

Social Heroes: Games as APIs for Social Interaction

Adam Simon

Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP)
Tisch School of the Arts, New York University
207 6th Ave. #1
Brooklyn, NY 11217
1-310-701-8627
asimon@nyu.edu

ABSTRACT

Social Heroes is a pervasive social game in which players trade points by tagging each other using Twitter. Through the accumulation of tags and points in defined combinations, they earn achievement awards and gain the ability to create their own tags and achievements. Taking the metaphor of APIs from software development and drawing parallels between the way we model game state, *Social Heroes* attempts to provide a ludic interface for our personal relationships. The result is a system for social play surrounding identity, relationships, and communication.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

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Documentation, Performance, Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

games, social software, APIs, pervasive game, relational identity, cognitive modeling, game state modeling, ludic language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Games are conversations. Information flows between players and the game system, and through that game system back to other players. A large part of both the metaphorical conversation of game play and everyday, language-based conversations is the process of modeling what the other party is thinking. In verbal conversation, that model allows us to communicate more effectively, and in games, that model allows us to learn how the

game works and improve how we play. In multiplayer games, there exists a metacommunicative channel as well, with each player's interaction with the game being communicated to the other players along with the message that it is a game action, that this is play [3]. Every game allows for at least this piece of metadata to be communicated, in order to establish and maintain the magic circle, delineating the game from the outside world. But additional information can be passed between players as well, with the game providing an interface for this metacommunication.

In software development, we refer to these sorts of frameworks as APIs, or application programming interfaces. APIs allow one piece of software to interface with another in a structured fashion, without regard for what happens with the data on the other side [21]. Recently, we've begun to see internet services emerge which look more like pure APIs than traditional software, with their primary function being to move data between endpoints. A good example of this is Twitter, which, despite having a website, is nearly agnostic as to the source and destination of the short text messages which users send and receive on the service [25]. Though APIs usually pass data through unaltered, the act of selecting what data to make available is a decision that shapes the way the system behaves.

My goal in building *Social Heroes* was to construct a game which served as an API for social interaction between players, providing a context for meaningful metacommunication. By making the mental models of social interaction more explicit, I hoped to allow for playful experimentation with modes of socializing, thus providing a better understanding of how these models are created. To that end, the driving force of the game became communication itself, and the platform for the game became Twitter, which provides a fairly transparent and flexible interface for textual dialog. What emerged was a platform for transmitting metadata about social state, a system for playful identity construction, and a game that blended performative language in the magic circle with phatic communication in the real world.

2. DESCRIPTION

Social Heroes runs on top of Twitter, allowing users to play using any device or software which can interface with the service, including the Twitter website, the Facebook website, desktop clients, instant messaging clients, and mobile phones, among others [27]. This pervasiveness was a primary factor in choosing Twitter as a platform, allowing for anytime/anywhere access to

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the game. The goal is to earn points from other players, which are categorized by the one-word tag which accompanies them. Over the course of the game, players earn achievements for collecting certain point combinations, and unlock more abilities in the game by earning multiple achievements.

Players join the game by following the Twitter user "socialheroes" just as they would follow their friends on the service. They begin the game with a store of generic points, unassigned to any tag, which they may give to other players by sending a message to Twitter. At the start of the game, tags were pre-defined by the system, but higher-level players have earned the ability to use their points to buy new tags and make them available for other players to use.

All of the actions in the game are taken by sending messages to Twitter. Because of the nature of the service, this means that all game actions are publicly viewable by players and non-players alike. The most common game action, sending points by tagging another player, might look like this:

@socialheroes @rebelprince +geek¹

This would send one geek point from the user who sends the message to the Twitter user rebelprince. In the event that rebelprince runs out of generic points to spend, he may send this geek point to another player, but he may not recast it as a different tag.

A player earns an achievement when he or she receives the required number of points for each of the specified tags. Earning an achievement is announced publicly and also delivered as a direct (private) message to the receiving user. An achievement also comes with 5 additional points to distribute to other users.

As with tags, initial achievements were defined by the system, but higher-level users may create their own. (Unlike tags, however, the creator of an achievement may never earn that achievement him or herself.) After a few achievements have been earned, the player gains a level, allowing him or her additional abilities, such as buying tags, creating achievements, or taking points from other users. Though the game is open-ended, the nominal goal is to achieve the highest level, Social Hero.

