

Nicola Atkinson-Griffith's "Secrets of the World"

Introduced and Edited by
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The following eight comments discuss, more or less explicitly, an art project undertaken by Nicola Atkinson-Griffith entitled "Secrets of the World". Perhaps it needs explaining why *Homo Oeconomicus*, a quarterly journal which focuses on economics and the social sciences, should be interested in publishing on such a subject. One argument is that although the concept of secret has, by-and-large, been ignored by the theoretical literature in economics and the social sciences, in the real world, secrets seem to be an important phenomenon.

Of course, when it comes to discussing secrets, economists would immediately point to the bulk of literature on asymmetric information, signaling, moral hazard and adverse selection which has been honored by the award of the 2001 Nobel Prize to three of its pioneer contributors: George Akerlof, Michael Spence and Joseph Stiglitz. Indeed these concepts could be applied to analyze secret as phenomenon. Yet, I strongly hope that the following contributions make clear that there is more to a secret than just asymmetric information: secrets can be dangerous, beautiful, exiting, immoral; secrets can hurt and please; secrets can be shared. Secrets are produced, sold, and bought and should therefore be accessible to economic analysis. However, secrets are peculiarly strange goods and the incomplete definition of property rights seems to be part of their nature.¹ I may hand a secret in a sealed envelop to you and you may carry this envelope to the other side of the globe. Still I can destroy this secret by publishing the information which is sealed in the envelope. But it could also be that there is no information in the envelope and you merely think that you carry a secret with you.

To integrate the analysis of the secrecy phenomenon with an art project seems to be promising perspective. Artists have a long and intensive tradition to work with secrets and many artists made a secret out of their art. Nicola Atkinson-Griffith has chosen a rather direct approach: she made use of the myth of secret by asking people to write down their personal, private and public secrets. (For further procedural details

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¹See the definition by Sofia Blind, this volume.

about her project, see Holler in this volume.) Her project stirred substantial discussion, especially when put on stage in different places.

The following eight contributions reflect only a smaller part of this discussion. The contributions are reproduced in the order of their submission. This detail might be of some importance because the authors of later contributions have received versions of earlier contributions and therefore had a chance to react on them. It is, however, not always obvious that this material had been read.

The contributors were chosen from a network which gravitates around the Institute of SocioEconomics of the University of Hamburg and the, so far only of virtually existing ARTS&Games Academy. Further contributions on "Secret of the World" are expected to be published in "Scandal and Its Theory II", forthcoming as *Homo Oeconomicus* XIX(2) in 2002. Special thanks go to Ben Spencer who initiated this verbalization of the discussion (see next page), to John Sedgwick who commented the material that follows, and to Nicola Atkinson-Griffith.

Dear Manfred,

I warned you that I would be asking you to write a short essay on Nicola Atkinson-Griffith's project '*Secrets of the World*' which Nicola has summarised as follows:

Secrets of the World (1996-present: Hamburg, Germany/Karachi, Pakistan/world-wide): Atkinson-Griffith asks people to write down personal, private and public secrets. These are kept in the possession of the artist until her death. The work is participatory on a global scale and begins to explore the notion that work does not need to be based in any particular location. It is not the secret which is of interest, but the act of participation itself to create a shared, unified community which underpins this project. Crucial to this process is the trust invested in the artist that the secrets will not be disclosed.

The essay is likely to be between 1,500 - 2,000 words long and I would ask you to concentrate on the issues raised in the short project description above - if possible in the context of Nicola's practice. A brief artist's statement is copied below. I believe this project is a fundamental summation of Nicola's practice and illustrates her careful interaction with individuals to underpin each project she has undertaken to date. And yet there is no final 'product' in this work.

The deadline for completion of the essay is 29th June 2001, although if you can get a draft to me by the beginning of June it would be very much appreciated. Please let me know whether you are able to write this piece as soon as possible.

Nicola is currently in Los Angeles where she was invited to create a city-wide public artwork entitled 'A Piece of Sky'. A website will be launched in the summer to accompany this project and Nicola has asked me to co-ordinate these essays on her work to place on the website. It is possible funds will also be available to publish this collection of essays.

If you want to discuss this proposal further, please contact me. With many thanks and very best wishes. I'm sure Nicola will write something in return - email her!

Best wishes, Ben

Nicola Atkinson-Griffith - artist's statement:

My work questions people's perception of their environment. I produce frameworks of ideas which enable the public to contemplate other views of the world. I present thoughts, questions and concepts which gently challenge the safe and familiar cocoon within which we each tend to embed ourselves. The human need to feel protected can limit our outlook and blind us to the remarkable aspects of life which surround us.

Introduction to practice: Atkinson-Griffith initiates projects which use participation as a process to realise her work, but this approach is not community art. Neither does the work impose itself on the community in which Atkinson-Griffith is working, but evolves from the participatory process. The thread running through all her projects is the creation of temporary communities, existing or fabricated, in order to pursue the links that bind established, or disparate, worlds together. Atkinson-Griffith establishes an idea to explore a particular community and then works intimately with its people to elicit contributions to the project; perhaps an object, a likeness or a memory. It is important this involvement is not coerced and that participation in the project is entirely voluntary. This process of gathering is itself an artwork and is fundamental to Atkinson-Griffith's practice.

The actual donation is not of particular interest, rather it is the act of participation which is crucial to underpin each project, to add meaning to the work and to create a shared, unified experience. In exchange for this involvement, Atkinson-Griffith clearly outlines her role and what contributors can expect to gain from the project. A key part of the process is that anyone involved does not feel they have been either misrepresented or used in any way.

Shall I Give You My Secret? An ARTS&Games Reconsideration

by

Manfred J. Holler*

In 1996, I had the pleasure to organise and to attend the Oberseminar at the University of Hamburg when Nicola Atkinson-Griffith asked the participants to write down their personal, private and public secrets. More recently, I took the liberty to replicate Nicola's work at the occasion of a seminar on guru management which I gave to students of jewelry making at the Technisk Skole at Copenhagen. I will also ask for the secrets in a course of interactive decision making which I will teach to the marketing managers of a major European ice cream producer in two weeks from today.

I have to confess that I did not ask for Nicola's permission to replicate her work but I do not feel guilty. Pieces of art belong to the public - at least, the ideas, questions and experiences which they provide. More specifically, a constituent element of Nicola's work is the discussion which it stirs and the questions which it induces. Replications are a means to find answers to the questions and new arguments for the discussion. Of course, I refer to Nicola as the inventor of the original experiment. In the sequel I will present some corresponding facts and interpretations. I will start with some observations related to the Hamburg experiment, then discuss the Copenhagen replication and conclude with an interpretation of the results.

1. The Hamburg experiment

The Hamburg experiment of 1996 is described in other contributions to this volume. I only want to add some background information. There were close to 40 participants at the Oberseminar. This was at least double the number of the regular seminar sessions which are on economic theory, or, more specifically, on economic model building and game theory. More than 10 participants were attracted by the fact that an artist presented some material; they would not attend the Oberseminar on issues of economics.

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Another 10 participants were doctorate students of economics from various institutes. They were attracted by the expectation to spend two hours with problems which do not have an obvious relation to their regular work. They were trapped by their curiosity - the curiosity which is the heart of research work. The rest of the participants were people connected as members, guests, external or former Ph.D. students to the Institute of SocioEconomics which was responsible for the Oberseminar's programme. It might be important to consider the heterogeneity of the participants for the interpretation of what follows.

After Nicola's lecture on some of her previous art work, which was supported by Alan and a senile slide projector, she distributed to each participant a sheet of paper with the three categories personal, private and public secret type-written on it together with a greyish green envelop. The envelops were donated by the Institute of Socio-Economics and looked very bureaucratic. Immediately, discussions started between neighbouring participants as to the difference between public, private and personal secrets. After a while the bilateral discussions turned into multilateral discussions and in the end there was a general discussion which ended with Nicola asking for a resolution. Most participants appeared satisfied by Nicola's response.

