personal and not very "scientific", is actually more precise in the sense that it gives more detail about the process that produced the results⁴. Reliable information means traceable information. A second methodological point is that *making comparisons* and *asking questions* are the main tools used to bring relevant elements into the description.⁵

Happy Network

During the summer of July 2008, while staying at a Chinese musician friend's place in Beijing, I noticed he and many of his friends were spending a lot of time on a website I had never heard about before. When he opened his user page, usually several times a day, he used to make this joke: "开心一下" ("Let's be happy for a while"). The name of the web site was 开心网 *Happy Network*, a new social networking site. My friend's joke referred to the name of the site. Intrigued, I registered and started to edit my own user page on July 23.

At that time, I already had experience of doing research on the Internet in China. One thing in particular I had learnt while working on Chinese blogs with my students was the need to take screenshots of the web pages. The content changed very frequently, sometimes within minutes, and most of the time it was difficult to archive the pages using the print or save functions of the browsers. Some content was available only through streaming from far-away servers. Quite

⁴ Most writings of the American sociologist Howard S. Becker are written in autobiographical style and had a deep influence on the way I wrote this paper. For more information about Howie's specific approach to scientific writing see H. Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*. Second Edition. University Of Chicago Press, 2007. On the use of the passive voice in scientific articles, see also B. Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 54. One can note that autobiography is a classic way of writing for ethnographies. Since this report is based on participant observation on the social networking site Happy Network, it makes sense to describe the results this way.

⁵ J Corbin, and A. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, London: Sage Publications, 1998.

often, it varied according to the information the machines got about the person visiting the page. For example, in the case of a connection using a browser in French, the page would display advertisement banners in French. That meant a French-speaking student who configured her computer in French did not see the same page as, say, a Spanish-speaking student—even if both were visiting the same address on the web at the same time. Also, since blogs are frequently edited, some pages gave me the feeling that they were ‘alive’, as their contents were changing constantly. As with human beings, the only way to archive the movements of web pages is to take pictures or record movies.

Therefore, from the very start of the research process on Happy Network, I decided to take screenshots. I also tried, --on the basis of the two research tricks mentioned above--, to make systematic comparisons with the well-known Western SNS Facebook and to ask myself the following question: “How is advertisement provided on Happy Network?” Of course, I could have made comparisons with another SNS, and chosen another research question. At that time, I already had an account on Facebook since 2007. It was heavily used among my friends and colleagues in Switzerland, which made comparative analysis convenient. Also, I had announced a new seminar on advertisement in China at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. A friend working in the advertisement industry had told me about SNS as “advertisers’ paradises” because users could be selected according to their age, gender, taste, habits, etc., and targeted with appropriate advertisements. So I hoped Happy Network would provide with some useful observations.

The User page

Figure 1 displays sections of three screenshots I took on my laptop in Beijing at the end of July 2008. At that time, two basic features of Happy Network were radically different from Facebook. First, where the latter used one page for my user information (screenshot A) and another for the news-feed about my friends (screenshot B), Happy Network mixed the two on a single page (screenshot C): my information on top, news-feed about my friends’ activities at the bottom. Second, while Facebook told me very explicitly that it would never tell my friends about whose profile or photos I viewed, Happy Network did exactly the opposite. On the right part of my user page, a dedicated section called 最近来访 *Recent visitors* (screenshot C, upper right) told me who viewed my profile and at what time. If I found the avatar of an unknown visitor intriguing, I could click on it in order to visit his or her user page --which would then display my avatar and time of visit in their own *Recent visitors* section. This feature, sometimes called *footprints*, although not used on Facebook, is actually standard on many social networking sites, especially in Asia.⁶

⁶ This information comes from a Swiss web designer who worked in Japan and China during the past few years. I also remember using a ‘footprints’ section myself on www.globe.jp in January 2007 (a SNS based in Japan which focused on cultural exchange, now closed).



