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Chat Roulette – Communication on the Internet

Introduction

The website *chatroulette.com* was designed by Andrey Ternovskiy and launched in November 2009. Ternovskiy stated in an interview for *The New York Times*, that his choice for the name was inspired by the war movie Deer Hunter where the characters were playing Russian roulette (Bilton, 2010). The idea behind this concept was to match up random people on the internet and allow them to video chat via webcam with or without the use of audio. The users could choose between participating in this random conversation or to search for a new partner by one simple click. Since its appearance on the web, *Chat Roulette* gained popularity among internet users in a short period of time. Newspaper and television shows featured the website and today, there are pop cultural references linked to it as well.

Background

Ternovskiy claims that he was inspired by the existing video chat programs he used with his friends, such as skype (Bilton, 2010). Before *chatroulette.com* launched, another webpage existed, which could be seen as a predecessor of *Chat Roulette. Stickam* was a live-streaming video website which launched four years earlier in the United States. A Person had to register on the website and could stream via his or her own webcam, which was known as "to go live". *Stickam* allowed users not only to interact with each other via chatrooms, but was a useful platform for artists to perform and gain popularity. Unlike *Youtube*, every performance was live and users could comment on it while it was happening. Same as in *Chat Roulette*, communication was possible via text, microphone and webcam. *Stickams* features in terms of privacy were more distinct, since the chat allowed the host to restrict users or invite those they wished to share their chatroom with. Therefore, *Stickam* was more community based and although technically it shared similar features with *Chat Roulette*, the randomness of interaction was not its main goal. Later, in February 2010, *Stickam* added a feature which was named *Stickam Shuffle*. This feature allowed users to

connect with random people, same as on *Chat Roulette*. But the main difference was that the users had to register and that the policy of *Stickam* was considered strict in terms of adult content. Misbehavior would result into banning the user. *Chat Roulette* adapted the registration policy later, so the user would be known by his or her username. Furthermore, the email address would be stored as a login detail. Additional information such as gender and location can be optionally added by the user. Since *Stickam Shuffle* was launched shortly after *Chat Roulette*, the originality behind the main feature of *Chat Roulette* has to be acknowledged. *Stickam* and *Stickam Shuffle* shut down in the first quarter of 2013.