Only then the discussion started whether the secrets were safe with Nicola. There were no doubts expressed that Nicola would try to keep the envelops closed and keep the secrets secret, however, does she have the ultimate *power* to do so? What if she gets robbed on her way back to Scotland, or if somebody broke into her home while she is in California? The general conclusion was that Nicola might guarantee that the secrets will be kept secret but that there was a very small probability that she might fail.

The discussion then moved on to the quest for secrets. Isn't such a question tasteless, impolite or even immoral? Why not asking for something else? However, nobody - even days after - could think of something equivalent to secrets. Ask yourself this question and you will have the same experience.

A branch of the discussion led some participants to discuss the nature of information as complementary to secret. For example, it was argued that one can destroy the secrets in the greyish-green envelops, as locked away in a steel box in Glasgow, by making the information in the envelops public knowledge. (I was thinking of exam questions which are a secret only up to the exam day when the secret is destroyed.) Discussion about asymmetric and private information, which are basic concept of modern microeconomics, continued to dominate lunch conversations for several weeks - in connection with questions of trust and power.

Slightly more than half of the participants returned a closed envelop to Nicola. Some of the other half claimed that they abstained because they could not solve the classification into public, private and personal secret. Others felt like under a shock: they could not cope with being asked to write down their secrets. I had the impression

that the number of abstentions and the arguments which supported this reaction could not be differentiated between the group of economists, trained in rational choice modelling, and the other participants with no similar training. However, I have to admit that I did no survey analysis on these reactions and cannot claim scientific status for this observation. I felt myself much too involved and some arguments became only clear days after. Needless to say that my curiosity was not satisfied and I took the next opportunity, however, five years later, to replicate Nicola's work on secrets.

2. The Copenhagen replication

Sten Bülow Bredsted² arranged that I led an 8-hour seminar on guru management with master students of jewelry making at the Technisk Skole at Copenhagen on February 20-21, 2001. It was felt that the students should become aware of the interactive relationships in which they and their work is embedded and get some training to succeed in their social nexus. We discussed the concepts of strategies, players, and preferences and looked for Nash equilibria in Prisoners' Dilemma games and the Battle of the Sexes.³ We learnt that it was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) who invented the sealed-bid second-price auction and that its remarkable properties were first analyzed by the late William Vickery who was not only awarded a Nobel Prize for this work but also gave his name for this type of auction.⁴ We also learnt how to share property when we get divorced or inherit a house, a garden, a model T car and a dog jointly with our brothers and sisters.⁵ Trust, reputation, morality were reduced to rational choices and the forming of corresponding beliefs (i.e., assessments). It seemed that all members were quite happy with this perspective - at least, in class room.

Things changed dramatically when after more than seven hours of the seminar about rational thinking I asked the students to write down their personal, private and public secrets. Of course, I promised not to look into the greyish envelops, and to defend the sealed envelops with all my strength until my last day. In the end, only 4 out of the 8 seminar participants gave me their sealed envelops. All of them argued that this was a real challenge and some of them considered it an immoral demand to ask them for their secrets.

²Danish artist, prominent member of the ARTS&Games group and master student of jewelry making at the Technisk Skole at Copenhagen.

³Those who are not afraid of basic mathematics can look into Binmore (1992) for further information. Dixit and Nalebuff (1991) contains a less technical introduction to game theory with a high value of entertainment.

⁴See Moldovanu and Tietzel (1998) for further details.

⁵See Brams and Taylor (1996) for rules and recipes.

It took quite some time until the waves of emotions calmed down and we could start to discuss a game-theoretical approach to analyze the various strings of expectations, mistrust and rejection. In the end, it was felt that situations of conflicting interests and expectations tended to be less threatening to friendly or successful social interaction when interpreted as a game and transformed into game models, which we then tried to solve either by applying game theoretical reasoning or by doing simulations, i.e., playing games.

3. Towards a game-theoretical interpretation

In its most abstract form, a game is defined by the set of players, by the sets of strategies from which each player can choose his or her plan of action, and by the payoffs of the players which express their interests in the game. *Nicola's Game of the Secrets* (the NGS) is characterised by the fact that the set of players is ill defined: in general, we know the interviewer and the respondents. However, making secrets known may imply bringing new players indirectly into the game, for example, through activating those agents who share the secrets or are even objects of the secrets. Furthermore, there is no perfect guarantee that the envelopes will not be opened.

By the design of the game, it is as not clear what the interviewer will do with the secrets - in addition to keeping them secret. Will he or she exhibit the secrets in a public space, or incorporate them in his or her art work, or just simply lock them in his or her steel box? Is it in his or her interest to inform others that he or she has the secrets or will he or she open the envelopes one day in the dark room - or destroy them unopened? Let's assume that she wants to have the secrets and to be in the position to show them when asked to do so.

The payoffs and interests of the respondents are even less obvious. For those who have decided to return a sealed envelop, the social pressure of the situation causing them to obey an instruction or to support science or art seems to be a major motivation. Some confessed, however, that they enjoyed writing down their secrets and that they felt better after. Obviously, however, neither the social pressure of the situation nor the possibility of a mental sensation is sufficient to convince everybody to follow the temptation of submitting secrets. Moreover, there is no guarantee that those who contributed a sealed envelop actually wrote a secret on their sheet. There is no proof at all that they contributed a secret or that the secret they contributed was a lie, and not a secret. (Note that a secret has to do with truth, information, etc.) This has to be considered when we discuss the strategies of the respondents. The contents of their writing cannot be controlled before sealing *and* hence for, as long as the envelop is sealed. This is implicit to asking for secrets and promising to keep them secret. All that could

be observed, depending on the setting of the experiment, is whether a respondent contributed a sealed envelop or not.

It seems that the set of strategies for the interviewer and the respondent are very large and difficult to define. There are however prominent strategies which are candidates for an equilibrium such that no player can improve his position by choosing an alternative strategy, *given* the strategy choices of the other players. A strategy combination which satisfies this condition is called a Nash equilibrium.⁶ Note that it implies that the strategies are mutually best replies to each other. Obviously, to write down the weather report of yesterday, or another story of no information and no interest, and the decision not to open the sealed envelopes are such mutually best replies which have, in addition, the nice property that they do not invite new players.

As soon as this solution was accepted by the participants in the Copenhagen seminar, they were less critical of me asking for their secrets. They admitted that it takes more than an 8-hour seminar to internalise interactive thinking in a way such that it cannot be challenged by "immoral" demands such as writing down secrets.

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⁶See Binmore (1992) for a discussion of this solution concept. In 1994, John Nash received a Nobel Prize for his work in game theory which builds on the equilibrium concept which carries his name.

Giving Up Secrets by Moving in the 'Right Direction':
Nicola's Game Revisited

by
John Sedgwick*

It is not at all clear to me that the game-theoretic template that Manfred Holler imposes on the social situation, described in his article on Nicola Atkinson-Griffith's experiment in gathering secrets reports from an unsuspecting audience, works. My critique, based on the limited information that Holler presents, concerns the nature of the interaction between the players and or the players and the interviewer, who from this point shall be called the *principal*. I argue two things: first, that as set up *Nicola's Game* is hardly a game in that the players behave independently of one another; and secondly, that the divided behaviour of the players indicates not multiple equilibria as suggested by Holler but random outcomes. My explanation for this is that the behaviour of the players is the result of a cognitive process about an intimate subject (holding secrets) that is likely to be deeply felt and involve a set of highly complex personal (and probably secret) considerations. The players, when asked to declare a secret, each bring to the shared moment their unique histories and memories. I am reminded of Hayek's retort to Schumpeter in his famous 1945 paper 'The Use of Knowledge in Society':

Any approach, such as that of much of mathematical economics with its simultaneous equations, which in effect starts from the assumption that people's knowledge corresponds with the objective facts of the situation, systematically leaves out what is our main task to explain.⁷

Holler, reports on a game he conducted (in the role of *principal*) with a group of post-graduate students (jewellery makers from the Technisk Skole) in Copenhagen in February 2001. In his account of the proceedings he outlined at least four emotional envi-

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⁷Hayek (1971, p. 30).

ronments confronting the participants: a) the reasons why individuals hold secrets; b) the type of secrets that are held; c) the extent to which the secrets are shared with others; d) the consequences for the others of their not knowing those secrets, before he examined the various responses of the participants to a fifth environment: (e) his request for one or more of their secrets. From these complex and fraught circumstances Holler examines the potential for rational choice and in particular a model of behaviour which leads to a steady-state, known to economists as a *Nash equilibrium*, in which decision makers, knowing already the strategies of the other players, choose that strategy which maximises their pay-off.