Comparison of screenshots of on Facebook and Happy Network, July 2008.

Another obvious difference between the two sites can be found in their name. *Happy Network* clearly indicates the notion of having fun, without any relation to a particular social class (anyone could register on the site). Facebook's name is related to the published directories of American universities for new students, and evokes the presentation of individuals. Its design also looked more serious than Happy Network, which displayed a cartoon-like yellow star as a logo (the respective logos can be seen on the upper left of screenshots B and C).

Games

Happy Network provided several games, which, contrary to most of Facebook's applications, were mostly designed by the owners of the site themselves⁷. Some were heavily used by my Chinese acquaintances and the many other Chinese people I quickly got to know while crawling through the "recent visitors" pages⁸. A game called 争车位 *Parking Wars* was particularly successful⁹. Almost everyone I knew was playing it, and although it was quite simple, I noted some friends were still playing on a daily basis eleven months later. The basic rules of *Parking Wars* were that users had to place their cars on friends' streets, and could earn virtual money if they remained there. The way to cash out the money was by moving the car to another space, but friends could take away money by giving tickets to your cars (if parked on their streets). The goal was to make as much virtual money as possible, so as to buy new virtual cars.

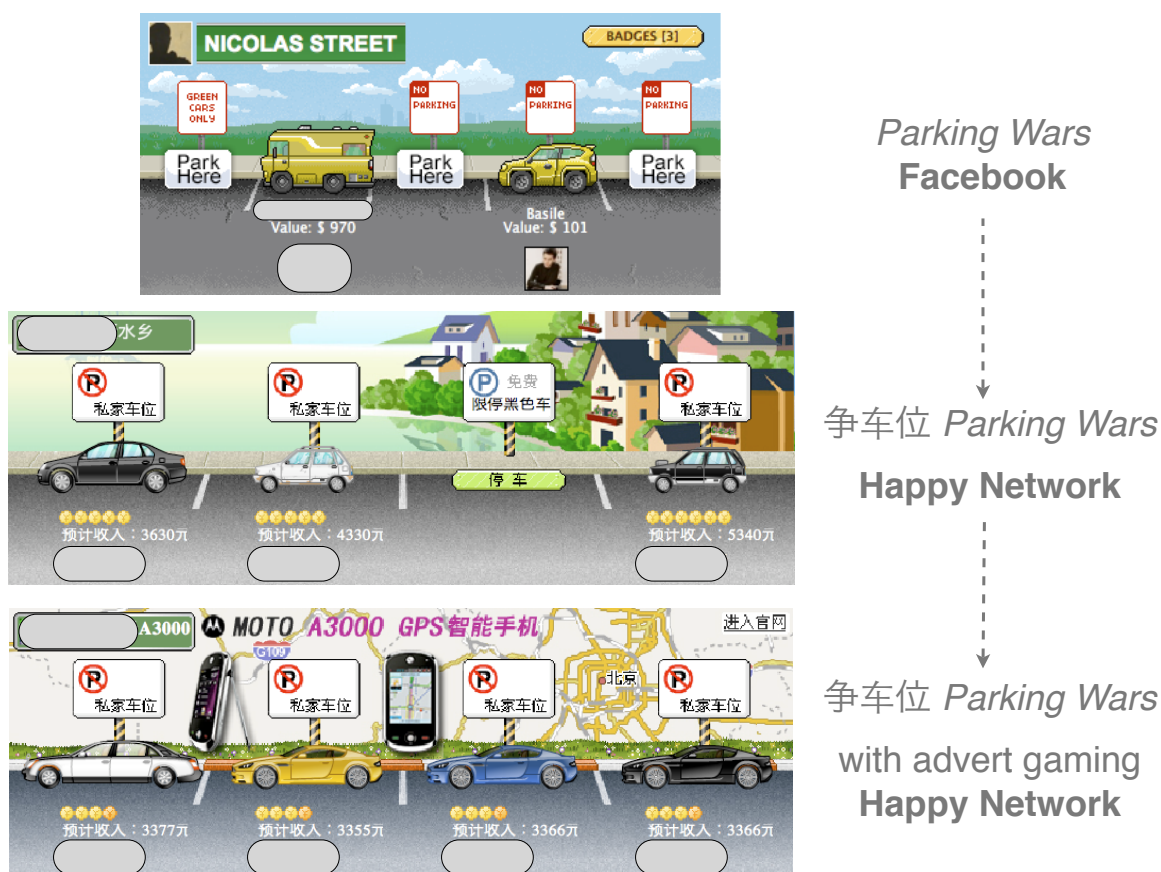
Interestingly, *Parking Wars* seemed to be a copy of a game of the same name that had been

