BoardFamily – design ethics questions around a collaborative online community

The purpose of this design case is to raise questions and open a dialogue about design ethics for projects in online communities. Boardfamily is a web community inspired by semantics and knowledge-based systems that investigate how information is transferred between groups of people. Boardfamily provides a community platform with a set of rich tools that visualize how people are connected.

Design plays a critical role in the development of large-scale collaborative information systems. These systems present design with new opportunities and challenges to investigate new research and methodologies. The role that interactive designers play in creating new types of civil space online raise ethical questions about how to best create these new public spaces, provide relevance through reputation and enable collaboration between people.

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INTRODUCTION

Boardfamily is an online community developed by the Sense Studio at the Interactive Institute to explore how information and innovation is transferred between groups of people. Boardfamily is developed to expand www.methodmag.com an existing snowboard community. METHOD SNOWBOARD /DVD MAG is a pan European snowboard magazine and DVD.

In order to explore the social dimensions of network science and diffusion of innovation we choose to operate in this existing community of young people that share a similar interest in snowboarding. This provides us with a large core of users (roughly 5,000 visitors a day).

Boardfamily has two main goals; the first is to create an effective web community platform that can utilize a lifestyle interest like snowboarding that leverages a network approach for bringing these people together. The second goal is to create a set of tools and methods for analysis of real-time data to see how information is being spread in the community.
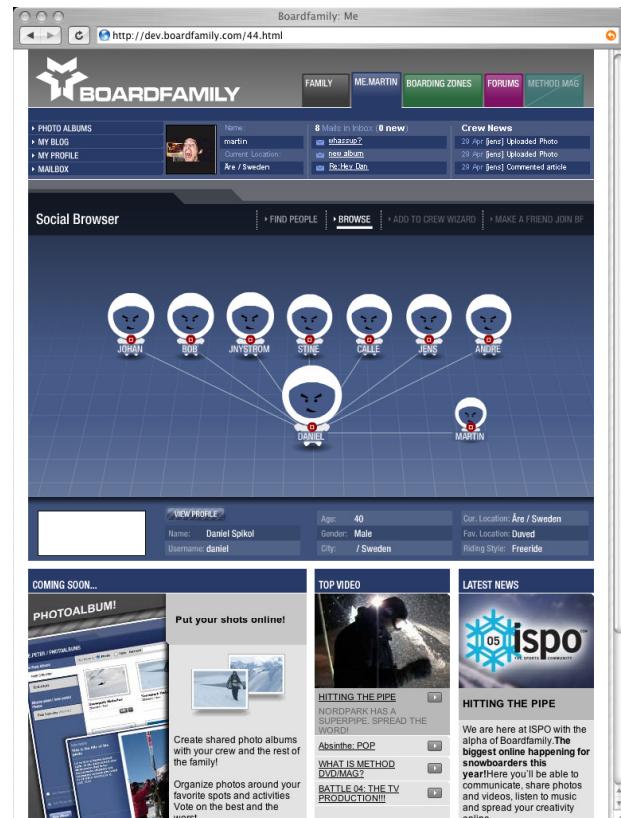
Figure 1: Social Browser

DESIGN CASE

The framework for the design of the Boardfamily community platform is derived from network science on the definition that networks are an exchange of commodity whose value is not easily made up. [1]. In this case commodity being the passion of snowboarding, but it is easy to see other articles beyond trade that drive people to become part of communities. The success of this community depends on these intangible values that we have attempted to translate into design criteria. The criteria we have been using to help define our community network has five parts:

- It is made up of people - that have common interests.

- Based on respect, honesty, and trust - that we are clear with our intentions for research and create a platform that encourage these qualities for all participants.

- Regulated by reputation – that we have relevant content that member's have input and control together with us.

- Strengthened through innovation – development of social software

- Successful because of the intangibles – the passion, creativity and dialogue that attracts people

From a design point of view the challenge is how to represent the members in this new public sphere if honesty, respect and trust are cornerstones (a key challenge in the Internet). The second question this design case raises is reputation and relevance of its content. The third question is compounded by the ease of collaboration for people to create new content in online communities. How does co-creation and collaboration change the role of designer? When we become part of the communication chain of many people to many people becoming enablers. The innovation of social software helps provide the ability for large-scale collaboration. These questions challenge design and interaction from many aspects. But ethics are also important to consider since new types of spaces face the same problems that all spaces face. How do we create positive, safe and constructive spaces for creativity that can be seen as these intangibles?