Whilst it is clear that the strategies available to the participants were twofold: to divulge, or not to divulge, a secret, the rewards (payoffs) for divulgence were opaque. If participants wished their secrets to remain secret - if there were no positive payoffs to divulging a secret - then their willingness to divulge their secrets involved them in an action for which the potential of regret through leakage was present. In a rational environment, no regret (by not divulging) is superior to some probability of regret (by divulging). In *Nicola's Game* the 'not to divulge' strategy dominated. On the assumption that disutility is the outcome of a secret becoming known, there are no circumstances in which the pay-off from divulging a secret would be more desirable than that from not divulging. Indeed, in this sense *Nicola's Game* is not a game at all in that each individual will take the same action irrespective of the decisions taken by the other players, or indeed the *principal*. The assumptions that are necessary for a *Nash equilibrium* to hold are irrelevant to the outcome. There is no interdependency factor in operation.

So, why then did some of the participants proffer one or more secrets? Holler suggests a number of motives but acknowledges that he did not conduct a systematic post-game survey. It would seem that individual participants had a variety of motives for their behaviour. Perhaps some believed that the utility they might derive by pleasing the *principal* would exceed any regret they might suffer from divulgence.⁸ If this were case the objectives of the players differed in that, controlling for the gravity of those secrets held by the participants, some were more responsive to the *principal's* needs than others. From this it would appear that each player had a distinctive utility profile, resulting in as many different pay-off combinations as there were players. Where independence prevails - A's choice is not affected by the strategies adopted by B Z - this level of potential complexity is not a factor in the decision making process.

Under what conditions then can interdependency be introduced into *Nicola's Game*? How might Nash equilibrium be arrived at? Suppose that a reward (such as a grant) were to be offered to those players adopting a divulgence strategy. If that reward were large enough to compensate for the regret suffered by every participant,

⁸This would be particularly likely if the secret was of an inconsequential nature.

the game would again be uninteresting in that divulgence would now become the dominant strategy for each of the participants, irrespective of the others. But, what if only the first participant to divulge was rewarded in this way? Given a common belief that at least one person would pursue the reward pay-off, for whatever reason, risk adverse players (those not prepared to take an even gamble) would choose not to divulge their secrets. In such a case no single strategy dominates the other. For player A, divulgence generates a reward when either, a) other players fail to divulge, or b) do so at a later moment, but it generates a measure of regret when another player divulges first. The same is true for the other players. Each player's strategy is predicated upon the expected behaviour of at least one other.

Now where does this leave *Nicola's Game*? Rather than it being a question of the validity of the steady state proposed by Holler, I think *Nicola's Game* is difficult to locate within a game-theoretic framework for two reasons: a) each of the players has a distinctive set of pay-offs which are not fully known to others - information was asymmetrically distributed between the players in that each person's motives and pay-offs were subjectively formed (not deducible from a set of explicit rules linked to a tariff of payoffs) and privately (i.e., secretly) held; and b) the conditions under which the game was played meant that the players were independent of one another - for each, the respective payoffs to either strategy was not affected by strategies adopted by the other players or indeed the principal.

In many ways the players of *Nicola's Game* resemble consumers in product markets. They exist in large numbers and bring to each transaction a personal history, which in its particular make-up is unique. They are clearly affected by advertising information but not uniformly - after all most new brands launched into first world markets fail. Elsewhere, I have written about this consumption process in the context of filmgoers Sedgwick (2000, ch.1, 2001). In my opinion the focus of *Nicola's Game* should be the specific time and place of the action/decision, to which participants bring their own personal and complex set of circumstances, part of which may be common to family, social group and social class, but all of which cannot be known to others.

In his 1945 article, referred to earlier, Hayek argued that there are two categories of economic knowledge. First, he identified scientific knowledge, which he took to be that knowledge necessary in the planning, organisation and distribution of production. Hayek, however, was truly sceptical about the ability of the large organisations (monopolies) and the State in particular ability to meet individual needs. This was because a single brain could not hope to investigate and comprehend the diversity of human needs encapsulated in his second form of knowledge; namely, 'knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place'. For Hayek (1971, p. 20):

... practically every individual has some advantage over all others because he possesses unique information of which beneficial use might be made, but of which use can be made only if the decisions depending on it are left to him or are made with his active co-operation.

However, in making a contrast with the information needs required by a central planning authority, Hayek maintained that the aggregation of this knowledge was unnecessary for the economic system to work effectively. Following Adam Smith, Hayek believed that the *invisible hand* of the price mechanism was sufficient to co-ordinate the effective allocation of resources through changes in relative prices. He wrote (Hayek, 1971, p.26):

The marvel is that in a case like that of a scarcity of one raw material, without an order being issued, without more than perhaps a handful of people knowing the cause, tens of thousands of people whose identities could not be ascertained by months of investigation, are made to use the material or its products more sparingly; that is, they move in the right direction.

In the same way that the central planning authority cannot know the secrets of its people so too the *principal* in *Nicola's Game* cannot know the 'the particular circumstances of time and place' of each participant. Secrets are a particularly complex form of human knowledge. Given that the motives of the *principal* were also secret it is perhaps surprising that any of the participants were prepared to give him one of their personal secrets. The fact that they did suggests that factors unknown to us were at work: they could not be deduced from the axioms of game theory. Whilst the reasons why some participants chose to divulge secrets to the *principal* might be the subject of further investigation into the social psychology of the group, and perhaps become 'scientific' knowledge as a result, this does not lead to the conclusion that the decisions that were made at the moment when the game was played were other than randomly dispersed about the two strategies. It may well be the case, however, that the *principal* might secure the secrets he desires through a reward mechanism. These rewards may be beneficial or coercive and may be thought of as *shadow prices*. It is likely that as the *principal* raises the price, increasing numbers of participants will move in what Hayek terms the 'right direction' and reveal their secrets.

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The Secrets of Small Worlds

by

Leonard Dudley*

The Secret Game is intriguing. In effect, what Nicola Atkinson-Griffith is asking players to submit is their willingness to participate in the creation of information networks. Interestingly, the three categories of information prescribed in the game - personal, private and public - correspond approximately to the three basic network structures, namely, distributed, decentralized and centralized, respectively, illustrated in Figure 1. Personal information would be a binary link between the participant and the experimenter, the basic element of a distributed network. Private information might be shared with a small group of people who have confidence in one another, the characteristic of a decentralized network. And public information is the material that might be collected by some coordinator in a centralized network. In effect, the player is confronted in turn with her confessor, her friends and society at large.

In addition, Ms. Atkinson-Griffith is prescribing the communications medium that must be used in the network, namely writing in the local vernacular. As McLuhan's famous aphorism, "The medium is the message", suggests, responses might be sensitive to this choice. How might people answer if communication were electronic through e-mail messages with some credible restriction on the destination? Might they react differently if all communication were oral, to a confessor, to a small group or to a large audience. Illustration with hand drawings might yield yet another variety of information.