⁷ In July 2009, it had 38 applications, 29 of which were designed by Happy Network, one in collaboration with another company, and eight by third parties.

⁸ I didn't notice any other foreigner until February 2009, when some of my students registered after I presented them the web site.

⁹ For a short article in English about this game at the moment of observation, see 'Chinese "facebook" friends hooked on games', China Daily. Online. Available <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2008-09/17/content_7034975.htm> (accessed July 13 2009).

running before on Facebook. It had been developed as a teaser for a television reality show¹⁰, and was also very successful on the Facebook network (a friend in Switzerland told me he kept moving his virtual cars for months.) However, Happy Network developed its own way of using the game as an advertising platform. On March 27 2009, I noticed for the first time that some of the walls behind the parking places had started to display advertisements (Fig2). A few weeks later I also noted that some car manufacturers had a link to a commercial for a real vehicle on their website, right next to the corresponding virtual car¹¹.



Screenshots of Parking Wars on Facebook and Happy Network, July 2008 - July 2009. The gray patches have been added to hide users' names and avatars.

Another fascinating application on Happy Network was the *Polls* game, which was also clearly among the most popular applications. It allowed users to create polls and answer other people's polls. Topics varied from 'What would you do first if you could change one thing in China?' with an array of politically related answers, to more personal questions like 'What kind of computer do you use?' and 'How old were you when you had sex for the first time?' There were also topics only relevant within circles of friends, such as 'Why did Xiao Wang go home so early at yesterday's party?' Some polls were directly related to Happy Network and allowed me to get

¹⁰ <<http://www.aetv.com/parking-wars/>>, (accessed July 13 2009). I have been able to find posts on the discussion board of the application *Parking Wars* on Facebook which were dated from December 29, 2007, –which makes it clearly much older than the version on Happy Network. A short article on this game and its development for Facebook can be found here: Simon Carless, 'AGDC: Area/Code's Lantz On Creating Parking Wars For Facebook'. Online. Available <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=20275> (accessed July 13 2009). Several games in Happy Network are described by Chinese net surfers as copies of existing applications on other SNS. The complete list with references can be found on Baidu or Wikipedia in Chinese (see links in previous notes).

¹¹ A blog post, Tangos, 'Kaixin001 Has Ads on Apps', China Web2.0 Review. Online. Available <<http://www.cwrblog.net/1231/kaixin001-has-ads-on-apps.html>> (accessed July 13 2009), dated December 8, 2008 mentions the presence of ads for the car manufacturers on Happy NetworkHappy Network.

some kind of feedback straight from the users. For example, a poll started on the June 25, 2009 with the topic ‘To what extent did you ‘Happy Network?’ The poll had received 103,180 votes on the July 8; twice as many people selected ‘Feeling too lazy to move cars on “Parking wars”’ compared to ‘Feeling too lazy to start new polls’¹².

Advertisement banners appeared at the end of poll pages at about the same time as the wallpaper in Parking Wars. Unlike Facebook, which increased the number of banners on my user page from one in July 2008 to three in August 2008 when it switched to its new version, advertisements on Happy Network were never displayed directly on my user page, but only inside the games and applications I was using.