At any time, players may retrieve their own scores or the scores of other players by requesting them through Twitter, or by viewing them on the website.

3.BACKGROUND

Games, even analog ones, are sometimes compared to software: player input on one side produces game output on the other. But when multiple players are involved, it is perhaps more accurate to compare games to APIs: taking input from one player and delivering it to another. This interaction is often framed in such a structured way that it is not thought of as communication, but the passing of a ball or the moving of a chess piece are both examples of game-mediated communication between the players. Recently there have been explorations of games performing a similar framing function for our physical and mental environments. Big street games such as *Pac Manhattan* are concerned with altering our perception of urban space, while alternate reality games like *The Beast* and *I Love Bees* provide a ludic interface for websites, pay phones, and other everyday objects [22, 10]. *SFZero*, a Situationist-inspired "collaborative production game" is perhaps

most upfront about its goals, referring to itself specifically as "An interface for San Francisco. That is to say, a new representation for the data that's already there" [1].

All of these games feature some amount of metacommunication among players concerning the way in which the environment is to be regarded, a frame of mind which extends beyond the scope of the game. Indeed, the breaking of the cognitive bounds of the traditional magic circle is often an explicit goal in these types of games [17]. This is more of a return to form than a departure. During the 14th and 15th centuries, for instance, a football match would take place in the midst of the city itself, a momentary overlaying of the ludic on the mundane: "The whole landscape became transformed into game-space. Houses, agriculture, sites of worship lost their everyday meaning and became an abstract terrain whose qualities impact the possibilities of game play" [12].

What kind of game-space would be created with a similar interface for our social relationships? Social games such as *Werewolf* and *Spin the Bottle* provide a framework for interacting within the game, but the metacommunication is strictly limited to maintaining the magic circle. The social play is not readily extensible into non-ludic interactions, and the metacommunication is segmented from "the data that's already there." Artist Sophie Calle experimented with imposing game-like constraints on her own life, but what Calle created for herself approximates something closer to what Salen and Zimmerman refer to as "ludic activities": more structured than merely a playful state of mind, but not easily identifiable as a game [5, 23]. Social software which encourages similar kinds of playful interaction between users has been gaining in popularity, particularly among dating websites such as *Crazy Blind Date* and *i'minlikewithyou* [7,11]. While these services certainly draw inspiration from games, they lack systems within which users can play and explore, situating them firmly outside of being actual games. *Social Heroes* aims to take a more direct approach by targeting the cognitive overlap between game design and social interactions.

4.GAME STATE & RULE MODELING

Game state is "the complete status of the game at a particular moment," abstracted away from the player experience of the game [16]. The pieces in a board game will both store information on the game state and represent that information to the players. This helps make the game state easy to examine. Chess could be played without the board, as a series of verbal descriptions, but holding that amount of data in our heads would make it unplayable. We learn to play a game by examining the game state, taking an action in the game, and evaluating how the game state has changed. This feedback allows us to refine our mental model of how the game works, and, if our new model is more correct than the old, improve our chances that our next action in the game will yield favorable results.

A player becomes better at a game by interacting with the system, watching others interact with the system, and refining his or her ideas of how the game works over time. The relatively small number of variables allows players to improve their performance by establishing a repertoire for how to progress in the game [15]. The ability to grasp the system, and improve the way which one interacts with it, is a large part of what makes games fun, and holds them in contrast to the much more complex systems of the real world. Callois describes a player in a game as being "free within the limits set by the rules" [6]. This freedom is key to

¹ See Appendix for a list of tags, achievements, and system commands.

experimentation. The iterative loop of making a prediction, testing it, and revising it is part what we're referring to when we talk about "play" in games. Overlaying this formal system on top of a less defined one, such as our social relationships, can provide for a more experimental approach to establishing previously undefined rules.

Social Heroes' command-line like interface affords this kind of experimentation toward defining the rules and limits of the system. In one instance, a player discovered the ability to buy new tags before the feature had been announced [A]. He bought one, of course, and the new feature quickly became public knowledge without ever being formally announced to the players. The game's automated messages are particularly fertile ground for play and experimentation with the limits of the system, such as the resulting message when a player bought the tag "points": "OK! You just bought points for 3 points! To start giving points points, reply '@socialheroes @TheirName +points'" [B]. The open-ended input of a text entry field allows players to explore the limits of the game system, discovering the rules experientially. And because all game actions are public, players can add to their repertoire of game play through observation as well as direct action.