PUBLIC SPHERE

The Internet is the physical representation of the global human network. Interaction designers and technologists have created systems for public representation in the virtual space. This space can be defined as the public sphere where public matters are settled and democracy and dialogue depend on it. [2] As designers we must be responsible in the way we create the interfaces for interaction and how they are represented in this public sphere.

For the design case we ask for evaluation of the social browser as a tool to explore the public sphere. Please question its ability to create a space where people can explore community members from a network model. Is it made up of people and based on honesty, trust, and respect?

Design Example: The Social Browser

The "Social Browser" is a tool that visualizes how you and your friends are connected. Members can search and browse each other's networks looking for people with similar interests and become friends with them. The browser utilizes a simplistic living network model with references of people they know to meet new people (see Figures 1 & 2). The user experience of visualizing complex social connections and what meaning and benefit they have to users is a concern and question.
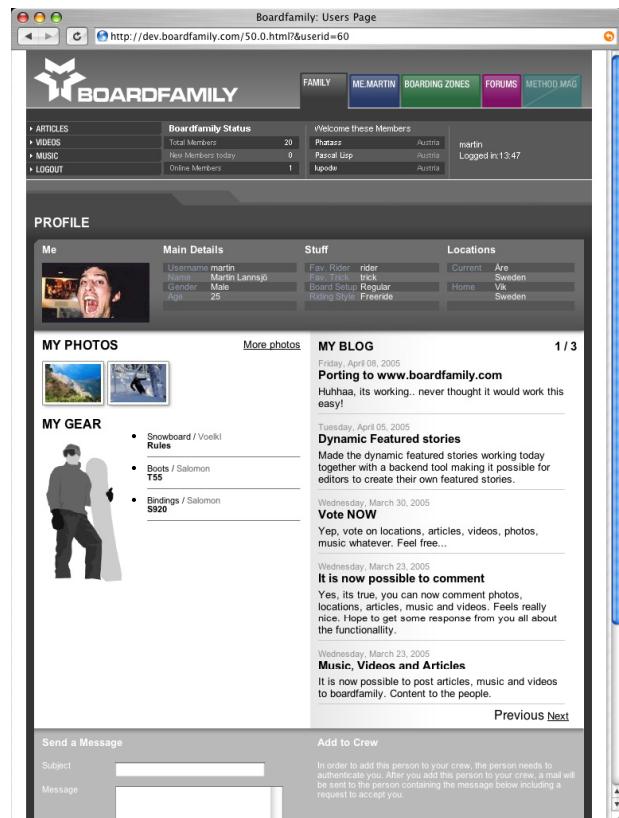

Figure 2: Public Profile of a Member

REPUTATION

Reputation marks the spot where technology and cooperation converge. The most long-lasting social effects of technology always go beyond the quantitative efficiency of doing old things more quickly and cheaply. [3] Online communities have long been efficient at proving a place for opinions of its members and they efficiently provide a type of reputation. The reputations of Wikipedia authors to book reviews on Amazon to sellers on Ebay are examples of how reputation and technology converge. They also raise difficult questions about who are the experts. As these networks of communication involve new creations of action and interaction in the social world, new kinds of social relationships and new ways of relating others and oneself are formed. [4] They present problems in relevance and reputation since anyone can be the author or the expert.

For the design case we present the ability to rate and comment editorial and user created content. Providing the relevance and reputation is fairly standard technology but if looking from the design ethical side the designer needs to be able to construct a space that provides a design that makes reputation and relevance grounded.

Design Example: Ratings and Comments

The opportunity to represent yourself via virtual communities is limitless on the Internet. With this project we provide a structured way for members to be represented and accountable in the community. By providing ways to account for your participation in the community in terms of actions, number of connections, postings, and comments to name a few we provide the means to communicate some type of relevance. In figure 3 the rating and comments systems are illustrated.
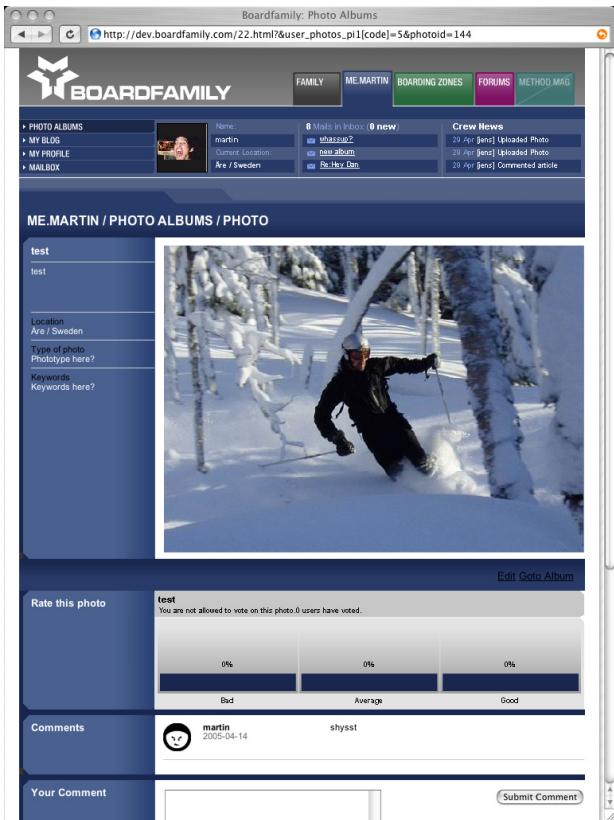
Figure 3: Rating systems

