
Lies in the Interface: Free “Smut” As License for Deception

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Abstract

Deceiving the user of an interface is usually considered a poor design decision. It is rare to find deceitful interfaces, and most of the time if a user recognizes deception, she will try to ensure that that experience is not repeated. In this position paper, I will examine the deception in the interfaces to Thumbnail Gallery Posts (TGPs) – ad-driven websites providing links to purportedly free pornography. TGPs are some of the most popular destinations on the Internet, and the design of many of them suggests repeat users are common. After describing the deception in their interfaces, and how it is accomplished, I will speculate on why this type of deception has become a norm and why the users of these websites tolerate it, unlike most other forms of deception.

Keywords

Thumbnail Gallery Post, deception

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Good HCI design calls for “truthful” interfaces – ones that are easy to understand and where the result of a

user's action matches her expectation. Guides for designers stress interfaces where users are in control and can predict the results of their actions. Norman, for example, encourages interfaces that allow users "to do [their] intended actions directly, without extra effort" and are "directly interpretable in terms of the expectations and intentions of the [user]" [4]. While he does recommend difficult-to-use interfaces in certain special situations (e.g. dangerous equipment that should be easily usable only by experts), these interfaces should still adhere to principles of good usability for their particular audience. In his list of heuristics for user interface design, Nielsen also recommends interfaces that minimize potential for user error and keep the user in control [5]. Such guidelines are generally considered common sense for HCI practitioners and are usually followed unstated. Users, too, almost always expect consistent interfaces where the stated result of an action is indeed its real result.

Deceptive interfaces, which are mostly found only on the Internet, are usually viewed negatively by their unwitting users. Email users who fall for a phishing scam, for example, are very unlikely to want to repeat their experience. Internet users who have accidentally installed spyware/malware because of a deceptive or confusing interface are also unlikely to consciously repeat that action. Finally, online advertisements that mimic the Windows interface and thus attempt to trick a user into clicking on them are generally disliked and avoided by those who understand their nature; such advertising practices are also banned by most popular ad-hosting services, such as Google AdWords [3] and Yahoo! Media [9]. Most deceptive interfaces are thus disliked and avoided by users.

However, at least one particular type of deceptive interface – that which is found on many ad-driven pornographic sites known as Thumbnail Gallery Posts (TGPs) – appears to have become an accepted norm, for both users and site creators. Though TGPs often mislead users as to where links on their pages will take them, these sites are some of the most popular destinations on the Internet, with a high rate of return users.

Deception in TGP Interfaces

Thumbnail Gallery Post (TGP) websites are ad-driven websites providing links to purportedly free pornography. Each hyperlink on a TGP points to what the user is lead to believe is a gallery of images or video clips, represented either by a text description of the gallery, or a thumbnail picture from the gallery. Galleries are submitted to TGPs by content creators or their affiliates, in the hopes that the traffic to their free galleries will entice users to pay for membership. In turn, TGPs usually make money every time a user signs up with a website they found through the TGP¹. Many TGPs are updated daily or more frequently. TGPs are also often take part in webring, where a set of TGPs list links to each other to mutually increase traffic, exposure (including each other's PageRank score [1]), and share revenue.

TGPs are prevalent, popular, and have a high rate of return users. According to SexTracker, a popular traffic counter for adult websites, the top 10 visited adult websites are all TGPs [6], with the most popular

¹ Except for TGPs that are owned by the content creators themselves. Some TGPs also make money from banner ads.

receiving millions of impressions daily². User return and page reload rates are also high for the popular TGP. Many TGPs, in fact, are structured with return users in mind – many start with a “Hall of Fame,” presumably showing the most popular galleries (these are, in fact, often paid placements) and then follow with “Today’s Galleries” and “Yesterday’s Galleries,” clearly indicating a target user who visits the site daily.

Webrings of TGPs often use a deceptive interface technique called “skimming” to increase traffic (and thus potential revenue) among the participating sites. While the exact technique varies from site to site, the idea is to have some percentage of clicks that users believe will take them to a gallery actually take them to another TGP. This can be accomplished by redirecting some percentage of clicks (using an out-link script, see Figure 1), or by selecting certain links to be the redirecting links and leaving the other links intact. Sites that perform skimming often try to hide this fact from their users by manipulating the browser’s interface to show each link as pointing to a real gallery. A typical link from dansmovies.com, a video TGP site, and the 4th most popular adult website tracked by SexTracker (over 1 million impressions per day) [6], is shown in Figure 1. By changing the text of the status bar, the JavaScript in the link makes it look like the link goes directly to a gallery on another domain (www.ramis-galleries.com, in this case), instead of to a script on the dansmovies.com domain. The *go.php* script performs the skimming for dansmovies.com, redirecting a percentage of all clicks to its affiliates. Presumably, the affiliates reciprocate this behavior.

² All statistics accurate as of January 03, 2006.

