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Bryan Furuness is Writing an Essay on Facebook Status Updates

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Bryan Furuness is writing an essay on Facebook status updates, by Bryan Furuness

Facebook has dozens of components — pictures, videos, notes, comments, groups, etcetera — but the smallest and most heavily utilized piece might be the status update. You know, the little bar near the top of the page that says Bryan Furuness is and then has a blank box to fill in with a little teapot, or whatever you want. The status update is one of those tiny inventions of the new age that seems kind of ho-hum and inconsequential only until you start thinking about it. And then it seems odd. I mean, how did we so naturally begin to make proclamations? Like we're celebrities, or kings. Hear ye, hear ye: Bryan Furuness just indulged in a Java Chip Frap.

"You don't have to file a news bulletin every time you fart," my father used to tell me when I was a blathering boy. Back then, the prevailing idea was that you waited until you had some real news or insight before bothering anybody. The idea was that other people didn't find your every little thought or twitch as fascinating as you did. If that idea isn't dead, it's on life support.

By providing the template for your micro-musings, and automatically delivering them to your friends via the News Feed, Facebook acts as your personal press agent. If you're going to take a little ego trip, the status update is the perfect vehicle. Facebook assumes your friends are interested — and the odd thing is, no one I know has questioned that assumption. Including me, even now that I'm thinking about it. In theory, status updates sound like something I would hate: line after line of trivial complaint, banal observation, and the occasional plaintive wish for the weekend — but I'll confess right now that I'm a status update junkie. I love them. Can't get enough of them. Sometimes I'll go right to the Status Update tab and binge on page after page. It turns out I'm even more interested than Facebook could have known.

Bryan Furuness is the eternal subject.

The subject of every status update is the same: your name. Talk about an ego trip. This is egotism with tenure — it's not only all about you, it's always all about you.

Your name is permanently installed at the beginning of the sentence, in what might be seen as the primary position. Head of the line, from here to eternity. Whatever you write might be interesting, but it's subordinated to the fixed subject of your name, the lead dog that will never give way.

This indicates that Facebook is fundamentally about the self, not about activities. You don't have to tiptoe too much further out on that limb to say that this makes status updates character-driven rather than plot-driven. Now, I'm not claiming that status

updates are a new form of literary fiction, but the two do share a focus on character. In literary fiction, action grows out of character; with status updates, the fixed subject practically mandates this approach.

And speaking of eternity . . . you know what happens if you don't update your status for a long time? The last update is erased, the box goes blank, and visitors are left with only your name, which resembles that traditional final status update, a tombstone.

Bryan Furuness feels funny writing about himself in third-person.

But apparently, he — er, I — am the only one. Everyone else seems to pick it up, no problem. Even Facebook noobs who otherwise seem borderline illiterate “get” the point-of-view shift right away. I don't think that would have been so easy for folks even ten years ago. So what's changed? What has made it so easy to switch p.o.v. on our own asses?

Avatars, for one thing. Thanks to avatars, people have been seeing themselves as third-person characters for years now. I'm talking about avatars in the broadest sense: from the malleable little homunculi on Wii, to that disembodied “web persona” you created for the Chicago Bears message board, to your Ranger in that role-playing game, to Luigi of SuperMarioKart. Over the past decade, anyone with access to a computer-like machine or a dork's basement has had an experience with an avatar. Some avatars can be personalized, some cannot. Some have animated bodies, others are ghosts with personality. They're controlled and animated by you; they may even be a projection of you, but ultimately, they're not you.

But wait — am I suggesting that when you write your status update, that you're not you?

In a way.

Go ahead and roll your eyes. Go ahead and think that you'd write the exact same update if you were allowed to start with “I” — but I'm not so sure. Third-person point of view has a greater narrative distance than first-person. You can narrow that distance, you can mimic the closeness of first-person through techniques like free indirect discourse, but (a) third-person will never be as close a shave as first-person, and (b) I've yet to see a status update employ free indirect discourse. And, like I said, I read a lot of them.

Here's why this matters, or at least what makes it interesting: even as status updates seem to be revealing, they maintain a certain distance. They simultaneously invite the reader in while keeping the reader from getting too close.