Unfortunately, there is not quite enough structure in the experiment as it stands. The player might like to know what the three categories personal, private and public really mean. Yet at the same time, the experimenter, may be imposing too many constraints. Why should she guarantee the same degree of confidentiality to each category of response? Public information might be treated differently from personal informa-

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tion. She is also very demanding in the amount of information she is asking players to donate. It might be enough to ask them to declare their willingness to donate to the three types of networks, with their responses remaining anonymous if the player so desires.

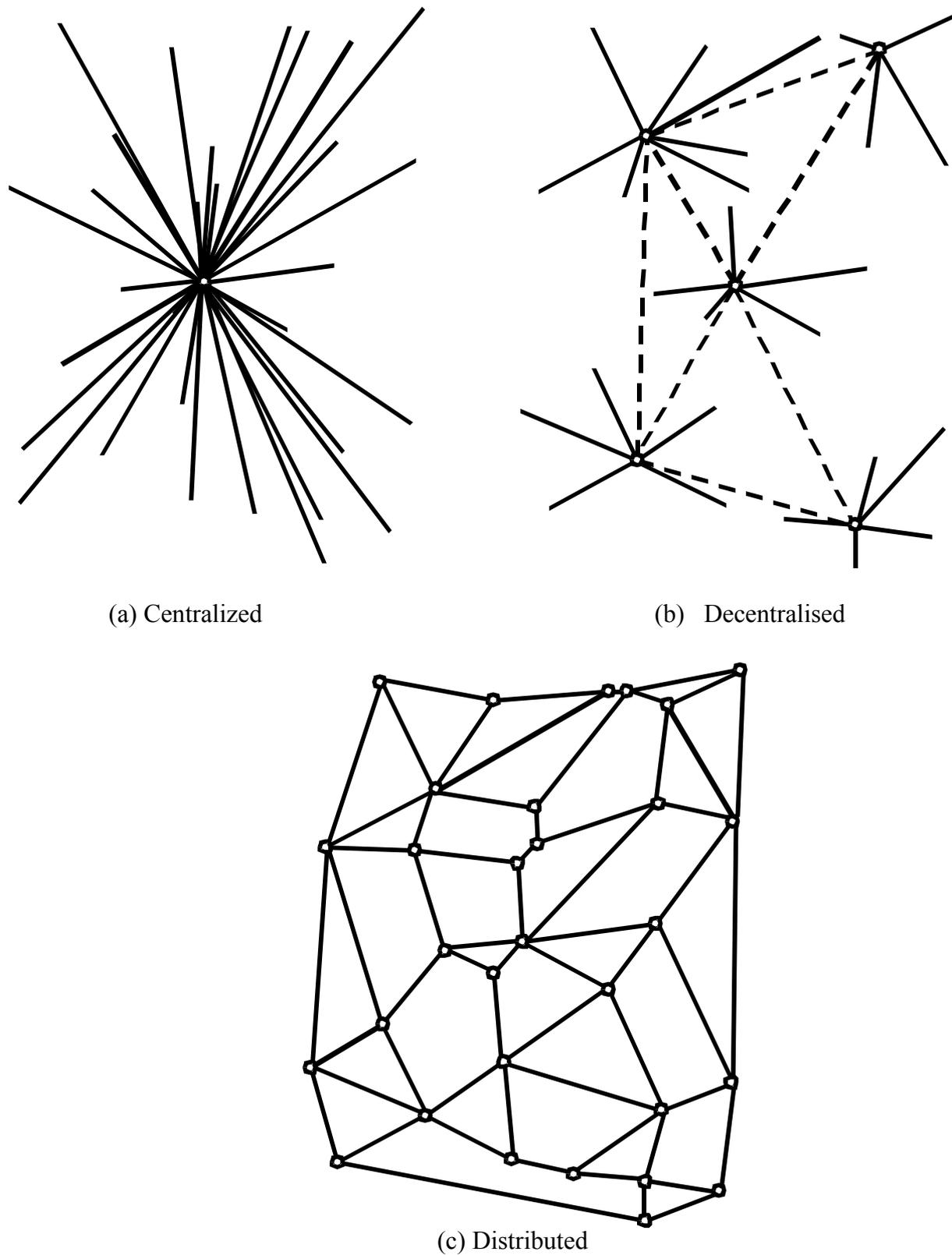


Figure 1. Three network structures

It would be very interesting to observe whether responses to the experimenter's provocation differ across societies. To function, as Fukuyama (1996) has explained, societies require trust. The Secret game might provide a possible measure of this trust. The

intensity of the willingness to communicate in each of the three categories provides a measure of the degree to which this trust dissipates as the social distance from the player increases. Presented in this way, one sees the importance to the game of the experimenter herself and the strength of her bonds with the players. In the end, the value of the experiment is perhaps to bring to each player's attention that at any given moment, he is at the center of his own unique community. Within this community, as Wellman (1988) has observed, he has different types of relations with many other "citizens". Most crucially, the links in this community have different degrees of permanence. In particular, those that are built in the course of the seminar are evanescent, momentarily intense, but quickly extinguished. It is perhaps the basic characteristic of our time that duration of the links in our communities is gradually decreasing. While on a given day we may still interact with as many people as did the residents in a medieval town, many of these links are fleeting, not to be repeated.

Viewed from the standpoint of the society as a whole, the facility with which information circulates has tremendous impact on the cost of contracting. Watts and Strogatz (1998) have demonstrated that efficient information flow does not require everyone to be linked to everyone else. The insertion of a few random links across a set of stations, as Ms. Atkinson-Griffith does in her game, may be sufficient to transform isolated neighborhoods into a "small world".

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Notes from the Pit

by

Joanna Hoffmann*

All of us remember the story of King Midas's barber, the man who could not keep his master's secret. He dug a small hole in the ground and whispered it out. We know the consequences. Since then the little pit has been changing its forms and dimensions. It used to be a little point at the top of a needle with a hundred devils in it. It assumed the shape of a perfect sphere or other geometrical figures. It became an amorphous amoeba spreading its appendixes. Finally a trivial dimple has developed into a black hole swallowing everything what balances on the edge of the horizon of events.

A pit, from its very beginning, was also a secret. We dig holes. We fall into holes. There are as many traps as shelters. A secret radiates dividing people into those who know and those who don't. Though there is yet another category: those who believe they know. Mostly we believe we know. However what when this believe is suspended?

The rationalism of a secret has its cognitive method. It introduces a distrust of the image of the world, how we see it in the first impulse. Justness of what we hear, the truth of what we see and function of objects we handle, are put into a question. The effect of this distrust is an intensive discernment. One can notice that any creative effort starts by an impulse from the edge of knowledge.

A consciousness of a secret becomes more important than a secret itself. It permeates cells of our bodies, the crevices of our brains. It joins us with the world, with others and our-selves. A secret itself occurs as a relation which implies significance. It is waiting each time for its referent to be supplied. Something we choose from the continuum of our reality starts to matter. We want to matter. We tend to keep our secrets but we are unhappy, when there is no hole we can whisper them into. We don't want them however to be whispered in every ear (King Midas's case). We want to protect what we value and we want to control it. We want to use our secrets as tools or weapons or as artefacts in mutual exchange. People who gave Nicola Atkinson-Griffith their secrets did not get much in return. The artist did not give them her secret. The control was shifted. Author's rights were introduced.

I have imagined the collection created as a result of the project: a strange archive which is worth Kafka's dream. Thousands of grey envelopes filling up shelves, drawers, boxes. Unimportant carriers of vulnerable inside. Registered and listed. "Secrets of the World" sealed by the artist's sworn statements. We do not know whether they point

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at some "objective" secret or intimate truth or just reveal a content of somebody's pocket. The sense of these standardized items realizes itself not in the relation to something external, but in tensions between them; one to another and yet to another and yet another They perform as testimonies and embodiments of little fragments of the world (in each case different) which we create and share with.