Technology

According to Ternovskiy, he designed *Chat Roulette* within three days on a computer at his home, where he was living with his parents as a high school student. In the beginnings, the user numbers were low but grew on a daily basis. Ternovskiy stated in 2010 that "after the initial 20 users the site doubled and it continued to double every day since then."(Bilton, 2010). In the same Interview he claimed to have 30 million unique visitors using *Chat Roulette* each day. In an interview for Spiegel.de in the same year, Ternovskiy mentions 1, 5 million users (Bieder and Kondanov, 2010). It is not clear if the terms visitors and users are used distinctively or not. The user-friendly interface makes it possible to use the features without further knowledge. It is kept minimalistic and user commands are arranged in a plain order. The website is running on *Adobe Flash* for the visual transcription and P2P (Peer-to-Peer) connection. The data travels directly from one user to another, using less server bandwidth. Therefore, the website is cost efficient and can deal with larger data packages and increasing traffic with less lags.
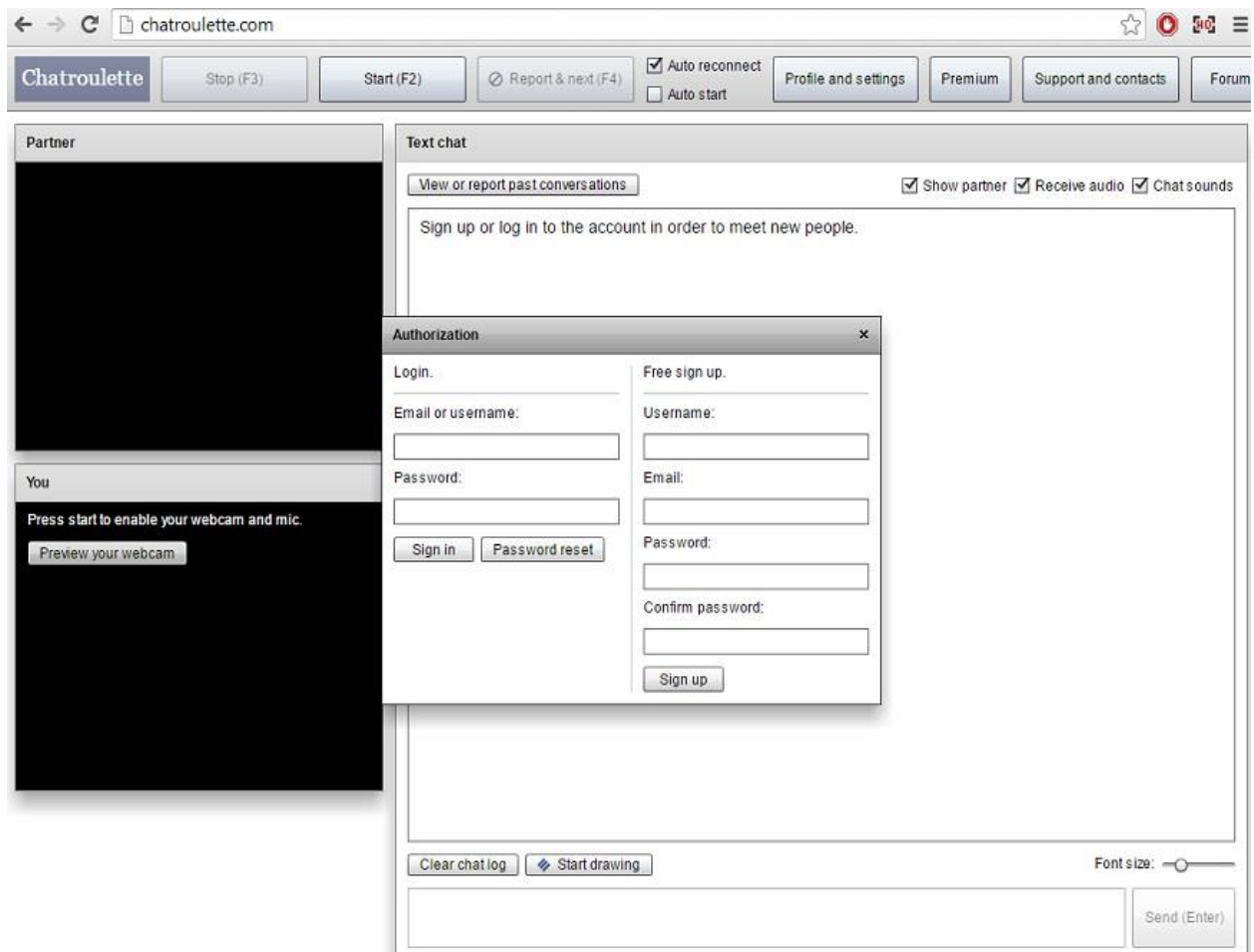
Figure 1: Screenshot of chatroulette.com 18/09/2004

Purpose of Chat Roulette

While chatting is not a new tool to communicate, there has to be made a distinction between chatting as a form of interaction or communication with a known person and chatting as a form of approaching new people. Both varieties of chatting pursue different goals in their social setting. While the chat with a family member would follow a personal or cultural code of behavior, the random encounter sets no such boundaries, since consequences are less likely to be relevant. A conversation between two familiar people often builds on similar background and understanding, leaving room for implications. Meeting a stranger on the web and trying to build up a decent conversation, faces more difficulties because of the unknown motive. It is unknown if both parties are willing to communicate, and if they are, what sort of communication would be expected. Also the choice of topics, mood, style of

presenting oneself, leads or misleads the other person to a certain perception and judgment. This would not weigh heavy on a conversation between friends.

Video chatting adds a feature of simulated face-to-face chatting. Using a video chat program to communicate with familiar people adds context to the conversation, since it is possible to show real facial expressions, rather than using emoticons. Emoticons can still be added but are no longer necessary to deliver a sense of mood. Furthermore, the user can demonstrate things rather than describe them. Misunderstanding can be avoided when more senses are involved, since the other user can rely on voice, visuals and text. At least, this is the package which is offered by the chat tool. Users can still chose not to use one or two functions and for example rely purely on video.

Chat Roulette has all three functions available and sets up an environment where users could communicate in a manner where misunderstandings could be avoided. Because of the nature of the program, *Chat Roulette* is targeted to an audience who wishes random encounter on the internet. Therefore, the dependence on additional context is essential to avoid misunderstanding. When a user is connected to another user, the motivation is at first unknown for both parties and one can only assume out of the context that is presented on the stream. If a user decides to use voice or text to introduce interest in a certain topic, the implication is lowered and the conversation follows the general rules of pragmatics. Indicators such as content, voice, pitch and mood can tell the users about the motivation of the other party. But sometimes, communication is flawed on purpose and can result in confusion over the motivation.