COLLABORATION

Online communities have provided opportunities for like-minded people to share interest rather than demographics and geographic location. [5] This provides the intangibles of creativity, passion, and dialogue. The most profoundly transformative potential of connecting human social proclivities to the efficiency of information technologies is the chance to new things together, the potential for collaborating on scales and in ways never possible before. [6]

For the design case we raise the question of how to create community responsibly for collectively created work? The designer faces an ethical challenge to create a process that empowers the users. At the same time create boundaries to prevent abuse of content and the system.

Design Example: Shared Photo Album

Creating shared workspaces for media content is the key ingredient for enabling people to creatively work together, the intangible success. We faced the design challenge of creating a tool that encourages people to create shared dairies with photo, and video media where individuals can place media together in one place instead of separate places. This content creation can be done remotely with mobile devices in addition to the Internet. (See figure 4)

CONCLUSION

Boardfamily combines many elements in its attempt to create a compelling community for snowboarders. At the same time it provides a research window into how the community is sharing and spreading information. Since Boardfamily is a real world community the information is relevant to the market. The intention of this project is provide a platform for technology transfer into the commercial sphere with our partners.

This raises key ethical questions of the impact of design research since it deepens the ethical role of designers. We need to traverse role of communicator and now enabler of these new types collaborations. Since collaboration involves people the many to many communication we cannot ignore the ethical responsibility as designers to provide clear intentions for the community to understand the balance between community and its commercial intention.

The Internet and social software such as this project have altruistic intentions that are part of the intangibles that attracts us to design. But, we need to question the outcome. Hamelink reminds us the current social reality.

These utopian visions seem to suggest that the emerging network technologies are creating a more humanitarian society, whereas current social realities suggest that around the world commercial interests to usher in a global billboard society are mainly using these technologies. [7]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
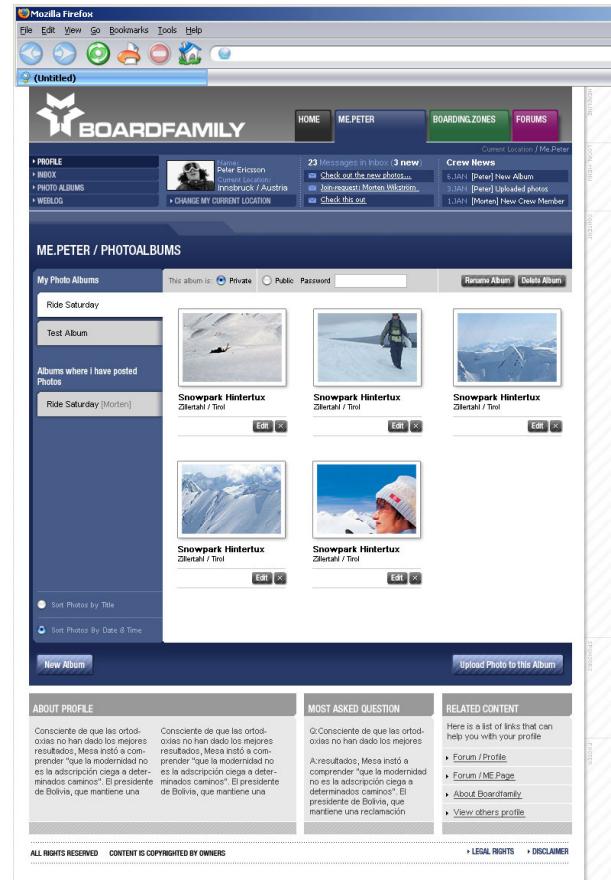
Figure 4: Photo gallery

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