One downside of running *Social Heroes* atop Twitter has been communicating game state to players, which is a common problem with games that cross established modes of play. While a player may receive his or her own score, or that of any other player, by sending a command to the game through Twitter, that interface is not ideal for judging one's position in the game against more than one or two others. Score information has been made available via the website. This is less than ideal for accessibility purposes, and perhaps suggests that play should be limited to sitting at a computer, but it has improved the situation for play testing purposes. As *Social Heroes* scales, more complex data representation and new forms of score retrieval will be necessary to support meaningful play.

5.SOCIAL MODELING

Just as we model the rules of a game, we engage in similar processes of mental modeling for the rest of the world, from what direction a car is turning as we cross the street to what the next sentence in this paper might say. In *The User Illusion*, Tor Norretranders explains that "we experience not the raw sensory data but a simulation of them. The simulation of our sensory experiences is a hypothesis about reality...We experience only a fraction of what we sense -- namely, the fraction that makes the most sense in context" [18]. This hypothesis is what we experience as explicit thought, or consciousness. Most of this modeling occurs implicitly, without us being aware that it is happening until we pull back the curtain and focus our attention on the process itself [20]. But there are some models which are handled more consciously than others, particularly those which are most crucial to our survival. We're more explicitly aware of our mental models of our immediate environment, for instance, since we may need to react quickly to avoid harm.

Another area where we are more conscious of our modeling process is in our social interactions. Humans' ability to form deep social bonds has played a large part in our evolution because our brains are highly tuned to modeling what is going on inside each others' minds [13]. This is particularly true in conversation, one of the most complex social interactions. Norretranders defines effective communication as causing "a state of mind to arise in the receiver's head that is related to the state of mind of the

sender...the information transmitted must elicit certain associations in the receiver" [19]. Managing our partners' mental models becomes even more important than the literal information that is being communicated. It is this awareness of each others' minds which allows us to recognize signals and symbols abstracted from reality. This allows for metacommunication, which, as described above, makes activities such as play possible [4].

When setting out to design games as social APIs, one of my goals was to bring these implicit mental models which dictate our interactions with each other closer to the top-of-mind. *Social Heroes* creates a game which exists solely as a series of ludic interactions with other players, thus raising consideration of these interactions to the level of game modeling in the minds of the players. This explicit simulating of social exchanges causes actions among players to be more purposeful. At the same time, the game context balances that consideration by lowering the stakes and allowing for play.

Furthermore, the pervasive and immediate nature of the game means that any social contact between players, whether direct or perceived, becomes subject to in-game actions. In one instance, a nickname was jokingly assigned to one player outside of the game, which sparked a flurry of tag buying and assigning between two players sitting at a table together [C]. In this instance the players were tagging each other with these nicknames, exporting traditionally verbal teasing to the game. The same interaction could have occurred from across the country, which would have been a typical use of Twitter. But two people sitting next to each other would need a reason to Twitter their conversation, making it public, which *Social Heroes* provided. This playful sequence of revenge, battle, and detente within the game is a footnote in the larger context of the personal relationship being played out across the table, but the ability to tap into the API of the game provides a structure for social bonding and identity construction.

6.RELATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

From the earliest paper prototypes, identity construction was an important part of *Social Heroes*. The first concept focused almost entirely on negotiating identity through a series of public and private membership in different groups. As that mechanic grew into *Social Heroes*, the public perception of identity remained a salient factor. Thus, as the game developed, it became an important rule that a player may not give himself or herself points; all points must be awarded by other players. By tagging each other, players are constructing relational identities, in which their game selves are defined by others [24].

In one instance, a player bought the tag "rockstar" in order to tag another player in exchange for a real-world favor [D]. This was in spite of an achievement called "Rockstar" already existing. In effect, the sender was attempting to short-cut the receiver to an achievement by sending him that point. Soon thereafter, a third player attempted to tag herself with "rockstar," only to be rebuffed by the system [E]. The game is flexible in the social hacking it will permit, but it may only be performed by others on your behalf.

