

# iCONFESS

## Mirroring Digital Self-Disclosure in a Physical Booth

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we describe an installation, iConfess, used to explore the question of disclosure in a physical space, when conditions for remaining anonymous are provided. The iConfess booth, a physical space where one could confess a secret, was tried at a large Student Faire. The paper reports on our findings on its use. The principle was simple: people could confess any secret in the privacy of the booth, on an anonymous site, using a tablet. After a period of time, confessions were handwritten on homemade cardboards and hung in the vicinity of the booth for everyone to see. In order to collect data on how it felt to reveal a secret in this way, we have offered to visitors a possibility to answer a questionnaire after the act of confession. 49 people did, a majority of them students (34), but also some others (15). In addition to the questionnaire, both participant and passive observations were made during the Faire. We have found that people enjoy revealing secrets, and reading those from others, although one participant still wondered just how anonymous the set up was. Attempts to connect people who confessed face-to-face during a social event, using a glow-in-the-dark bracelet, symbolizing that they have confessed, was not a success.

**Keywords:** anonymity, physical booth, social interaction, confession, design.

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we consider the question of self-disclosure in a physical space when conditions for remaining anonymous are provided. The phenomenon of increased self-disclosure through social media may be understood in terms of anonymity and reduced social presence [7], as well as other factors such as reciprocity [5]. Assuring anonymity, as well as reciprocity, in a physical space is generally considered to be more difficult than online.

The idea of the project came about in the context of a human-computer interaction class, where four graduate students decided to make a space for themselves and their fellow students. The students chose to design a room where some weight can be lifted from stressed students' shoulders. Various concepts were explored: a relaxation room, a match making booth, and finally, a confession booth. Confessing something they strongly feel about, e.g., love, classes, friendship, politics, exams etc., [4], should feel

good. Taking into use a confession booth as a metaphor, but providing some technology that blurs the boundary between the online forms for self-disclosure and the physical ones, we hoped to increase the willingness of participants to make disclosures. The installation that the students made was seen by the authors as an opportunity to explore how the sense of anonymity and trust can be created in a public, physical space [1]. Furthermore, we were interested in how people perceive the difference in anonymity in the digital world as opposed to a physical space [1,6]. Reciprocity, as an important factor for disclosing, is difficult to achieve in the public context. We attempted to provide a possibility for some reciprocity, by giving to all confessants a glow-in-the-dark bracelet. The bracelet was to be worn at a social event, and used as an icebreaker, enabling people who made confessions, to discuss them.

When it comes to previous research using installations similar to this, there was little to find. There is a lot of literature on confession and its benefits in psychology, e.g. [9,16], where findings show that the act of confession has positive implication on psychological health for a person who confessed. Much is also written on self-disclosure and self-presentation on social media, e.g. [8]. Recently, there is a clear trend within social media, favoring portals for disclosing secrets. A trendy site *Whisper.sh* [17], states that it is about expressing one's true self within a community of honesty and acceptance. *Whisper* was launched in the spring of 2012 out of a belief that the way people share and interact with each other is changing. *Whisper* claims to have over 2.5 billion visits to its pages per month [18]. An older, and smaller scale, artist initiated site, *PostSecret* [19] has a similar feel as the *Whisper* online, but it does some of what *iConfess* does: it combines the physical and the virtual. Here, users create homemade postcards and mail them to an address in Maryland, and the photo of the postcard is then posted on the *PostSecret* site. *PostSecret* is now considered to be one of the largest ongoing community art projects, organizing live events, exhibits, etc. Warren, a person behind the project, believes that *PostSecret* brings relief and hope to the people world over [15]. The art project, by Canadian artist and Ted fellow Chang [20], is similar to that of *iConfess* in the look and manner of posting confessions. This project, however, came to our attention only recently, long after the *iConfess* was made, and thus, has not influenced the design of it.

Within the HCI community, there are some examples of design involving confessions. One of our favorites is the *Embroidered Confessions*: “*A disconnect exists between the perception of the transitory quality of digital data and the truth of its enduring existence. Through the weaving of the stories and secrets of strangers from the Internet into a material artifact, Embroidered Confessions represents the physical manifestation of the duality of digital information*”, [1, p. 1].

Another interesting project, which combines the digital and the physical, enabling social interactions, is *Mobile Sawing* [11]. In this project, people were invited to embroider SMS by hand, and with an embroidery machine connected to a mobile phone.

