

# reGossip: Gossip and Multi-User Narratives

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## Abstract

This paper is about a research project known as reGossip. reGossip is a network game about gossip and social status. The multi-modal network includes mobile phones, personal digital assistants, and desktop computing systems. The paper describes the interaction model, the game design and system design of reGossip, preliminary results and next steps. The primary research question is can an interaction design platform be created to author “multi-user narratives”.

## 1. Introduction

*No doubt narrative began its life on earth in the form of gossip, simple stories told by one individual to another. Gossip remains a folk-art version of literature, the back-fence way of compressing events and exploring their meaning. Like the grander forms of storytelling, gossip expresses our concerns and anxieties, it delivers moral judgements, and it contains ironies and ambiguities that we may only partly understand, just like the most serious work of the greatest authors. When we gossip we judge ourselves as well as those we talk about.*

- Robert Fulford, Triumph of the Narrative

***You have been invited to join a game of “reGossip” by someone you know. This person is the “host” of the game you’ve been asked to participate in. The host has chosen people who he or she thinks are great gossipers who will make the game interesting and fun with their gossip.***

*When you first logon you will have a list of five people to whom you can send gossip. The game may involve many more people, but for now you only know of these five.*

- reGossip scenario for design testing

reGossip began as a discussion about the possibility of developing an interactive technology platform for creating social networks that one could play in, be

entertained by, and use to tell or read stories. The discussion quickly focused on ideas of multi-user interaction models that became encapsulated in a multi-player game design we called reGossip.

The essential game description is as follows: Players exchange gossip in a game to achieve the highest degree of "connectedness" by becoming the best "gossiper" or "gossipee". Players are invited by a "host" to join a reGossip network that shares a common experience. They exchange and rate gossip while accruing social status points and currency to further their overall "network connectedness".

The game design relies explicitly on functions of a social network and as an outcome generates multi-authored narratives. The interaction design of reGossip is based on assumptions of social networks that include the idea that social standing is a motivator for social participation, and that social standing is achieved by possessing and exchanging information. In particular, social networks exchange information as narratives or gossip.

At this stage of the research, the primary question is can we design a platform for creating “multi-user narratives”. Key issues related to this are the questions of can we use game design as a participation model, and what qualitatively would we accept as a narrative in a multi-user context? The ultimate outcome of reGossip, is a theoretical framework for multi-user interaction and language exchange in an interaction design context.

This paper describes the current research objectives of the reGossip project, and provides an overview of the game design, the game environment and the system design. Preliminary results from initial testing and prototyping of the platform and an outline of the next steps in the reGossip project will be reported in this paper.

## 2. Aims of research

reGossip draws on text-based interaction models of email, chat, messaging and SMS (Short Message System). It extends these models by designing a platform

for more structured and extended interaction that is designed for play and social creativity.

The extended model captures and makes explicit the collaborative information or narrative building of a group. The social use and play of technologies like SMS is an antecedent to a more designed interaction platform like reGossip [1]. Structured text-based game-play like in MUDs (Multiple User Dungeons) occurs on an equivalently large scale.

In reGossip language is at the center of its interaction and the object of the game-play. The interaction model has the potential to research collaborative authorship, and even game play, that in fact may be at the core of the evolution of mythic storytelling [2,3].

In addition, the language exchange in reGossip is rapid and iterative which allows for the collective story to emerge in a reasonably short period. The game system captures the mutation of the stories and tracks its mutation path from individual to individual. The system offers an accurate mapping of the evolution from gossip to collective story. The game design, on the other hand, is a blueprint that potentially allows for exploring motivation in not only game-play but also in storytelling.

A primary research aim is to further explore the relationship between storytelling and game-play as found in reGossip. Preliminary testing confirmed the game design as a means to develop collective stories. The areas for further research are the direct qualitative relationship between game play and narrative. Is there a link between strategy and narrative quality? Is a prominent role in the making of collaborative narrative related to degree of connectedness to the social network, i.e. winning the game in the context of reGossip? From our initial prototyping it was generally evident that game design had an impact on the nature and quality of the gossip.

In the current phase of the research, the immediate question is can we design a platform for creating “multi-user narratives”? Key issues related to this are the questions of can we use game design as a participation model, and what qualitatively would we accept as a “multi-user narrative”?

Primary issues in pursuing this question include designing a participation model that will simulate a social network, for this we have chosen multi-user game design. The question of defining what constitutes a multi-user narrative is the key to assessing the design of the platform. The process of narrative generation that we have assumed is akin to the process of evolving from gossip to collective stories to social myths. The process is inherently social and iterative and therefore, there is an onus on the participation model or in our case the game design to move past simulation of a social environment to successfully supporting an actual social network.