Issues

The issues one person can face when using *Chat Roulette* can be placed in three categories of unexpected events. Although people are aware of these categories by know, they could still be seen as a disruption of the overall function of the website. Firstly, misbehavior on *Chat Roulette* is quite common, according to statistics by Robert J. Moore (2010). Although the policy of the website has become stricter over the years, there is still a huge amount of inappropriate behavior registered on the website. Secondly, and also connected to misuse is

the frequent encounter with adult content, where users explicitly show or demand the presentation of nudity or sexual performance. Thirdly, artists use *Chat Roulette* as a platform to promote their talent, use it as a way to experiment or advertise their work. The last category includes people singing on stream, doing social experiments or playing pranks to provoke certain reactions. Of course, these categories can overlap as I will explain in the following paragraphs.

Since users can basically do and communicate anything they want, without facing serious consequences the manner of articulation or presentation is not bound to a specific code of interaction. Users are able to report another user by pressing a button, but the flagged user would only face a ban from the website if he or she has been flagged three times. In such a case, the user could wait until the block is lifted or easily sign up for a new account and continue trolling other users on the website. Such offences could include swearing, using inappropriate symbols or gestures and bullying. Data on this topic is rarely collected and rely on own observation or quantitative reports of users.

The issue of explicit adult content has been monitored in more detail and some numbers demonstrate a frame in what dimension this type of misuse occurs. Moore who is the co-founder of *RJMetrics* has used data collected from *Chatroulette Map* and concludes that the majority of encounters would be solo male users. Solo female users make up only 9% and when added to a group, there is a chance of 13% to encounter a woman on *Chat Roulette*. The majority of users were registered between 20 and 30 years of age and mainly located in the USA or other western countries. Moore found out that the display of explicit content would occur in around one out of eight chat sessions, while the users who actively display such acts are 92% male. The majority of sexual performance can be counted as any form of male masturbation (Umut, 2010).

The third unexpected encounter on chat roulette would be the act of performing any kind of art on the webcam. Common ways of expression would be music or comedy, but also pranks. While art such as music or comedy would rarely be seen as offensive, the pranks are sometimes crossing a line, due to the nature of *Chat Roulette* where the viewer is not prepared for being a target. In 2001, Italian artists Eva and Franco Mattes staged a suicide on *Chat Roulette* and thousands of users were exposed to that scene without being prepared. The reactions of those users were recorded and went viral through *Youtube* .

These kind of artistic expressions or in other examples, social experiments raise the question of ethics which was discussed controversially over the web and other media.

The Question of Communication

When viewing these three categories of misuse, the question of motivation arises. It becomes less obvious from a linguistic point of view, what or if any communication is actually happening in those scenarios. In the case of basic offence or trolling, the active user is directly addressing the other person by insulting him or her. The same rules which apply to everyday conversation could be used to analyze the utterances between two users. A lot of context is made available when voice, visuals and chat is used. The display of explicit adult content is relying on visuals more than on the other two media. A user who is exposed to exhibitionist behavior on *Chat Roulette* can only assume the motivation of the other person. Even calling the act itself exhibitionist is already a pre-labeling process, since no context is given. As from the perspective of the person performing, the reaction of the audience is as unforeseen as his own exposure to others. In this setting, it is puzzling to what extend is something actually communicated. Of course the user watching is able to comment on the context in different ways but the reaction alone would be a non-verbal feedback which includes implications. One example would be the expression of disgust, before clicking to a next user shuffle.

When applying these assumptions on the final category where the motivation of the artist is clear afterwards, the main goal has to be the collection of reactions. Here one could argue that the nature of this encounter is not based on common interest, but on the advantage of one party over another. The Artist knows its purpose and communicates whatever he or she wants, without interference. A musician would play on his or her guitar, simply to show his talent. Feedback can be given at any time, but the user watching would not have many options to change the context. Regarding the example of the staged suicide, the user is directly confronted with the graphic image and even if he or she decides to click to the next user. Being robbed of one's agency can be traumatizing but is the whole purpose of the act. The artists receive honest feedback by simply blocking out any change to not see their art.

Conclusion

Chat Roulette is currently still active and even though there are other websites offering the same features, it is still the leading platform of its kind. This could be explained by the potential of free expression which is not limited like *Stickam Shuffle* due to strict policy. From a linguistic perspective, the random matching between users faces many problems since the motivation of the participants is not obvious and the context might be set up by one side, leaving the other side to interpret most parts of it. I conclude that in every encounter certain messages are embodied even if they do not serve as context for two sided conversation. The motivation of self-expression seems to outweigh the purpose of the exchange of common interests. Therefore, the original purpose of this website is not entirely fulfilled. By including the need to sign up on the website and making it possible to ban users for misbehaving, users so far have not been driven away from *Chat Roulette*, but the shutdown of *Stickam* could be a result of strict policy. There is a possibility that the restriction of self-expression indicates a decrease in popularity for the future.

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