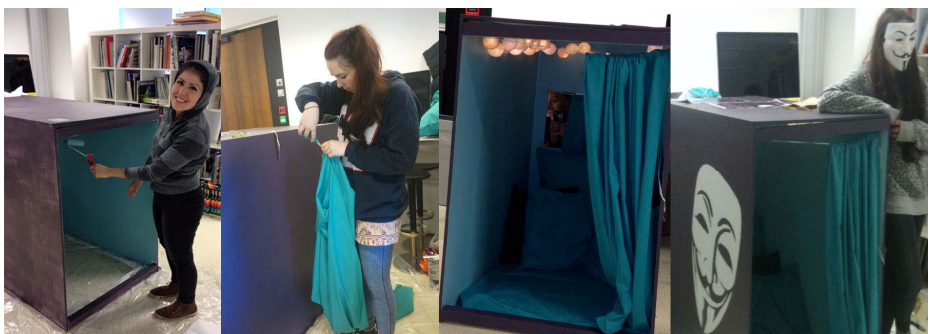
The paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, we describe the design of the booth. Section 3 describes the use of the *iConfess* during a Student Faire. Analysis of collected data, the questionnaire, confession cards and qualitative data obtained is presented in Section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2 Designing the iConfess Booth

One of the authors was a member of the design team working on the iConfess project. The idea to design a space for students came from a fellow student, a very busy lady, working while studying. She envisioned a small relaxation space with interactions around music and nature images. While brainstorming around what relaxation is and what places there are to relax in, we discussed churches, chapels, massage rooms, and other cool places that people have seen world around.

Design thinking, with rapid prototyping, focus on empathy, and abductive reasoning, was used to explore. A wooden box was used as a tangible tool for exploration. Through role-playing and paper prototyping around relaxation, it became obvious that people have vastly different ideas about what relaxes them. The box, though, was well liked. In the next iteration of scenarios, brainstorming and paper prototyping, a ‘match-making’ box, intended to support social and fun interactions, was conceived. The idea to combine the virtual and the physical came alive: people could fill an online ‘profile’ with their interests and be matched with others with similar interests. The participants’ interests were grouped in six categories, each represented by a different color of a glow-in-the-dark bracelet received after making their profile. Then it was just to smile to another person wearing the bracelet, same color for similar interest, or another color for brave souls wanting to explore differences!

As the project group dug deeper into anonymity and privacy issues around the match-making idea, the final concept with confessions emerged. It retained some aspects of previous iterations, but had a richer content, and was more in tune with the course requirements [3]. The idea of confessing was motivated by well-being effects of confession [9,16], and ‘wish for peace’ trees by Ono [12]. The size of the wooden box, now called the ‘booth’, was perfect for the purpose, reminiscent of the church confessional just the right amount. It was mobile, making it easy to move around the institute.



**Fig. 1.** Making the iConfess booth: painting the box, making curtains, floor cover and cushions, lighting, Fawkes mask symbolizing anonymity. Photos: the project team and faculty.

The interior, several soft cushions and the floor cover, was carefully designed, paying attention to colors and their effect on perception. The green color was used to invoke soothing, nature-like balance and well-being. The color purple was used on the outside, invoking the more spiritual and mystical feeling. The color also coordinated well with the color schema used for the space where the booth was to be used. The inside was painted in light green and azure color, round light spheres gave a soft light. Curtains were made to support the feeling of trust. On the booth, a Guy Fowler's mask, [14], was painted, as a symbol of anonymity, see Fig. 1.

### 3 iConfess Installation at the Student Faire

The Student Faire at the Institute of Informatics is an annual event, carefully organized by students. The Faire includes a large number of local companies presenting their work, talks, events, exhibits, games and a large party to round up the day. The Faire is always well visited by students, employees and outside guests. The iConfess booth was strategically placed by the stairs between two floors with exhibits, and thus was on the walking path for everyone visiting the Faire. In addition to this exposure, the students went around wearing Guy Fowler's masks, a symbol of anonymity, handing out a little flyer about the installation. The flyer was designed in same color tones, with a mask on it, making the booth easy to spot, even during 'rush' periods, between talks and presentations, Fig. 2, image in the middle.



**Fig. 2.** A project team member wearing the Fawkes mask, waiting for the confessant with a gift bag, two project members sharing flyers about the booth, students reading confessions. Photos: Culén.

Once someone showed an interest in the booth, they could go in and confess a secret using an iPad. The iPad was chosen because it is mobile, easy to use, and we thought, still a techno-cool, [2]. Indeed, the iPad worked without a glitch. Nobody had problems or questions about its use. Confessants wrote their confessions on a secure digital schema. When the schema was submitted, the confessions were emailed to an administrator, completely anonymously [13]. Every hour, confessions were handwritten by the administrator on a homemade cardboard and displayed at the exhibit space, on long lines of rope, fastened with cloths pins, Fig. 2, image on the right.

When a confessant was done confessing, one of the people behind the project (and the mask) handed them a gift bag, Fig. 2, the first image. The bag contained a muffin and a glow-in-the-dark bracelet. The bracelets were to be used at a social event, a party, concluding the Faire that evening. All participants who wished to fill in a short, five questions questionnaire were offered a possibility to do so.