The individual messages gathered by Nicola Atkinson-Griffith, have been inscribed in a system of gathering and ordering data adopted from administrative procedures. The strategy used by the artist reveals a direct and mutual invasion of one reality into another (administrative, social, scientific, artistic and intimate realities). The project ascertains it as well as provokes. People who got involved, show a deep belief in values carried by art and science. They contributed their secrets not because of personal gratification but for sake of art (which shifts the secrets to the level of a metaphor) or science (which turns them to a part of wider experiment). Nevertheless discussions has been raised and important questions posed.

Is this a game? According to the Columbia Encyclopaedia "a game consists of a set of rules governing a competitive situation in which two or more individuals or groups attempt to maximize their own winnings or minimize those of their opponents".

Is art a game? It is difficult to answer positively to that question. Nevertheless this term can help us to understand how art and mechanisms which manipulate it function.

Talking about art we could however use the word "a play" in a sense introduced by *Friedrich von Schiller* in his "Letters on aesthetic education". For him the ideal of a human being realizes itself through playing. A play he understood as an activity far from "empty games played by a practical man" and closer to the "art of life". A play gives us experience of freedom and creativity. We learn that freedom is our personal matter; it depends on us and gives us questions to answer. It can become a burden, something uneasy since it introduces a responsibility for each gesture we make. We have to resolve the rules of play we invented. It is us to decide what to do with this immensity of freedom. Which deeds are correct. Art seems to be a play which is transformed into reality.

However, modes of articulation and presence of art in the world are not so clear. The Polish artist Jaroslaw Kozlowski proposes to imagine three concentric rings. The first one would be the domain of reality, both social and material, such as we experience it. The second would be the domain of art as it is usually conceived. The third one would also involve art, but understood quite differently. The relationship between the first and the second ring is rather well understood. Art is dependent upon reality as its image, projection, commentary, language, utopia or - as Beuys would have it - universal "social therapy". Reality authenticates art, art in return introduces order and gives metaphysical dimension to reality. The third zone is an area of artistic freedom, not bound by conventions or aspirations to achieve some commercial, propaganda or ideological aims. Here an artist has entire freedom in the choice of material and meth-

ods to realize his statement. This ring contains elements of the first ring and the second. Yet they are not "borrowings" and do not depend on a context from which they were taken. They often look "the same" but their status and different internal relations between them make for the fact that they are neither themselves from the domain of reality nor their "representations" or "alteration" from the domain of art. According to Kozłowski "they assume a different identity, and with it they regain their lost dignity". This transformation undertaken by an artist has an ethic dimension and is based on a deep respect towards both objective and animated worlds.

The 1927 public confronted Marcel Duchamp's "Porte, 11 rue Larrey Paris". An ordinary door was fastened with hinges to two adjacent embrasures. It was closing one space while opening the other, separating people from themselves, from art and from reality. Unexpectedly the inside was turning into the outside and vice versa. A viewer got invited to participate in the process of mutual disclosures.

Seventy years later, Martin Creed put a doorstep behind the door to one galleries in London, allowing it to get open to 45%. This "work no 115" cannot be read only as an ironic gesture. It underlines that the entrance (and exit) from the area of art is neither comfortable nor automatic. There is no more passive audience. Each of us has to decide individually whether to join the play we are offered. The play full of secrets, as the whole world we live in. "For everything which is visible, there is a copy of that which is hidden". These words pronounced by the eminent video artist Gary Hill echoes ancient, Platonian ideas. It seems however that there are no more originals, copies or shadows but never-ending process of transformation of one qualities into another.

Some time ago a little girl from the neighborhood, took me to the corner of the court. She told me that she wanted to show me her secrets. She gently brushed leaves and earth to the right and left. Underneath there was a hole covered with a piece of glass. Inside there were little objects which the grown ups usually name rubbish: an old cork, a colorful leaf, some thread, used tickets

So where is a secret? It is a secret. It is a challenge.

by
Karola Koch*

Abstract: People are part of their environment but routine often makes us forget what it means to be part of a segment in our world. *Nicola's Game* is an invitation to come into contact - with ourselves and the people around us. In this sense *Nicola's Game* gives a chance to realize where we are and opens our senses for new perspectives. Two different environments in which *Nicola's Game* took place will be analysed. It will be argued that *Nicola's Game* cannot be seen separate from its respective environment.

1. Introduction

Nicola Atkinson-Griffith is an artist who creates situations in which everyday life is confronted with new perspectives on its limitations. In her own words, she wants "to question people's perception of their environment". *Nicola's Game* creates a framework in which we can come into contact with ourselves and the people around us. A secret functions as a barrier between those who keep it and others who do not. It upsets us when we are asked to divulge our secrets. But the goal of *Nicola's Game* is not to lure out secrets but rather to involve people in her conceptual art-work. The impact of the environment on how people interact when they are asked to divulge their secrets shall be analysed in two different environments - university/college and business. It is stated that the answers of the different groups cannot be seen separate from their respective environment.

2. The concept of "secrets" and its semantic contents

At first sight any subject that a person does not want to communicate could be a secret. For example, if someone does not tell the colour of his socks when asked to do so, this could be a secret. Words are "slippery customers" as William Labov says and he claims that "it is not only that words are shifters; the objects to which they must be applied shift with even greater rapidity" (Labov, 1973, p. 341). The example above certainly is difficult to locate within the vague frame of the term "secret" and it is quite

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evident that this is a transition stage where the term becomes arbitrary. But even in a vague frame there is an invariant core where a secret is undoubtedly given. For example, a certain dictionary states that a secret is something which shall or must not be given away. What is suggested here, is that it needs some effort to overcome a certain resistance if a secret shall be divulged. "Effort" defines a wide range from "an aversive touchiness towards self-exposure" (Blankenburg, 1997, p. 179) over strong fears to strategic considerations of pay-offs in the future. The more negative the anticipation of pay-offs is, the greater is the interest in keeping the secret. In that sense a secret is something exclusive and its function is to protect.

Secrets can be found in institutions, e.g., professional discretion of medical doctors. They can appear in private contexts and one or more persons can share secrets. And as wide-spread the contexts in which secrets can occur are as manifold are the consequences of revelation. They reach from prosecution to personal disadvantages in any respect and dimension.

3. The experiment

Nicola's Game was played in an Oberseminar at the Institute of SocioEconomics of the University of Hamburg, in a seminar for guru management at the Technisk Skole in Copenhagen and in a company seminar with employees of Unilever/Germany.

Each time the corresponding interviewer handed out some sheets of paper with envelopes to the participants of each seminar. The participants were asked to write anonymously down their public, private and personal secrets. The interviewer promised that the envelopes should be closed afterwards and never be opened again. There were close to forty participants at the Oberseminar in Hamburg which Nicola Atkinson-Griffith gave at the University of Hamburg in spring 1996. About ten people were doctorate students in economics, the rest - about thirty persons - were guests, members and external or former Ph.D. students of the Institute of SocioEconomics. On February 20-21, 2001, Manfred J. Holler gave a seminar on guru management at the Technisk Skole at Copenhagen. The participants were students of the master course of jewelry making. In both occasions, in the Oberseminar in 1996 as well as in the Copenhagen session, lively discussions arose about the project. Morality and immorality, the risk of being outed and more abstract aspects of the concept of "secrets" were discussed. The Copenhagen session was combined with a lecture about strategic and rational thinking in a game-theoretic framework. After more than seven hours of being trained in rational thinking the students were asked to write down their personal, private and public secrets. There were eight students participating in this experiment. The effect was that the students were upset and it took the participants some effort and time to interpret the whole situation on the basis of game-theoretical reasoning. In the

end, not only in the Oberseminar at the University of Hamburg but also in the seminar at the Technisk Skole in Copenhagen only about half of the participants were prepared to write down something and to hand it over to the interviewer.