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<a href="http://www.dansmovies.com/go.php?
ID=32255&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.ramis-
galleries.com%2f263%2f05.htm"
onmouseover="window.status='http://www.rami
s-galleries.com/263/05.htm'; return true;"
onmouseout="window.status=''; return true;"
onfocus="window.status='http://www.ramis-
galleries.com/263/05.htm';return true;"></a>
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Figure 1 Code for a hyperlink to a gallery from dansmovies.com. JavaScript is used to try to hide the fact that the link points to a script on dansmovies.com, instead of directly to a gallery on another domain. (Emphasis added for clarity)

The interface to dansmovies.com is clearly deceptive. While the affiliates of the site are listed on the site itself, nowhere is the fact that clicks may be redirected stated. Any dedicated user of the site (and especially the return users, of which there are over 200,000 daily) is sure to experience a redirection to another TGP, instead of to a gallery they selected. Furthermore, many users undoubtedly see that the URL provided on the status bar for any given link does not always correspond to where they are directed, and infer that the website is deceiving them³.

Two of the top 10 most visited sites ranked by SexTracker use skimming to deceive their users. Each

³ Firefox users who have disabled status bar editing through JavaScript don't see any URL listed in the status bar, which is still a potential sign of foul play.

of these, however, also has dozens of affiliates, which in turn may have affiliates of their own; the number of TGP sites using skimming is very large. Furthermore, professional TGP-site software almost always offers skimming options (e.g. [2], [7], [8]). Since these sites are so popular, with a high percentage of returning users, this deceptive tactic present in their interface is either ignored by their users, or treated as a mere nuisance – not enough to warrant using alternative sites.

Discussion

The fact that certain kinds of deceptive practices in the interfaces to TGP sites have been accepted as norms suggests that the expectations, values, and purposes of users when they are browsing for free pornography differs from those when they are using other Internet sites. The following is a brief list of these alternative design constraints, which start sketching out the design space users and designers might find themselves in when working with TGP sites and Internet pornography in general.

- *User as Deceiver* – While so far the TGP has been discussed as the deceiver, users might feel themselves to be deceptive as well. While browsing TGPs and the galleries they link to, users are bombarded with advertising messages asking them to pay for more content; the user is clearly lead to believe that the pornography they are looking at has financial value. Yet, most users refuse to pay and continue to seek out free pornography. It is possible that users feel a guilt (even if subconsciously) at “stealing” content, and thus accept their own deception as *quid pro quo*. A comparison with the “guilt” (or lack thereof) of users who download copyrighted music or movies would be

interesting, but is outside the scope of this position paper.

- *Looking for “Smut”* – The way in which users interpret the activity they are engaging in could play a role as to their expectations for their interactions with the sites they visit. While some users may feel that they are looking for “pornography,” others may feel like they are looking for “smut” – e.i. content that is morally depraved or obscene. Just as an individual looking for entertainment in “the wrong part of town” may overlook some amount of unseemliness in their surroundings, TGP users with a lowered sense of moral expectation may overlook the TGPs’ deceptiveness.
 - *Fuzzy Selection* – Users of most websites featuring long lists of links (e.g. news websites, or friend-of-friend lists on social networking websites) have definite opinions as to what content they do and do not wish to view, which is expressed in their clicking behavior. Users of TGPs, however, seem fine with the fact that their clicking pattern does not perfectly correlate with the actual content they are served. This could indicate that the short text descriptions or small thumbnail images associated with each link provide too little information for users to feel strongly about any particular choice of links. Instead, users perform a “fuzzy selection” – clicking links that catch their eye or seem promising, but not committing enough to any single click to feel disappointed if some of them do not lead to the content they expected.

The reasons suggested above are preliminary, but they begin to sketch out a design space that in at least some ways is significantly different from most design spaces encountered on the various spaces of the Internet. Undoubtedly many more explanations for the curious

behavior of TGP users are possible, and many are likely to be of interest to HCI practitioners looking to work with this space, both from “straight-forward” and critical perspectives.

Conclusion

In this position paper, I have presented a unique deceptive interface tactic used by Thumbnail Gallery Posts (TGPs). While this tactic is not seriously deceptive in the sense that it does not cause financial loss or significant loss of privacy (as might be in the case of deceptive malware or phishing scams), it is interesting to note that it seems to have been accepted as a norm by both Internet users and the maintainers of TGP sites. This acceptance of deception in the interface to TGPs suggests that the design of interfaces for online pornography occupies an alternative design space, with its own set of social and cultural norms and user expectations, different from most other Internet spaces (or markets). At the “Sexuality in HCI” workshop at CHI 2006 I hope to be able to further contribute to the discussion of design spaces surrounding Internet pornography and related topics.

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Yevgeniy "Eugene" Medynskiy is a recent Cornell University graduate, with a degree in Computer Science and an Information Science minor. His interests include informal online social spaces, online social networks, and critical design. He has been researching the LiveJournal blogging/social networking site, a site with a large number of alternative lifestyle communities and members, from both structural and pseudo-ethnographic perspectives for over a year. Eugene is a member of Cornell's Culturally Embedded Computing Group (CEmCoM), a group of multi-disciplinary researchers working at the intersection of design, technology, and culture, and is always interested in exploring, analyzing, and building for new design spaces.