Relational identity is an important part of how we socialize in groups and in society. By expressing our personal identity in public, we encourage others to read our signals and form an identity for us which matches what we are trying to communicate about ourselves [8]. This is another example of how modeling

each others' minds comes into play: the application of archetypal labels to another person is a particularly powerful form of identity construction because of the cultural metadata which it implies. As an API, the game allows for only short labels as identity markers, preventing the development of complex profiles. By forcing even the most intimately acquainted players to perform very coarse acts of relational identity construction for each other, *Social Heroes* becomes a game of teasing, flirting, and light-hearted social play.

7. LUDIC LANGUAGE

Building the game on top of a platform designed for transmitting text underscores its roots as a framework for ludic communication. In order to play the game at the most basic level, a player must type a tag, address it to another player, and make it public. Game play is only possible through the direct entry of text, rather than, for example, selecting tags from a drop-down list on a web page.

In the context of *Social Heroes*, the act of tagging is illocutionary: it performs the action it describes. The only way to tag a user is to say that you are doing so. Using language as game action allows the tag to operate as both description (or "locution") outside of the game as well as action ("illocution") within the game. While the tag and achievement system had been designed to be illustrative of the receiving player's real life actions, certain tags, such as "flirt," are ambiguous [F]. Inside the game, it is pure illocution: the tag is applied by sending the message. Outside of the game, however, only social context dictates if it was intended as locution (describing the receiver as a flirt) or as perlocution (an act of flirtation from sender to receiver) [2]. This ambiguity, which is encouraged by the restriction of the game rules and syntax, heightens the sense of playfulness surrounding the language of the game.

In other cases, tags were specifically adopted for perlocution, an attempt at evoking the state they represent in the receiver. For example, sending "glamor" points to other players before an important presentation in order to bolster morale [G].

These examples provide some interesting early cases for linguistic play within the framework of the game, but the limited vocabulary of tags and achievements in the earliest versions prevented more expansive use. Within a week of the first play test beginning, players had begun adopting the game's "+tag" syntax to send "points" to each other for tags which were not a part of the game [H]. While they knew that these messages served no purpose for scoring, this ludic interaction continued alongside normal game play and unrelated messaging on Twitter. Players were using the game as a phatic device, a reason to exchange non-consequential (in the real world) communication, while at the same time playing with illocutionary language in the game. The question became how to combine those two use cases.

It is important to note that all *Social Heroes* game actions are situated in the flow of messages from other Twitter users, where the same information could easily be communicated in plain English. This use of the *Social Heroes* structure for other communications suggested that the syntax and game rules were well constructed, and that the limited vocabulary was hindering more widespread game play. Soon thereafter the ability was added for players to use points to buy new tags into the game, which were publicly announced and available to everyone.

This resulted in an explosion of game play and deeper metacommunication. There was a large increase of in-game tagging and point exchange as a result of real-world actions, as

players would not hesitate to buy a tag in order to publicly express gratitude or to tease a friend [I]. Tags were often purchased and used exclusively by one player or for a short period of time, suggesting some sort of expiration system, perhaps [J]. And because the purchase of tags occurs publicly, but without the involvement of another player immediately, it was used as a way to broadcast the purchaser's own desire or temporal state. For example, when a player buys the "needscoffee" tag just after sending a non-ludic message about being tired, we can assume that he is broadcasting his own state, and would likely appreciate someone giving him a "needscoffee" point [K]. The public announcements of tags and achievements also provides a peripheral vision of game play outside a player's own social group.

This broadcasting of temporal state has become the most common type of metacommunication in *Social Heroes*. While the points and achievements of the game are long-term assets relating to identity and relationships, the sending of points and buying of tags is very immediate, due to the broadcasting nature of Twitter. The service is designed with this type of use in mind, with the website prompting users with the question "What are you doing?" [26] While *Social Heroes* players continue to use Twitter for non-game communication on a regular basis, the in-game communication has taken on the role of metadata, annotating non-game exchanges both in real-life and online [L]. If the game is an API, the linguistic structure it provides is what makes this metadata creation possible. And because this game activity is visible to non-players, as well, it is readable by all of a player's friends on Twitter.