The situation in the company seminar at Unilever/Germany was completely different: In contrast to the Hamburg and Copenhagen seminars all of the about twenty participants of the business seminar wrote down something on their sheets of paper, closed their envelopes and handed them over to the interviewer without much hesitation and delay. Scarcely any discussion about the request arose in this group. Though this is very little information indeed it nevertheless gives rise to the speculation that the underlying reference system in business environments could be fundamentally different compared to a university or college context.

4. The role of context

Proto-learning, as the first stage of Gregory Bateson's analysis of learning, is characterized as simple problem-solving. Learning II, in his sense, is a progressive refinement of proto-learning which is always embedded in a certain context. Learning III, as the last stage, is a fundamental insight in our character structure and gives us the chance to alter habits acquired during learning II. To explore the nature of a given context and to understand it is part of learning II. Problem-solving on the level of learning II awaits a certain context and learns more and more how to deal with it. To find out what the context is means to know intuitively the rules of the game (Berman, 1981, p. 238). But learning II in this sense is certainly more than understanding where we are - it defines the matrix which we call character. To describe "character" means to talk about transactions between the individual and its surrounding (Berman, 1981, p. 240).

This leads us to the reference system which is defined as a mediator between inside and outside.

4.1 The reference system

A reference system organizes, controls and directs the psychic processes combined with object-oriented behaviour and the individual formation of experience. Learning processes which result out of mimetic behaviour, internal valuations and emotions are linked to the reference system. Standards, values, preferences are part of the valuation process and thus have impact on the reference system. Emotional incentives and emotional reference are important requirements for imitation and reproduction (Mogel, 1997, p. 91). Mimetic processes play a fundamental role for the new acquisition, test-

ing, long-term acquisition and the alteration of behaviour and behaviour patterns. These patterns tend to define frames for group-specific behaviour.

Interindividual similarities in the variety of individual reference systems can arise from similar circumstances and development. Stimuli which are similar enough form groups and thus do also contribute to orientation and the organization of experience.

Conceptual representations of the individual experiences are structured by so-called organizational or biographic conditions. Current behaviour is designed according to the schematized experience, i.e., to the biographic conditions, and the anticipation of reference objects, situations, events and the resulting consequences. On the other hand, the reference system is in each and every moment influenced by current circumstances. Thus a reference system mediates inside and outside as the general determinants of psychic affairs (Mogel, 1997, p. XIII).

4.2 Hemispheric asymmetry and context

Commissurotomy disconnects the two hemispheres and data from split-brain patients prove different modes of operation. The most evident difference is the lack of verbal abilities in the right mute hemisphere which instead is known for its visuo-spatial qualities (Springer and Deutsch, 1987, p. 171). The left hemisphere is said to process quick alterations in time and to analyse the details and distinctive features of given stimuli. The right hemisphere, on the contrary, recognizes patterns of stimuli and processes information simultaneously. When the right hemisphere detects patterns it relies on the abilities of the left hemisphere to verify whether they are real or not (Springer and Deutsch, 1987, p. 182). But critical thinking which is attributed to the left hemisphere remains sterile without the intuitive and creative input of new patterns coming from the right hemisphere. The successful connection of the two hemispheres through the corpus callosum meets the requirements for optimal brain functions.

Inner speech is the capacity to talk to oneself (Morin, 2001, p. 110) and plays an important role for gaining self-information. Self-talk transforms pre-verbal imagery, a means to imagine ourselves as others might see us, into verbal categories. In this sense, inner speech is a powerful tool to differentiate certain sensations or emotions by forming verbal representations. Moreover verbal labels are important for understanding and dealing with experiences that remain diffuse without verbal categorization. In the words of Morin "... people develop a more sophisticated self-concept when they frequently engage in self-talk" (Morin, 2001, p. 113).

The self-concept in Morin's interpretation of hemispheric self-awareness is a privilege of the left hemisphere though the right hemisphere is supposed to have a primitive self-concept, too. Introspective skills combine the observation and conception of emotional patterns with the ability to identify and categorize them. The acquired vocabulary becomes richer, more adequate and elaborate. On the neurobiological level

introspection crosses the corpus callosum and thus is an important factor to connect the two hemispheres.

5. *The context of Nicola's Game*

Routines or patterns usually are mechanical and remain in the unconscious until something touches them. To ask someone for his or her secrets penetrates an intimate sphere and it causes emotions at the first stage. Emotions form the basic reference system and define the frame for the following cognitive activities of our brain (Damasio, 1996, p. 219). So does Nicola's demand for secrets cause reflections about our relationships and brings about the anticipation of consequences in the current situation and in the future. This process leads to self-awareness.

The choice of profession is a biographic factor with directive impact on experiences, standards, values, attitudes, etc. The importance of professional impact on our lives allow to draw certain conclusions that apply to reference systems. Individualistic behaviour in an heterogeneous seminar context or a higher conformity with its demands to adapt to company standards contribute to different mimetic effects and the emotional incentives are different as well in the two environments. For example, master students of jewelry making at the Technisk Skole at Copenhagen are trained to go into a personal discourse in their creative art-work. The creation process is not only self-expression but also self-experience. A business context trains to disregard personal emotions and to act strategically to gain advantages.

In a university context, especially in an academy of arts, individualism is very much appreciated and self-expression and self-experience are, as already mentioned, characteristic for creative art-work. Inspiration as a special form of contact is important for an artist and being inspired gives way to new sights. This is true not only for the master students of jewelry making in Copenhagen but also to some extent for scientific research. Moreover a campus context is limited in time and because there are no direct potential competitors as in a given company hierarchy it does not substantially affect the struggle for life. Holler suggested that the seminar participants at the Technisk Skole in Copenhagen took the game as a real challenge and discussions arose about morality and immorality of *Nicola's Game*. The discussions with the interviewer and within the group give us a hint that the participants were indeed involved and that they considered the request and analysed the situation. This may also indicate that the participants had actually accepted the situation given by the interviewer.

To describe the context in a brief, but adequate way needs at least two parameters: first the integrity of or confidence in the interviewer and second the reflection of the request for the revelation of secrets. An interest in self-experience is fundamental for introspective qualities and a spirit of conflict, analysis and arrangement. Morin refers

to Siegrist (1996) who stated that "highly self-aware individuals use inner speech more frequently in comparison to less self-aware individuals" (Morin, 2001, p. 111). As soon as an interrelationship between the interviewer and the participant is established confidence in the interviewer's integrity will be a decisive factor for revealing a secret or not. Confidence, on the other hand, corresponds with the degree of exclusiveness for a secret. The degree of exclusiveness for a secret is given by the anticipation of negative pay-offs and the willingness to accept these consequences and thus is a measure for the willingness to reveal a secret. After a longer period of lively discussion, which can be important for a harmonic distance to the topic, four students in the Copenhagen seminar divulged their secrets and four did not.

In contrast to a heterogeneous and individualistic context there is a demand in companies to adapt to certain standards. In a positive sense this can train flexibility. But not to fulfill the standards might compel an employee to legitimate. Hierarchies and competition are important factors in a business context. Therefore strategic behaviour can be expected. Moreover to go into something and to be involved needs time but in business life many situations nowadays are automated to save time. Target-orientation and the demand to function, in a team for example, do not give way to much self-expression and self-experience. Business environments stimulate decisive qualities because they are target-oriented and functional. And last but not least business environments are usually not limited in time and the struggle for existence is the normal case and more or less everyday experience in companies. Under these circumstances, the variables which formed the reference system describing the campus context do not apply here and therefore are no longer relevant: Confidence in the interviewer and a degree of exclusiveness are negligible. Decisive qualities for example and adaptive qualities could replace them in this scenario in which we have no relationship between the interviewer and a special participant.