Interestingly, while Facebook’s advertisements clearly related to my profile information --e.g. my gender, the languages I speak, my age and location (typically I got advertisements for men’s underwear, or in one case, an iPhone advertisement in French saying that 36 years old was the right moment to get one) -- Happy Network’s advertisements focused on which kind of activity I was performing. For example, when I clicked on a button named “part-time job” to get some virtual money in order to buy seeds for my garden (in another game), the advertisement banner at the bottom of the page displayed an advertisement for a job placement company.

Evolution in time

Today, my Happy Network user page looks very much like the one I had twelve months ago, but with a few additions. Tabs are now available in the news feed section and allow me to filter which kind of information I want to see about my friends: pictures, diaries, notes, forwards, status, or conversations. Several new applications are available, and I have added a couple of them. One in particular was strongly suggested by the web site in April 2009: the 转贴 *transfer* tool. It allows me to forward almost anything coming from a friend. For example, if someone posted a picture or a story I like, in two clicks I can forward it to all of my contacts¹³.

What to think about all this?

Having reached the end of this short report, readers may be looking for explanations. In many academic texts, a description is traditionally followed by an explanation. As the French sociologist of science Bruno Latour discussed it, this question lies in “(...) the difference between the empirical and the theoretical, between “how” and “why”, between stamp-collecting --a contemptible occupation-- and the search for causality -- the only activity worthy of attention. Yet nothing proves that this kind of distinction is necessary.”¹⁴ In a more recent publication, Latour tells us more about descriptions, and --maybe the most interesting and difficult point-- what makes a good description.

The simple fact of recording anything on paper is already an immense transformation that requires as much skill and just as much artifice as painting a landscape or setting up some elaborate biochemical reaction. No

¹² There were seventeen possible answers, voters could pick up to eleven.

¹³ Facebook has a similar feature called “share” but at the moment its use is limited to several kinds of data, where Happy Network’s *transfer* tool is more general.

¹⁴ B. Latour, ‘Technology is Society Made Durable.’ In *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology, and Domination*, edited by John Law, Routledge, 1991, p. 129.

scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description. This is, on the contrary, the highest and rarest achievement. (...) If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description. (...) A good text should trigger in a good reader this reaction: "Please, more details, I want more details."¹⁵

While I hope the story I have been relating here does not remain too much in need of an explanation, it definitely warrants more detail. The few elements described in this essay are only a very tiny part of a huge and highly complex object. Happy Network has hundreds of features which have not been discussed in this paper. Even a short list would range widely: the interface for its use on mobile phones, the various applications users could add¹⁶, its commercial and legal battles with the other SNS on the Chinese market¹⁷, interaction with the government on censorship issues¹⁸, users selling their virtual goods against real money¹⁹, debates in the local media about the impact of SNS on society²⁰, etc. Contrary to archeologists who often spend great efforts in order to find only little information, on-going research about the current design of web sites raises the question of how to choose which information to discuss among the billions of web pages available.

After one year of research on Happy Network, I can say for certain that the huge success of this web site and its impact on Chinese society makes it an object of interest. It is worth noting that at the beginning I had no idea whether the site would even survive long enough for me to conduct my study of it. Design research, applied to software objects which quickly become obsolete and disappear forever, requires more researchers taking random screenshots of what is happening on their screens. If most of these pictures will never be used in publications, the few that will be kept for analysis and comparisons will be useful in that they provide precious evidence of what was going on between machines and people at a certain period of time in history²¹.

Global Design

Common features between Happy Network and Facebook as well as many other online communities sites illustrate the fact that we are currently witnessing extremely rapid exchanges of flows of ideas on a global scale. It is important to keep in mind that these movements are simultaneous, and that they are not going in one direction but in many. For example, when Michael Jackson passed away in June 2009, Chinese users on Happy Network reacted a few hours before European Facebook users, because the time difference meant that they got the

¹⁵ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005, pp. 136-7.