This is consistent with the way folksonomies are used as metadata on many social software websites, in order to categorize photos, links, etc. for later retrieval [9]. But the communicative use of tags in *Social Heroes*, and their limitation to being granted by other players, situates them in the realm of metacommunication. While the act of giving tags as points is a use of performative language in the context of the game, as discussed above, it has no reality altering effect on the outside world, and in the larger context of social interactions, it becomes almost phatic. By blending these two extremes of communication -- phatic communication whose contents are unimportant and performative speech whose contents shape reality -- *Social Heroes* creates ludic language with high consequences in the game and low consequences outside of the game [14].

8. CONCLUSION

Within the context of the play testing, *Social Heroes* has proven successful in establishing a metacommunicative channel between players within a game context. The resulting construction of relative identity within the game, the use of blended illocutionary and phatic language, and the generation of social metadata has been extremely valuable to observe during testing. Player feedback also suggests that the pervasiveness of the game adds to the heightened awareness of social modeling.

Social Heroes has only undergone play testing with up to twenty players over the course of a few weeks, so the need to examine how play develops with more participants is a high priority, particularly as the game spreads across social groups. The creation of namespaces surrounding social groups has been raised as an idea for future development, though that would eliminate the peripheral vision that is currently afforded by the overlapping clusters already created by Twitter. And the ability of play to remain engaging over time has not been tested, though players'

willingness to adopt the syntax suggests that it may be less of an issue than initially thought. Rules are still being refined, of course, and the need for better score representation has already been discussed.

This is, of course, only one game, and one approach to designing games as APIs for social interactions. Targeting specific social phenomenon for ludification would be one approach for further investigation, with bonding and bridging capital being prime areas for exploration due to their straight-forward quantifiability. Identity construction could also benefit from further exploration in pervasive games, as the tension between personal identity and relative identity is both instantly recognizable and yet often remains implicit.

As gaming shifts away from the keyboard and the couch, and mobile technology allows for pervasive, digitally enabled games, it will be natural to see more integration between the ludic and the mundane. By crafting games as systems for player exploration of these boundaries, they will undoubtedly push and pull them in ways we cannot anticipate. And by designing these games as layers on top of implicit social models, we may draw these models closer to the surface and create a system for experimental social play.

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10. TWITTER CONVERSATIONS

- (A) Menscher, Corey: "@socialheroes buy badassmofo"
<http://twitter.com/crackhead/statuses/798768574>
- (B) Dory, Mike: "@socialheroes buy points"
<http://twitter.com/DoryEx/statuses/799699770>

Social Heroes automated private message to Dory, Mike:
"OK! You just bought points for 3 points! To start giving points points, reply '@socialheroes @TheirName +points'."
- Dory, Mike: "@socialheroes @ds1935 +points"
<http://twitter.com/DoryEx/statuses/799701360>
- (C) Ralsey, Heather: "@mawopi's new nickname for me is MOSFET (<http://rewrit.es/sBD>). still not quite sure why."
http://twitter.com/Heather_R/statuses/802173740

Dimatos, John: "@socialheroes buy mosfet"
<http://twitter.com/mawopi/statuses/802178732>

Dimatos, John: "@socialheroes @heather_R +mosfet"
<http://twitter.com/mawopi/statuses/802178918>

Ralsey, Heather: "@socialheroes buy ultrabrite"