6. Conclusion

The arguments above suggest that the calculations of pay-offs in a company are different from those on a campus and it is not very likely that secrets that matter in any respect are revealed in the business context. It seems that the decision of an employee to write down something and to hand it over to the interviewer had reasons different from those of a university or college student. It is quite likely that the employees wanted to fulfill a given job (what means to function) without much discussion and to find a fast and convenient way out of an inconvenient situation (what undoubtedly needs strategic qualities). The participants of the Oberseminar in Hamburg and the seminar of guru management at the Technisk Skole in Copenhagen were emotionally and intellectually involved by the demand, i.e. they explored their situation. In my

opinion, the given arguments indicate that *Nicola's Game* cannot be seen separate from the environment where it takes place. And this fits quite well with the artist's own intentions.

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Sacred Secrets or Hänsel & Grethel in the Deep Dark Woods

by
Petra Grünig*

I did not know I had a secret. I mean what happens when a secret becomes so secret nobody remembers?

I didn't remember, didn't know there was a secret. And yet, I attracted them.

Everyone, stranger or not, told me their secrets. I collected them as squirrel collect nuts. I dug deep holes, I guarded them, kept them in a sacred safe place where they belonged.

I didn't know I had a secret of my own.

They told me, seeking answers is part of my Self.

They told me, my journeys and restless moving from one corner of the world to the other is in fact a part of me.

It is not.

It belongs to him.

How can one sense what one does not know? What no-one ever mentioned or whispered? No-one knew.

Maybe, not even *he* knows now.

I would probably never have known that there exists a secret if I hadn't been asked to write about "secrets". The secret had been gone for too long and it in fact still lies in the dark:

"Hänsel & Grethel went deep into the woods ... attracted by the witch".

I hold his sweaty hand - it is all I have, all I hold on to. I feel my brother's fear. His body clenches. I can hardly look ... look at the black hole in front of us. He dares; he looks.

My head is half turned away but my eyes are burnt into the darkness of the secret until they too, are burning.

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I don't know. *We* don't know. And yet I remember being nine and wanting to leave. I couldn't stand it no longer. The black hole was sucking our energy away and I had let go of my brother's hand.

I want to go, too.

But I was not allowed. As I am not allowed to know more now.

So I left. I didn't die but simply left and searched for secrets I didn't know.

No matter in what language, no matter in what place - they told me their secrets. Because they knew: I would keep them safe. As I always did.

Today as I write this I know, there was only one secret I chased. The one I don't know. But now I feel his hand in mine again. My brother is here. Slowly we turn our backs to the witch and start to walk. With every step closer to the forest's rim, our steps become lighter and our arms start to swing as we used to do, as children do.

Dad, we leave now.

*And we keep the secret.
Your secret we don't know.*

Trust in Secrets

by

Ben Spencer*

I am intrigued by the analytical discourse about *Secrets of the World* which has resulted from asking Manfred Holler to contribute to a collection of writings about the work of Nicola Atkinson-Griffith. First and foremost, Atkinson-Griffith is a hugely demanding and energetic artist working across three continents as a successful practitioner and curator for nearly 20 years. Atkinson-Griffith's practice is particularly concerned with presenting her work, and that of other artists, in unusual public spaces; continually interrogating and pushing the boundaries of making art in public. To the eye, her work is carefully crafted and exquisitely presented, aesthetically underpinned by her training in Fine Art. Yet this is to simplify work of great complexity, evolved from myriad ideas and painstaking process. My reaction to *Secrets of the World* is primarily as an artwork and not a game as rationalised by Holler.

In essence, Atkinson-Griffith works to question people's perception of their environment through producing frameworks of ideas which enable the public to contemplate alternative views of the world. The work intriguingly warps the everyday to disturb the status quo and to alert audiences to remarkable aspects of life around them. Atkinson-Griffith presents thoughts, questions and concepts to gently challenge the safe and familiar cocoon in which we tend to embed ourselves. This approach is based upon the idea of art as a form of communication through which the artist can influence (and be influenced by) as wide a range of people as possible. Through working in the public domain, Atkinson-Griffith is not confined to touching people who visit galleries or who participate in, say, photography workshops and this has led to the development of her particular artistic practice.

In much public art, the concept of collaboration often involves little input from the community where the work is sited. The 'traditional' approach to making public art often tries to gentrify an area by imposing an aesthetic, usually in a singular image, which has little to do with the identity or concerns of the local population. On the other hand, community art has its tradition firmly rooted in working to empower local people in transforming their environment. With an emphasis on providing the chance for people to be creative at any level, the processes of community art are intrinsically democratic in their approach to artistic practice. Although community art may be

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challenging for the participants, the results rarely have much impact and are largely uncritical in terms of contemporary art practice. Atkinson-Griffith does not practise either approach.

Throughout her career, Atkinson-Griffith has initiated projects which use participation as a process to realise her work, but this approach is not community art. Nor does the work impose itself on the community in which Atkinson-Griffith is working, but evolves from the participatory process. The common thread running through all her projects is the creation of temporary communities, in order to pursue links that bind established, or disparate, worlds together. Atkinson-Griffith develops a framework to explore a particular idea within a community and then works intimately with its people to elicit contributions to the project; perhaps an object, a likeness or a memory. In this context - a secret. It is important this involvement that it is not coerced and participation is entirely voluntary. This process of gathering is itself an artwork and is fundamental to Atkinson-Griffith's practice. While the actual donation is likely to be invested with great significance by the participant, the contribution itself may not be of particular interest on its own. Rather it is the act of participation itself which is crucial to underpin each project, to add meaning to the work and to create a shared, unified experience. In exchange for this involvement, Atkinson-Griffith outlines clearly her role and what contributors can expect to gain from the project. A key part of the process is that anyone involved does not feel they have been either misrepresented or used in any way. This 'contract' is vital for her to build up trust with the participants and has permitted Atkinson-Griffith easy access to a wide range of communities.

Secrets of the World is a key work to demonstrate this practice and has been undertaken by Atkinson-Griffith in Hamburg and Karachi. The project continues under the direction of Atkinson-Griffith worldwide. The work is participatory on a global scale and explores the notion that the work does not need to be based in any particular location. It is not the secret which is of interest. Nor is collecting secrets an end in itself. It is the act of participation to create a shared, unified community which underpins this project. The paradox arising from the work however is that in wishing to foster a collective spirit, the participants do not interact or need to know anything about anyone else taking part. This reinforces the act of participation, as only those who take part can associate with the 'secret' community. The key point for Atkinson-Griffith is in building trust with those who participate in the work and not in playing games. Crucial to this process is the trust invested in the artist that the secrets will not be disclosed. Trust her - your secrets will be safe.

Shall I Sell You My Secret?
On Blackmailers, Traitors, Good Secrets, and Secret Goods
by
Sofia Blind*

*There's no value to a secret if you can't repeat it.
Ein Geheimnis ist wertlos, wenn man es nicht herumerzählen darf.*
- Richard Fish⁹ -

1. What is a secret?

Being asked to submit their secrets in an experiment conducted by an artist they had never met before, many participants protested (see Holler, this volume): They thought the idea pointless, they did not trust the artist to keep their secrets, or they questioned the categories of secrets offered. But not a single one refused to participate on the grounds that he or she did not have a secret to offer! Can this be true - do we all have secrets?

Of course, every one of us knows thousands of things no one else knows: the contents of our pockets, our true thoughts on our best friend's taste, yesterday's shopping list. But are these secrets? I want to propose a definition of secrets that excludes things which are merely "not known":

A secret is a statement known to a finite set of people which, if revealed to one or more people outside this set, changes the utility levels of one or several people in this set. The set can be a singleton.