### 3. Project description

Players exchange gossip in a game to achieve the highest degree of "connectedness" by becoming the best

"gossiper" or "gossipee". Players are invited by a "host" to join a reGossip network that shares a common experience specified and designed by that “host”. Players exchange and rate gossip while accruing social status points and currency to further their overall "network connectedness".

The success criterion for the game is social credibility that is achieved by success in social status, social knowledge, and network awareness. Social status can be determined by the degree of fame or infamy a player has through either gossiping or being gossiped about. Social knowledge is measured by the amount of gossip a player knows and the amount of secrets a player knows about other players. Network awareness is measured by the number of players a player knows and the level of knowledge a player has about the transactions of a network, for example, who has sent gossip to whom.

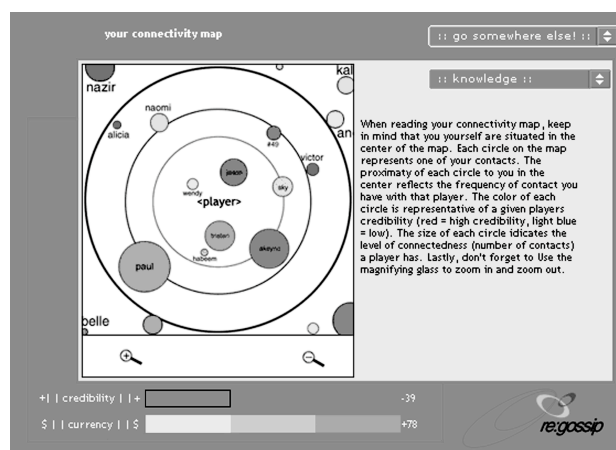


Figure 1. Screen shot of the web interface displaying the “connectivity map” for a player. The map provides an overview of the player’s social relations with other players or “network connectedness”.

The mechanics of the game interaction revolve around a basic set of actions that include: writing gossip, circulating gossip, rating gossip, buying network traces of gossip, buying of gossip from the system or player, and buying secrets about other players. The primary actions for players are writing, circulating and rating gossip. Players are only able to send a piece of gossip on to one other player. The recipient player has the option of deleting or sending the gossip on to another player. In either case, the player must rate the gossip as positive, neutral or negative. After rating the gossip and if the player decides to send the gossip to another player, she may alter or add to the gossip content.

The rating of the gossip is a key factor in determining the social standing of a player. Each player who is part of the circulation of a piece of gossip is affected by the rating of that gossip each time that gossip is rated. A player’s credibility rating rises or falls with each evaluation of the gossip. The original writer of the gossip is affected by the rating at twice the amount each time, positively or negatively. In addition to the rating of

gossip, player's credibility rises or falls depending on how much social knowledge and network awareness they have.

The game design also includes accruing and spending of currency that enable actions and the acquisition of knowledge. Currency is accrued based on the player's success at circulating gossip. The player receives currency for every eventual other player that receives gossip the player has either written or circulated. The currency allows the player to purchase secrets of other players, traces of gossip and other artifacts that will aid with furthering the player's knowledge of the network.

Designing resources as an exchange mechanism and to induce a condition of scarcity is common to game design. However, this typical game design convention is unique in the combined game play and storytelling approach of reGossip. The use of currency was successful in the preliminary user testing in regard to acquiring knowledge of other players to be used directly in the gossip generated.

A direct result of the preliminary tests is the plan for a meta-level of interaction. This is a crucial factor in creating audience for the multi-user narratives and to include mechanism for each game or game host to design unique gossiping themes and more importantly, unique communities. This is the game level for the "hosts" and it is at this level a "host" can create an instance of the reGossip game. In addition, the meta-level allows for a passive participation with the system. The users will be able to view abstracted views of multiple reGossip games. The multiple emergent and dynamic narratives will be available to be "read" as the games continue at the game level.

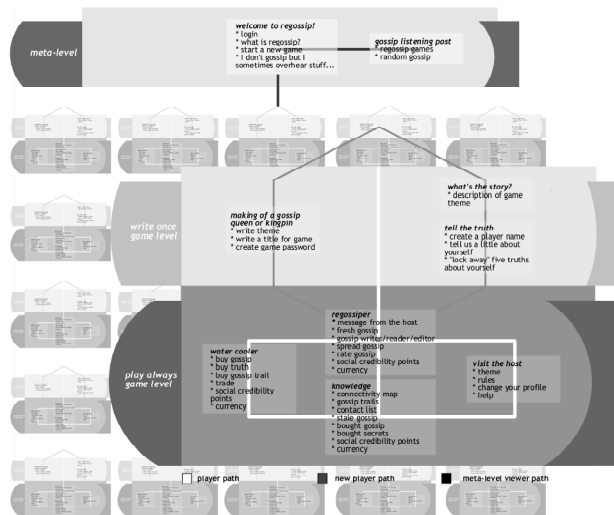


Figure 2. Flow diagram for the reGossip user-interface. The diagram represents the overall reGossip system, including a meta-level and game level. Note the concurrence of multiple instances of reGossip games at the game level.

