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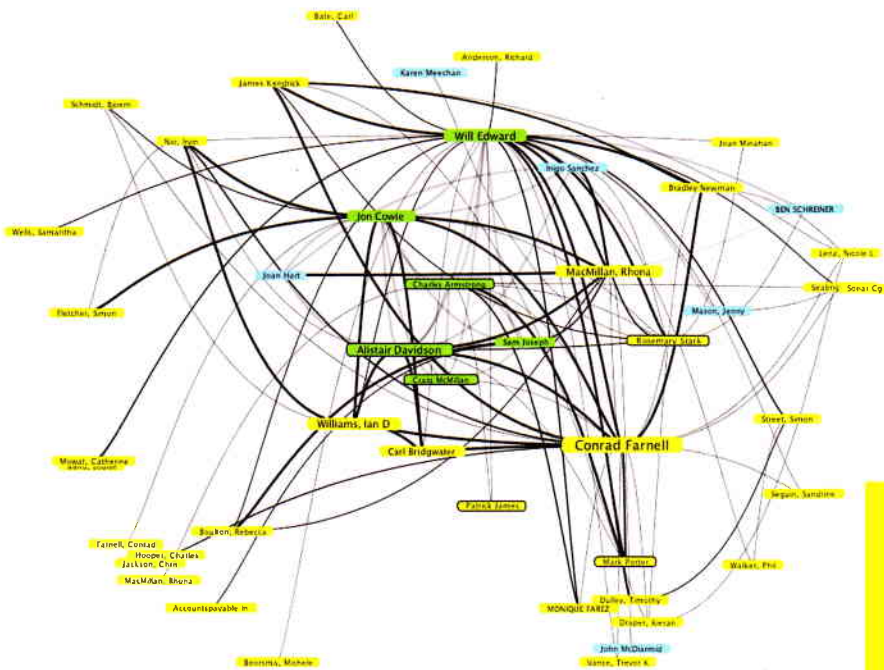
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TRAMPOLINE

NEIL SIMPSON talks to London-based ethnographer and founder of Trampoline Systems, Charles Armstrong, about social networking and data visualisation.

SOCIAL NETWORKING has well and truly established itself over the past decade, having survived a lengthy honeymoon period during which time people have been brought together from all walks of life in all sorts of ways through applications like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

One person who saw the potential of social networking early on, and who then took it to a new level is UK ethnographer Charles Armstrong. His company, Trampoline, helps business people make better use of their relationships. The company formed on the back of a research project, and has since produced some ground-breaking commercial applications from their headquarters in central Shoreditch, referred to by Armstrong as Silicon Roundabout.

So what attracted Armstrong to social networks in the first place? "I was always interested in why people cooperate in certain ways, and how communities change in response to their environments. When I first visited the Isles of Scilly in my mid-teens I remember one evening sitting in a little cove in front of a boatshed in the twilight. After a while I heard footsteps and a man came through the trees and down the path to the beach. He went into the boatshed and started to untie the covers from the boat. A moment later another man arrived, then another and another, eight altogether arriving within 10 minutes of each other. They proceeded to prepare the boat, organise some logs as rollers and bring her down to the water with scarcely a word. Then they folded the

covers, stored them in the shed and went their separate ways. I was struck then by the seemingly effortless complexity underlying their collaboration."

In 1999 Armstrong based himself on the Isles of Scilly to conduct ethnographic research into information distribution and collective decision-making. During this time he had a chance encounter with the head of the San Francisco Stock Exchange, leading him to realise his research may have commercial potential. A decade later Trampoline's flagship product – SONAR CRM – has surfaced as a popular social networking business tool.

A web application that links to corporate email and contact management servers and builds up an electronic model of all a company's customer and partner relationships, SONAR automatically creates a searchable database of the known contacts in each customer together with a record of who knows them. The system works out which people are decision-makers and how strongly you're connected to them, reporting on the overall health of each relationship. "There's something about interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships that just cries out for visualisation, I don't know if it's the innate structure of the data or the way our minds deal with relationships," says Armstrong. What's appealing about SONAR from an experience design perspective is that it comes with some eye-catching information visualisations to make it easy for people

to get a simplified perspective of complex relationships. "Visualisation has always been part of the recipe at Trampoline," he explains. "At our first public presentation of Trampoline's technology for visualising organisations, towards the end of the presentation I switched from my slideshow to the live application and the huge screen behind me lit up with a visualisation showing the ebb and flow of communication among several thousand people in an inter-governmental organisation. I could sense the intake of breath in the room. Then I started moving nodes about, filtering the graph, showing different slices through the data, all the time highlighting what it revealed about how the organisation worked. It was very exciting."

At a time when data visualisation is making a huge impact in the digital world, with more products and services introducing live data-feeds via infographics, it begs the question – will data visualisations eventually become the new user interface? Armstrong believes the answer is 'yes'. "I also think touch interfaces are going to accelerate that process; however, one thing Trampoline's learned deploying solutions to customers is that some people are still more comfortable with tabular data than graphical representations. Based on this experience we nowadays tend to design interfaces where visualisations are the second step after an initial report that's tabular in form." Graphical visualisations of data may appeal to creative people, but are they really an example of art meeting science or, as Armstrong puts it, 'utility meeting aesthetics'? "Visualisation is a classical interdisciplinary melting pot. Designing dynamically-generated visualisations is even more challenging than hand-crafting a visualisation for a single dataset. SONAR's 'Visual Map' screen has to provide illuminating and intelligible results for an infinite spectrum of datasets. Getting this right demands expertise in statistics, sociology, psychology, graphic design and software development. It's striking that many of Trampoline's most successful visualisation solutions have been worked out by software engineers, rather than graphic specialists.