People aren't baring their souls; they're creating, managing, and promoting an image. An avatar of themselves. I know this might not be a groundbreaking thought about Facebook, but isn't it interesting that so many people are drawn to the idea of creating

an avatar, then becoming its publicist? Some might call this cunning and find it sad; to me, it's art.

Bryan Furuness has two rules for writing status updates.

The first is that I do not ever say what I am literally doing at that moment (e.g. Bryan Furuness is staring grimly at a blinking cursor). The second is that I do not file petty complaints: Bryan Furuness wonders why people talk so damn loud on their cell phones in public. Lady, your brother in Naperville can probably hear you out of BOTH ears. God!

I think of these two rules as a way to differentiate my blurbs from 98% of the other status updates — but then, what do my updates really say about me? When I write Bryan Furuness ate a pumpkin or Bryan Furuness, Plain and Tall, what does that reveal? Besides the fact that I want you to think that I'm terribly droll? Nothing! Which can also be said of my profile picture, currently a beautiful old photo of Bela Lugosi. Or my info page, which contains slightly less information than prisoners of war volunteer to their captors. My profile and Facebook activity can be seen as all these little deflections that might be trying just a bit too hard to be clever.

On the other hand, that's a perfect description of who I am. My earlier argument can be flipped around: even as status updates seem to be maintaining a distance, they can be revealing. What is it they say about fiction? It's the lie that tells the truth?

But why am I trying to disguise myself in the first place? Some pundits say that internet users over the age of thirty are more likely to closely guard their privacy — but I don't think my e-reticence has anything to do with age. I think it has to do with the fact that I'm reluctant to advertise the fact that I'm fundamentally uncool. And not uncool in the funky/dorky way that suggests I might be designing killer apps on my Macbook; no, I mean old-school uncool. Uncool as in I-am-an-insurance-agent uncool. Seriously: Bryan Furuness is an insurance agent. He lives in a house that looks like somebody placed a huge mirror up against the house next door. His wife mows the lawn because he has allergies, bad. He still thinks Portobello mushrooms are really exotic.

Can you blame me? Would you reveal any of that?

So instead, I hide what I can hide, knowing these mean truths are going to leak out eventually, despite my best efforts at holding them back. Here, in front of my computer, I work long and hard to sound quick-witted, which might go a little easier if there wasn't this damn lawnmower roaring outside my window.

Bryan Furuness don't Tweet.

Given my love for the status update, you might think I love Twitter, but you would be wrong. Here's the best way I can explain why I'm anti-tweet: there is little I enjoy more than eating the top off a muffin, but I never buy those stand-alone "muffin-tops" you can

get now at a bakery. Something about the muffin-top seems a touch too indulgent and reductive — or maybe just hyper-evolved (What if humans went the route of the muffin-top? What if, in ten million years, my distant offspring is just a brain, a penis, and a finger to push the orgasm-button? Off-putting.).

Even if I don't use most of the functions on FB, I feel comforted knowing they're there. They make FB seem more spacious. Also, ignoring things makes me feel powerful and choosy. The real indulgence isn't in eating the top of the muffin; it's in throwing away the stem. That's the part that makes you feel privileged.

Bryan says, Have you heard the one about the Solipsists' Convention?

Remember what I was saying about egotism? How status updates, and pretty much all of Facebook promote it? Maybe that's only half the story. Maybe Facebook flattens the ego even as it puffs it up.

When you're writing your status update, or tagging your own photos, or declaring yourself a fan of The Hold Steady!, it's all me, me, me. But that's only half — or maybe less — of the FB experience. Sure, your status update is auto-delivered to your friends, but it's thrown in the pot with a hundred others. And when you're reading updates instead of writing them, that experience isn't so much about you.

So what is it about? What, in a broad sense, is the FB experience about? Here's one way to look at it: go click on your status update tab (after you finish reading this, of course). Lean back until you're taking in the whole screen, and then the next screen, and the next. What you'll see is a book with hundreds of point-of-view characters. What you'll see is the arrival of a true, sprawling, crackling omniscience. Somebody call Tom Wolfe — the billion-footed beast has arrived! The experience isn't about you or me; it's about all of us. Bryan Furuness is agape! Bryan Furuness is agog!