According to this definition, the contents of my pocket are not a secret. I would not mind revealing them, and no one would profit from knowing, so no one's utility

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⁹Cf. www.fishismus.de.

changes. If I had a freshly stolen diamond ring in my pocket, though, things would be different: I would not want to show it, and the police might be keen to know. "Cui bono?" is the question to ask, as every secret benefits or harms someone. No gains or losses from disclosure - no secret!

2. *Good and bad secrets*

Let me state the economically obvious: People derive some utility from keeping their secrets - otherwise they would divulge them. They may want to hide some dark spot in their past in order to avoid embarrassment or punishment. They may try to protect some profitable knowledge or invention. Or they may want to help (or to harm!) someone else. Whatever the nature of a secret, the utility of keeping the secret is identical to the disutility caused by its disclosure. And both can be huge. Blackmailers are very good at estimating these utilities: They earn their living by demanding as large a portion of the economic value of a secret as they can get; ideally, close to 100 per cent. However, often blackmailers try to repeat this demand again and again until all their victims' resources, far more than the original value of the secret, are depleted. (The victim must think of some way to prevent this - a classic crime story plot.)

Many secrets are *private* ones, which do not concern anyone but those who keep them. This does not imply that their contents have to be of a private nature - political issues can be private secrets, as well, if they only concern those who know the secret. Private secrets may be shared by several people: Many families hide secrets, ethnic groups keep secret knowledge on ritual or religious traditions, and corporate employees possess information on secret production processes. Mostly, the keepers of a secret know about each other, sharing it openly. Sometimes, however, people secretly share their hidden knowledge: I know it, you know it, but I don't know you know, and you don't know I know. Terminal illnesses can tragically fall into this category, when couples try to protect each other from knowing the full truth. At any rate, shared secrets remain private if they only concern the secret's keepers.

Another type of secrets are those which create external effects, benefiting or harming third parties. I want to call the first type of such secrets, those who create positive externalities, "*good secrets*". E.g., classified information on military defence strategies can be a good secret, protecting the general public. The keeper of such a secret increases the utility of others. As this effect, however, does not enter his or her utility function, good secrets are in short supply. The incentive to keep such secrets is systematically too low, or inversely: the temptation to divulge them is too high. To attain an optimal supply level, good secrets should be protected by paying their keepers for staying silent. The relatively high wages and secure jobs of civil servants, who are supposed to be loyal keepers of state secrets, might be seen as falling into this category. The large rewards for traitors, who procure other countries' military or

political secrets, also prove their high external benefit. Capital punishment for traitors is a mirror image of these benefits and rewards.

The second type of secrets are *bad secrets*: those who harm others beyond those who keep them. Unfortunately, it is much easier to think of examples for bad than for good secrets. Crimes, hidden scandals¹⁰ and secret deals in politics or law all fall into that category. As bad secrets create negative external effects which are not accounted for by the secrets' keeper(s), they are in too abundant supply. The incentive to divulge them is too low; bad secrets should be revealed more freely. This might be achieved by payment to "traitors" - e.g., the common practice of reduced prison sentences or, inversely, coercive detention for chief witnesses. Inversely, police officers, tax inspectors and secret agents are remunerated by the state for uncovering bad secrets. Investigative journalists, who are financed indirectly by a community of readers or viewers, serve the same purpose. They disclose secrets, thus helping to achieve a preferable, lower social level of "bad" secrecy.

To sum up: From an economic point of view, there are cases where secrets should be kept in the interest of all, and others, where they should be revealed. To complicate things more, it is often unclear which are which. Especially in the context of state secrets, it is difficult to define whose secrets should be kept, i.e., who is good and who is evil. So, even a traitor may do good, revealing beneficial information to the public.

3. *Attention or respect?*

As we have seen, there is no built-in dynamic towards an optimal level of secrecy. Additionally, most people's way of dealing with secrets is not governed by economic calculus but by psychological factors. I want to put forward the thesis that two conflicting factors determine people's handling of secrets: The quest for attention and the wish to be respected. (These two do not exclude each other: Young girls often share secrets because the "penitent" gets attention and shows that she had something interesting to hide and the "confessor" is proud of her trustworthiness, being let into the secret. It is all but irrelevant what the secret is about.)

All of us probably know the temptation to show off with secret knowledge. Talk shows, therapists' couches and confessionals are crowded with people who want to spill their secrets. They all want to draw attention to themselves, just as gossipers who divulge other people's secrets.¹¹ This is what the introductory "fishism" was about: A secret is worthless if you cannot tell it to others! The attention value of a secret can be reaped even after a long period of secrecy, as in the recent case of a Bavarian great-

¹⁰The definition of scandals, though, strongly depends on context - see the contributions by Airaksinen, Weigel and myself in Holler (1999).

¹¹In his *Economics of Attention*, Franck (1998) even sees attention as the new universal currency.

grandmother. She confessed her secret on the occasion of her 90th birthday party, with the mayor and all local police officers present: She had been the notorious poacher who had plundered the forest for decades without ever being identified.

But in the long term, it is a dangerous strategy to aim at gaining attention by telling secrets, as it reduces the informer's perceived trustworthiness. Discretion is a highly regarded virtue, and professional bearers of secrets, therefore, are well-respected people. The prestige enjoyed by doctors, priests or lawyers partly stems from their professional obligation to keep secrets. In politics and administration, keeping state secrets is a main part of the job. Even professional secret bearers, however, seem to be prone to gossiping. Why else would there be any need to enforce professional secrecy and confidentiality standards by binding legal rules of conduct, by confidentiality clauses in work contracts and by the threat of dismissal in the case of divulging?

The ability to keep one's own secrets is also highly regarded. An air of mystery always adds to the attractiveness of a person (Fein and Schneider, 1998). For this, however, it suffices that other people *assume* we have secrets. Film stars know the trick: They shroud themselves in mystery, making a secret out of everything from their true birth date to the natural colour of their hair.

To sum up, there is no unambiguously "good" way of dealing with secrets. One can either attract attention by disclosing others' or one's own secrets or gain respect by keeping them.

Ways of handling secrets:

	disclose secret	keep secret
others' secrets	gossip	be trustworthy
own secrets	divulge	be mysterious

The strategy of aiming at respect, however, is a difficult one. How to hint at one's status as a bearer of secrets? Secretmongers who attempt to show off their secret without revealing its content only annoy or amuse others. Kids sometimes practice this - "I know something you don't know, ha ha!" This does not help them to find friends. The respect can only be generated by third parties who confirm the existence of a secret or ask (vainly) about it.

4. *An experiment in secret simulation*

The last point leads us back to the original experiment and the question why the participants proffered any secrets, at all. According to Sedgwick (this volume), "... there are no circumstances in which the pay-off from divulging a secret would be more desirable than that from not divulging". Oh yes, there are! The experiment offers a neutral, third-party-induced opportunity to show off one's status as a bearer of secrets. The protestations and alleged worries about the future safety of the envelopes only support this hypothesis. If I claim to know important secrets, I also have to pretend being highly worried about their ending up in the wrong hands.

Insofar the experiment has a humorous touch: German students worrying about future spies prying into their true or alleged secrets. Beware! Blackmailers, police investigators or the yellow press might be after the envelopes, already.

*Finally, let me sell you a secret
(the one the introductory citation is about):
Mark's new girlfriend has a penis. He has not found out yet.
Don't tell anyone.*

References

- Fein, E., and S. Schneider (1995), *The Rules*, New York: Harper Collins.
 Franck, G. (1998), *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit. Ein Entwurf*, Munich: Hanser.
 Holler, M.J. (ed.) (1999), *Scandal and Its Theory*, Homo Oeconomicus, Munich: Accedo Verlag.
<http://www.fishismus.de> (lists the aphorisms of Richard Fish, Ally McBeal's boss in the TV series).