- http://twitter.com/Heather_R/statuses/802177768
- Ralsey, Heather: “@socialheroes @mawopi +ultrabrite”
http://twitter.com/Heather_R/statuses/802179097
- (D) Varland, Scott: “@socialheroes @ds1935 +rockstar”
<http://twitter.com/scottiev/statuses/799040049>
- Varland, Scott: “@socialheroes buy rockstar”
<http://twitter.com/scottiev/statuses/799041692>
- Varland, Scott: “@socialheroes @ds1935 +rockstar”
<http://twitter.com/scottiev/statuses/799042079>
- Soltis, Daniel: “@scottiev dude, rockstar is an ACHIEVEMENT, not a POINT”
<http://twitter.com/ds1935/statuses/799044213>
- Varland, Scott: “@ds1935 I don care. I buy Daniel rockstar! :P”
<http://twitter.com/scottiev/statuses/799045019>
- (E) Ralsey, Heather: “@socialheroes @heather_r +rockstar”
http://twitter.com/Heather_R/statuses/799057720
- (F) Marsh, Zannah: “@socialheroes @mawopi +flirt”
<http://twitter.com/zannahlou/statuses/792807619>
- Dimatos, John: “@socialheroes @zannahlou +flirt”
<http://twitter.com/mawopi/statuses/792859729>
- Dimatos, John: “@phantasmagora +flirt”
<http://twitter.com/mawopi/statuses/792860832>
- (G) Simon, Adam: “@socialheroes @scottiev +glamor”
<http://twitter.com/rebelprince/statuses/796915997>
- Simon, Adam: “@socialheroes @DoryEx +glamor”
<http://twitter.com/rebelprince/statuses/796915660>
- (H) Dimatos, John: “@socialheroes @mawopi +junkinrunk”
<http://twitter.com/mawopi/statuses/796026696>
- Soltis, Daniel: “@socialheroes @mawopi +scaryuserpic”
<http://twitter.com/ds1935/statuses/796062274>
- Menscher, Corey: “@socialheroes @mawopi +insaneinthemembrane”
<http://twitter.com/crackhead/statuses/796138293>
- (I) Varland, Scott: “@socialheroes buy rockstar”
<http://twitter.com/scottiev/statuses/799041692>
- (J) Menscher, Corey: “@socialheroes buy tagwhore”
<http://twitter.com/crackhead/statuses/799125301>
- (K) Solits, Daniel: “@socialheroes buy needscoffee”
<http://twitter.com/ds1935/statuses/798838797>
- (L) Dimatos, John: “@socialheroes @heather_R +karma”
<http://twitter.com/mawopi/statuses/802341762>

11. APPENDIX

What follows are a list of tags, achievements, and commands at the time of writing. Initially players began with 20 points, which was later lowered to 12. Achievements came with a bonus of 5 points each, and buying a new tag would cost 3 points. All misunderstood commands are responded to privately by the system, with helpful information provided where possible. Updated information and rules available at www.socialheroes.net.

11.1 Original Tags

The tags created by the designer, which the play test began with: geek, flirt, glamor, creative, hipster, athletic, philosopher, zealot, disaffected, sophisticate, punk, innocent, drunk

11.2 Player-Created tags

Tags which players in the play test created themselves: badassmofo, yourmom, outstanding, nerd, butthead, needscoffee, rockstar, demon, tagwhore, haaay, cylon, trekkie, mooch, points, sleep, mosfet, ultrabrite, karma, canhaz

11.3 Original Achievements

The achievements and tag requirements to earn them, as created by the designer for play testing: (At the time of writing, player-created achievements had just been implemented, and no player was yet at a high enough level to yet do so.)

- Pollyanna (5 innocent)
- Gutterpunk (3 punk + 2 disaffected)
- Billyburger (1 disaffected + 3 hipster)
- Rockstar (2 punk + 2 glamor + 1 creative)
- Sexbomb (3 flirt + 3 glamor)
- ITPer (2 geek + 2 creative + 1 philosopher)
- ITPissd (2 geek + 2 drunk + 1 punk)
- Socialite (1 glamor + 1 sophisticate + 3 drunk)
- Footballer (4 athletic)
- Bible Thumper (4 zealot + 1 innocent)
- Poet (2 philosopher + 2 creative)
- Beat Poet (2 philosopher + 2 creative + 1 hipster)
- Seducer (2 flirt + 3 sophisticate)
- Richster (2 disaffected + 1 hipster + 1 sophisticate)
- Freetard (2 geek + 2 zealot)
- Musclehead (3 athletic + 2 innocent)

11.4 System Commands

- @socialheroes @TheirName +tag (to give points)
- @socialheroes @TheirName score (to get their score via DM)
- @socialheroes score (to get your own score)
- @socialheroes buy Tag (to buy a new tag for 3 points)
- @socialheroes make Achievement Name +# Tag +# Tag +# Tag (to make a new achievement - see below)
- @socialheroes tags (to get a list of current tags)
- @socialheroes help (to get help)
- @socialheroes more (to increase the frequency of direct messages from the game)
- @socialheroes less (to increase the frequency of direct messages from the game)
- @socialheroes off (to turn off direct messages from the game)
- @socialheroes on (to turn on direct messages from the game, sets your frequency to low)