¹⁶ A short description of the apps on Happy Network in October 2008 is given in this blog post from Alan Rutledge,

'Kaixin001: China's Apple of Social Networks', TechCrunch. Online. Available

<<http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/10/16/kaixin001-chinas-apple-of-social-networks/>> (accessed July 14 2009).

¹⁷ See Juliet Ye, 'Kaixin001 v. Kaixin: Social Networking Goes to Court', China Journal. Online. Available

<<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinajournal/2009/05/21/kaixin001-v-kaixin-social-networking-goes-to-court/>> (accessed July 13 2009).

¹⁸ The 'Great Firewall of China', so-called, and censorship issues are often discussed in the Western media in a very truncated way, usually much closer to a Hollywood movie script (the 'bad' Chinese government against the 'good' dissidents fighting for their freedom) than to what is really going on in the PRC, especially on the Internet. Z. Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*, New York: Routledge, 2006, provides with a detailed discussion on this issue.

¹⁹ For example in this article from February 2009, a user is reported selling his account --containing amazing virtual goods-- for 80,000

RMB (about twelve thousand US\$) '开心网帐号叫价8万元: 重庆30万白领注册陷疯狂', 华龙网-重庆商报, 新郎科技. Online. Available

<<http://tech.sina.com.cn/2009-07-02/10263229607.shtml>> (accessed July 14 2009).

²⁰ Articles in the Chinese media on SNS have very similar concerns to those that I hear in Switzerland, e.g. on privacy or legal issues.

See for example 罗晖, '开心网创始人: 社交网站风生水起需自律', 科技日报, 新华网. Online. Available

<http://news.xinhuanet.com/internet/2009-05/11/content_11350528.htm> (accessed July 13 2009).

²¹ Many attempts are made in order to archive what is going inside computers today. The Internet Archive <<http://www.archive.org/>> stores the data available on the World Wide Web, and computer museums are trying to keep old machines able to run old software. However, pages such as those inside the SNS are most of the time password protected, and therefore cannot be archived automatically.

information at a time people in Europe were still asleep.

At the moment, on the English-speaking web, Happy Network is often described as a ‘fake’ Facebook. It is true that Facebook was launched in 2004 --more than four years before Happy Network-- and probably inspired its creators. But Facebook also came long after other online community sites, which have a long history that goes back to the very first days of the Internet. In China, one of the first SNS websites, UUZone²², was launched in 2003, and 校内网 ‘Campus’ (which emulates Facebook by focusing on universities and students) has existed since 2005. Japan’s most successful SNS, Mixi, started about the same time as Facebook. So did Facebook inspire the design of Happy Network? Or maybe it was UUZone, Campus, or Mixi? Most probably, considering the amount of exchange of information between China and the rest of the world, not one but all these existing social networking sites and many other technical objects inspired the designers of Happy Network.

The question of whether or not to try to interview Happy Network’s designers was one of the main points of debate when I presented this research at the Royal College of Art in London, in May 2009. After eight years of ethnographical work on Chinese electronic musicians in Beijing (a previous research topic), I am personally convinced that the designers would not tell me straight away how and why they designed their online community. Trust and understanding need months, if not years, of participant observation in order to make out the real stories behind these kinds of activities, especially at times of trouble such as the huge competition today between 校内网 “Campus” and Happy Network. So it is not merely a matter of interviewing the designers (hundreds of such interviews can be found on the Chinese web) but of opening several new chapters for this research. Maybe I’ll cross the line in a few weeks and try to meet these people.

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²²

UUZone.com closed recently, see ‘Chinese SNS Website UUZone.com To Close In March 2009’, China Tech News. Online. Available <<http://www.chinatechnews.com/2009/02/05/8663-chinese-sns-website-uuzonecom-to-close-in-march-2009/>> (accessed July 13 2009).