**Fig. 3.** A confessant filling out the questionnaire, the installation space with confessions, and a person wearing their glowing bracelet at the party. Photos: Culén and Gasparini.

## 4 What We Learned from the iConfess

In what follows, we analyze the content of the confession cards first, then the data from the participant and passive observations, next the questionnaire, and finally, we provide a discussion about social interactions at the event and the overall user experience with the iConfess installation. We also consider the relationship between disclosure and privacy, and offline and online confessions.

When developing the iConfess concept, we considered the use of ‘likes’ with confession cards, which has become customary with Facebook and other social media (SM). ‘Likes’ provide interaction and excitement, making the interest of others visible. We chose not to use the ‘likes’ feature, because in the context of the Faire, people could not confess repeatedly. Not receiving likes on their confession could potentially make someone feel bad, and they could not try ‘a better confession’.

### 4.1 Confession Cards Analysis

After the Faire, we collected and worked with 49 confession cards. Some cards were written in Norwegian and some in English, see Fig. 4. For the purposes of this paper, the Norwegian text has been translated into English by the authors. We grouped the cards into four categories by topics of confessant’s concern: love, about me, ethics, and trivia. The ‘trivia’ category contains, in our judgment, confessions without large impact from the confessant, although they may be pieces of non-trivial wisdom such as “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see”. A sample of ten confessions, picked at random, is shown bellow. After each confession, we show how we categorized it (in italics).

“I kissed a girl and I liked it” (*love*)

“I miss mamma!” (*love*)

“I always think I'm fat :( ” (*about me*)

“I'm lonely” (*about me*)

“I was a shoplifter” (*ethics*)

“I have often pretended to be interested in guys I meet when I go out, just to get a free beer” (*ethics*)

“I drink cola every day for breakfast” (*trivia*)

“I only did this to get a free muffin!” (*trivia*)

“I like to dance necked in the flat” (*about me*)

“It's not what you look at that matters, its what you see” (*trivia*)

In summary, 20 of 49 confessions were categorized as *ethics*, 15 as *trivia*, 6 as *love*, and 8 as *about me*. The high number of trivial confessions may, in part, be attributed to the setting and not being certain just how anonymous it was, given that, in spite of having outside visitors, many people know each other.



**Fig. 4.** Confessions. Handwritten on homemade cardboards by the iConfess project team. Photo: Finken.

## 4.2 Observations

Both participant and passive observation were conducted during the day and passive observation during the party in the evening.

People stopped in front of the confession cards that were displayed on the string to read them, see Fig. 2, last image. Most of the visitors read all the displayed cards, and clearly showed signs of enjoyment, smiling, and frequently laughing. When there were groups of people, confessions were often read aloud and expressions like “check this one out”, “cool”, “funny” and similar, were used.

While confessing, many confessants sat inside the booth for quite a few minutes before they came out. Some commented that it was hard to come up with a secret, and others that they just enjoyed the coziness of the booth for a little while. Almost everyone who went into the booth came out commenting on how cozy it was to sit inside it. Many Faire visitors who passed by the installation did not confess, but commented on the exhibit. Some of those said that they did not have any secrets: “I am like an open book”, or “I do not have any secrets”. One visitor explained that he

had issues with claustrophobia, but he wanted to confess anyway, which he did outside the booth.

As the number of confession cards increased through the day, the interest in the confession cards, and confessing, also increased. We could observe some people putting the glow-in-the-dark bracelets on, intended for the evening, right away. In the evening however, only four people had bracelets on, in addition to all the students taking our course in advanced interaction design. Since many students were familiar with each other, it was hard for the observer to tell if any had started conversing because of the bracelets. So, at the party, we had neither the critical mass of strangers, nor the bracelet wearers.

### 4.3 Questionnaire Analysis

The students who designed the confession booth, as pointed out in Section 2, used design practices and design thinking, and did not involve others than themselves in the design process. It was, thus, of interest to evaluate the installation. We made a simple questionnaire with five questions, which would not take much time to answer, but would give us an indication about how the users experienced the act of confession and the booth, see Fig. 3. The questions we asked were: 1) Have you ever disclosed a personal secret on Social Media? Place a cross by all that apply: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Your own blog. 2) If the answer to question 1 was yes, was it easier to use the confession booth than other social media to tell a personal secret? (yes/no answer) 3) How easy was it to tell a secret inside the booth? (Likter scale, 1-8, 1 not easy at all) 4) Are you a student, a researcher, an employee, a visitor (place an X) 5) Do you have anything else you would like to share about iConfess?