Presenting complex datasets to corporate clients can be challenging, so what are some of the user experience hurdles that Trampoline has experienced? "The biggest challenge is

always relevance," says Armstrong. "Working every day on the product it's easy to get lured into thinking that elegantly representing structure in complex data is what we're trying to do. We need to keep reminding ourselves that's not the objective. Our goal is to help people to make good decisions and fulfil their tasks more effectively. Our user interfaces and visualisations are only successful in so far as they communicate information that users take hold of and create value.

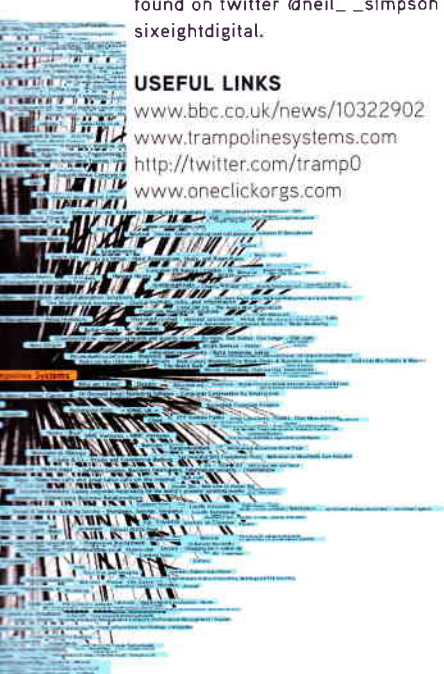
"I think the first milestone was realising we needed to stop optimising user interaction for ourselves," Armstrong continues. "Like a lot of designers we started off developing solutions that worked well for people like us. But as soon as we started testing with customers it was clear we needed to get away from that."

Asking Armstrong how he sees social networking changing over the next few years, he responds that change is in the air. "I think we'll see a shift from manually-constructed networks (where you tell the system who your contacts are) to auto-constructed networks built from communication patterns and other types of source data. The big problem with manual networks is the lack of discrimination between your closest friend and someone you spoke to at a bar last week; they're all just 'Friends'. Automated approaches permit fine-grained distinctions based on the frequency, pattern and longevity of communications. This enables a system to provide a much closer representation of the way humans mentally model their social networks, which has important functional benefits. Trampoline pioneered the automated approach with business solutions, but I think it's inevitable it will become mainstream in the consumer world too." **DT**

Neil Simpson is an interaction designer, digital strategist, writer and director of Melbourne-based experience design consultancy sixeightdigital. He can be found on twitter @neil_simpson and @sixeightdigital.

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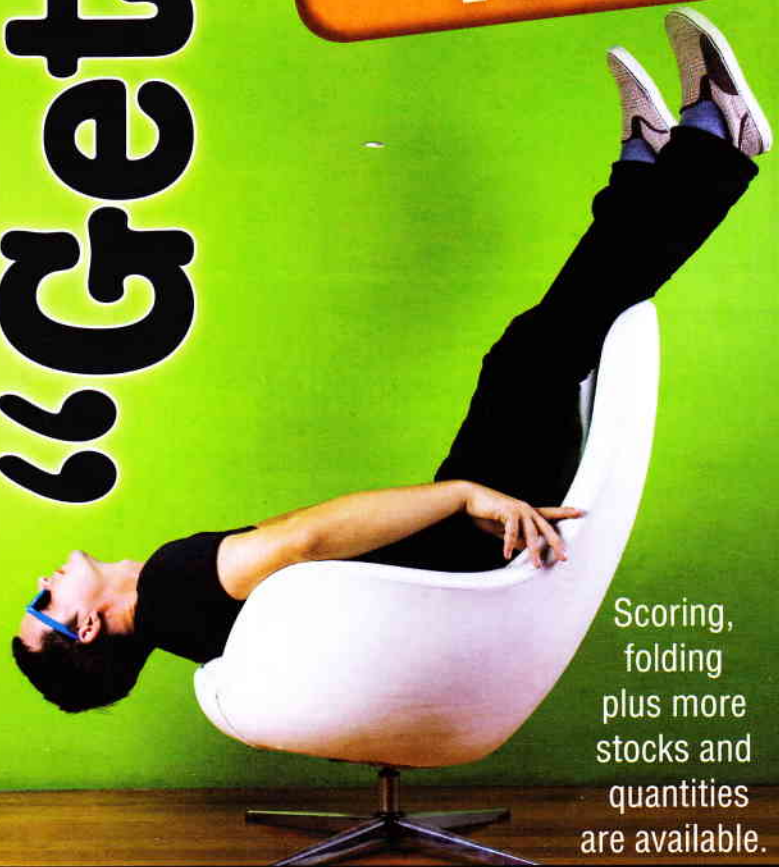
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