#### 4. System design

To date we have implemented and user-tested the web-based system, and reGossip has been implemented in i-mode and WAP. User-testing has been staged to eventually test in the complete multi-modal environment.

The virtues of the system design are to support the social based interaction and to support the formalizing of functions of a social network. This formalization allows these functions to be aspects of game play in the game design. The system design tracks social interaction as discrete artifacts that can be measured, filtered and traced. For example, information in the form of gossip is in reGossip a discrete message that is checked for changes, traces, ratings and can be represented in a point system. The system makes explicit social relationships within the network by visualizing the network and one's relationship to it. The system provides for an accurate and real-time point system that makes social standing explicit, especially important for game design. A secondary function of the system design is to monitor actions throughout the reGossip network and to allow for actions other than exchanging gossip to be bought and sold.

#### 5. Prototyping results

Web-based prototypes of reGossip have been user tested to validate the basic concept of the use of multi-user game design as a method for creating multi-user narratives or collective storytelling. The refinement of the system design was critical to ensure that we could not only implement the platform but also effectively capture the process of storytelling. In addition, the details and design of the game rules is critical in providing an effective blueprint for exploring issues of motivation, quality and nature of gossip, and social structuring and for testing these ideas in an eventual theoretical framework for collective storytelling and multi-user interaction.

In addition to the web-based prototype, we user-tested the basic game design through face-to-face role-playing. The initial results discussed here affirmed the basic premises and raised the central design gap in the platform, the lacking in the design of the meta-level of the reGossip system.

#### 6. Next steps: collective and interactive narratives

A key issue in the next step is the criteria for narrative. This will not only allow for detailed relationships to be made between game design and narrative generation, but as has been stated, the game design may be a blueprint for a theoretical framework for collective storytelling.

There is a ubiquitous definition of narrative in which we are all engaged in narrative all the time, "verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened"[4]. If we move beyond the everyday but still on the collective level, the Russian

theorist Vladimir Propp pointed out that folktales are sense-making narratives that are invariably plot driven[5]. In relation to “higher” forms of narrative the primary goal of folklore is to make highly comprehensible to as many as possible, what has happened in their context.

In a yet more formalized collective setting, organizations, narrative often appears in these forms[6,7]: i) research that is written in a story like fashion; ii) research that collects organizational stories; iii) research that conceptualizes organizational life as story making and organization theory as story reading; iv) disciplinary reflection in the form of literary critique. The use of narrative in an organizational context for example, appears to have its own evolutionary path that includes a level of reception analysis.

In relation to game design there has been a fair degree of discussion about narrative, mostly in arena of non-linear narratives. The interaction designer, Chris Crawford is a strong advocate of the inherent narrative potential in the non-linear interaction of interactive games[8]. The writer Steven Poole’s analyses narrative in the form of complementary pairings of “diachronic” narrative, what has happened, and “synchronic” narrative, what is happening[9]. He argues it is interactive games inability to design engaging user-driven “synchronic” narratives that diminishes the current potential of narratives in interactive games. Collective narrative is primarily strong “diachronically”, making sense of what happened. However, in design and planning processes the form of the “scenario” as a future sense-making tool is widely used, the scenario genre can be seen to be a synchronic narrative of what is happening in the future.

It is against the backdrop of this brief overview of collective narrative theories that the defining of collective narrative generated by reGossip will take place as the next step.

## 7. Summary

reGossip is at a first stage of research and it is too early to draw conclusions. The concept has been tested in face-to-face exercises and a web-based implementation and the preliminary results are encouraging in affirming the premise and basic concepts of the reGossip. In addition

the results clarified the interaction objectives and game design, including the solution of designing an explicit meta-level function.

In summary, at this stage of the research, the primary question is can we design a platform for creating “multi-user narratives”. A key issue related to this is the use game design as a participation mode. In addition, determination of the qualitative criteria of a multi-user narrative will need to be established and further explored.

While the long term research aim and outcome of reGossip, is a theoretical framework for multi-user interaction and language exchange in a game design or interaction design context, there is a range of intermediate research aims revolving around the concepts of game play and storytelling in a collective context. It is clear that reGossip is currently developing a design for determining a qualitative goal for collective storytelling through game design.

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