Thus, one of the aims with the questionnaire was to gain understanding about relationships between disclosure and privacy and offline and online sharing of secrets, in relation to the exhibit. The answers to question 3) gave indication of participant's emotional response. In their answer to the open question 5), several confessants have addressed other issues, such as aesthetics of the booth. In this way, we could say, the outcome of questionnaire came to stand as an evaluation of the concept as a whole.

We first take a closer look at the answers we got to the open question: "*Do you have anything you would like to share about iConfess?*" The answers to this question contain semi-qualitative data, which give a bit more detailed insights into how the confessants related to the booth (*aesthetics*), to confessing (*emotions*), and to anonymity issues (*privacy*). As with the confessions above, we provide a sample of 10 answers, translated and categorized, category written in italics.

"Nice booth :)" (*aesthetics*)

"The booth was cozy with modern decor – happy lights and all that. Nice idea! :-)" (*aesthetics + emotions*)

"It's very nice to sit in that calming box and think. Confessions rock :-)" (*aesthetics + emotions*)

"I think it is a fun idea." (*emotions*)

"It was cool" (*emotions*)

"I was fun and serious!" (*emotions*)

“Exiting!! And scary!” (*emotions*)

“It was very difficult to write a secret” (*emotions*)

“I have never post a personal secret in social media but I think in Confession booth it's so much easier to tell your secret because you are anonymous” (*privacy*)

“On SM, one still has clear identity. The booth is giving a feeling of privacy. But I do not know exactly if anyone can find out who I am” (*privacy*)

What we can learn from the answers above, is that disclosure is closely connected to emotions such as exiting, scary, fun, serious, and so on. Further, emotions and aesthetics were woven together in some of the answers we received, for example: “It's very nice to sit in that calming box and think. Confessions rock :-)” and “The booth was cozy with modern decor – happy lights and all that. Nice idea! :-)”. Such weavings fall along the line of reasoning, which initially was part of the relaxation box concept, and which may indicate that the well-being effect was supported through the act of confession.

Addressing the first two questions, most of the participants did disclose a secret using the SM before: 15 disclosed on the Facebook, 10 on Snapchat, 4 on Twitter and 6 in their own blog. 25 participants thought that using the booth was easier, 5 opted for other SM, 16 left the question blank and 1 was undecided.

For the Likter scale question 3), the average was 6.02. Some of the lowest scores were given by faculty (out of seven faculty members, three gave scores of 2, 2 and 4, outside visitors gave scores of 5, 5 and 8, and university employees 7, 8 and 8). The evaluation given by 34 students averaged 6.98. Two persons did not answer the question 4).

Taking into consideration the results from the questionnaire and our observations, we can conclude that the majority of the participants at iConfess liked to reveal a secret to the public in this manner. They also liked the installation as a whole.

On the other hand, the use of bracelets at the party did not fulfill its purpose as an icebreaker. As mentioned in Section 3, only four, other than the students in the class, had them on. Since many students are acquainted with each other, it was hard for the observant to tell if any have started conversations because of the bracelets. So, at the party, we had neither the critical mass of strangers, nor the bracelet wearers, Fig. 3.

Being in the physical booth, while revealing secrets through an online channel, the iPad, creates an interesting relationship between the private and the public. The booth itself, is placed in the public, yet the inner space of the booth created a safe environment for confessing. Although the project group, to the best of their knowledge and skills, had secured anonymity, it was not possible to forget the public sphere: “On SM, one still has clear identity. The booth is giving a feeling of privacy. But I do not know exactly if anyone can find out who I am”. The issue of having a private thought, released in physical form, so that by passers can engage with it and openly discuss it, creates an interesting area of tension between disclosure and privacy and between offline and online sharing of secrets. This area of tension we could call social interaction 2.0. We choose this term because the handwritten confessions on the cardboards attracted attention, made Faire-goes converse about the secrets and the booth itself, and, motivated others to share their secrets. The latter claim is based on



our observations. At the same time, the secrets, we believe, would not have been revealed to the public without the concealing act performed by the secure digital schema, which was anonymously forwarded by email to an administrator. With the mix of offline and online settings, thus, it became possible to bring together disclosure and privacy more intimately, and, support revelations on the same physical location. This aspect distinguishes our work from online sites such as Whisper and PostSecret [17,19], or the artwork by Chang [20].

## 5 Conclusion

An installation, iConfess, was made and used during a large public event at the institute. Students, faculty, employees and outside visitors alike, could confess a secret in the privacy of the booth, using a secure digital schema. In one-hour time intervals confessions were downloaded by administering students, handwritten and exhibited for all to see. This interplay between the digital and the physical was interesting, especially because it took place at a work place, where many confessants are acquainted with each other. iConfess also gave an opportunity for people, who confessed, to interact, of course, without knowing what they confessed. The interplay of the private and public spaces as they relate to the act of confession was interesting. Confessants have found the booth to be easy to use and, certainly not more difficult than using social media.

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