



NOOSCAPE

Friend Fracker Tests Your Facebook Friendships by Randomly Deleting Them

By Austin Considine



Tech provocateur Harper Reed (left) and artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer celebrate the loss of friendship at Rhizome's "Seven on Seven" conference. Image by Daniel Stuckey

[RLH]

If you lose something but you don't know it, is it actually a loss? What about a friend? Was it genuine friendship if that person's disappearance goes totally unnoticed?

Friendship is important. So important that a [meta-study](#) published in 2010 showed that having strong social relationships was as predictive of human longevity as avoiding other risk factors like smoking and drinking, and was actually more influential than factors like exercise and obesity. Unsurprisingly, most experts agree it's also [fundamental to human happiness](#)—a basic, empirical truth observed by philosophers as ancient as Aristotle.

But chances are you have a lot of “friends” these days. Maybe a few extra on social media. How important are they?

The truth is, you could probably stand to lose a few.

Last weekend, I attended a conference in New York organized by Rhizome, a nonprofit [focused on art and technology](#), called “[Seven on Seven](#),” in which seven artists were paired with seven tech developers, and given 24 hours to conceive and create a new product from scratch, like a web application. One project was particularly disruptive in a normative sense, as playful and prodding as one would expect from [Harper Reed](#) and [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#).

Reed is a non-criminal hacker type who was CTO for the 2012 Obama campaign, and Lozano-Hemmer creates conceptual artworks that are unified by their viewer interactivity, their subtle, dark humor, and their ability to challenge notions of place, self-awareness, and the ways we interact with our environment and transfer our kinetic energies.

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Their product was called *Friend Fracker*, a web site that, with a few clicks, randomly deletes between one and ten friends from your Facebook account, without informing those friends or informing you who's been eliminated. As Lozano-Hemmer explained it, "The art is not knowing who was deleted. The way we see it is, if you don't know who was deleted, they aren't as good a friend [as you thought]."

"It's a good excuse to delete all those people anyway," Reed laughed. "And if they say, 'why did you unfriend me?' you say, 'oh, I went on Friend Fracker.'"

You could feel anxiety seize the collective breath of the audience as Lozano-Hemmer applied the service to his own Facebook account in real time, as projected on a large screen for all to see. But after that brief gasp, the auditorium erupted in applause. It was exhilarating. It was reckless. Here was the kind of social insouciance most of us wished we had, made easy. Watching it, I felt a vicarious rush akin to breaking the law in a fun and harmless way—like sneaking a grape at the supermarket, or having sex in a park.

Who were all those people that just got axed from Lozano-Hemmer's Facebook account? There was a good chance he'd never know. And that was the point. What you didn't know couldn't hurt you. You couldn't really regret the loss of an online friendship you didn't know went missing. Depending on the friend, there was a good chance that person would never notice either.

Since I, like every hack journalist, likes to imagine myself sometimes as [George Plimpton](#), I knew as soon as I started writing this that there was no getting at the truth unless I turned Friend Fracker against myself. I put it off as long as I could. I'm not sure I've ever defriended anyone who wasn't an obvious spammer or, in one or two cases, an ex-girlfriend to preempt my own self-loathing induced/producing cyber-stalking. It was scary.

I went for it. Turns out that although the website was still up, the API had already been disabled. I'm guessing the folks at Facebook weren't big fans.

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But the anxiety I experienced when I attempted to use it was instructive. Because I wrote this over the span of a few days, it also forced me to notice that my friend count had dropped by one. Why? Did I offend someone? Did someone die? Maybe someone just closed his or her account. I'll never know, but even that tiny bit of uncertainty is enough to provoke some uneasiness.

That's because Facebook friendships matter. Sure, some of them are less meaningful than others. But it's a tired and crotchety argument to call our online friend circles shallower, somehow, than our "real" ones. Our online social networks—particularly on Facebook—are based on real-world social interactions, where levels and forms of intimacy vary in all the same ways they do online. The connections are always real on some level, however perfunctory.

In 2010, I wrote an article about the psychology and real world implications of defriending for the [*New York Times*](#). The term “defriending” had just been added to the Oxford American Dictionary that same year. It seemed that defriending, with its attendant anxieties, had become a fact of life. At that time, Facebook estimated it had 500 million active users worldwide, and the average number of friends among users was about 130.

Today, Facebook says it has more than a billion monthly active users (618 million use it daily); reports vary on the average number of user friends today, but one independent marketing survey published this month suggests it’s as high as 303, with 12-17-year-olds racking up an average of 506.

"EMOTIONALLY, BEING DEFRIENDED CAN BE THE SAME AS BEING DUMPED BECAUSE IT'S ONE-SIDED."—IRENE LEVINE, NYU CLINICAL PSYCHIATRY PROFESSOR

It seems reasonable to infer that, for most of us, our Facebook “friendship” circles are widening beyond our real-life connections, watering down the mixture. Researchers at Columbia recently used some creative accounting to estimate that the average American knows about 600 people (though they only know “just 10 to 25 people well enough to say they trust them,” the researchers say).

Those estimates could be a tad high (previous studies using the same method came up with 290). Still the point isn’t lost. Viewed one way, collecting Facebook friends is a bit like collecting baseball cards. I have 1,084 friends online. Off line, I’m lucky most months if I see my closest friends more than twice, even if they live just a few subway stops away. There’s a good chance a few among those 1,084 are expendable.

For that *Times* article, I asked Irene Levine, a clinical psychiatry professor at the NYU School of Medicine, about what she had observed with regard to the psychological effects of defriending. Her opinion, based on her extensive primary research on friendships, confirmed what many of us already knew by experience.

“Emotionally, it can be the same as being dumped because it’s one-sided,” she said. “While the defriender may have been grappling with the decision to defriend for some time, it comes out of the blue for the person defriended.”

Which is fair enough when it’s someone you’ve known on an intimate basis. But for those Facebook friends you can’t even remember meeting? I’m convinced there’s a little part of us that’s activated more by some kind of hoarding instinct here than by human empathy.

Nooscape (pronounced "no escape") is a column about today's techno-scape, and the idea that we are all merging into one massive, weirdo brain thanks to the internet—an phenomenon loosely known as the "noosphere."

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