

Faceless patrons - an augmented installation exploring 419-fictional narratives

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Abstract. 'Faceless patrons' is an installation that documents stories used by Internet scammers in so called 'overpayment check scams'. Scammers use scripted stories to reach their victims, yet when correspondence continues story worlds start to evolve. We created a virtual character to interact with scammers who posed to be art buyers. The installation presents five of these interactive narratives in form of a series of photos each coupled with a forged check. By using smartphones or a tablet an augmented reality layer can be accessed to expose further story elements.

Keywords: Unsolicited electronic mail, scambaiting, Computer mediated communication.

1 Introduction

Scamming is a global phenomenon and victims can be found everywhere with no difference in gender, age or race. To persuade the victim into paying money upfront, the scammers create story worlds with 'get rich quickly' schemes that seem 'too good to be true'. The scammers draw on emotions like greed, empathy or love. The different narratives are situated in the grey area between reality and fiction [3]. Story worlds can get very detailed and involve several characters and are often related to real life. We wanted to take a closer look on these '419-fiction' cybercrime stories, '419' relating to the criminal code in Nigerian law that deals with fraud. These stories reflect the dystopian side of computer mediated communication where the Internet enables a world of false representations, abuse of trust, humiliation and desperation for opportunities. The 'Faceless patrons' installation has been described earlier in a poster paper [5], in this paper we therefore focus on the narratives that lead to the creation of the installation.

2 How the scam works

We want to take a closer look to the overpayment check scam, that is still largely used although digital payment methods are a common practice. In this type of

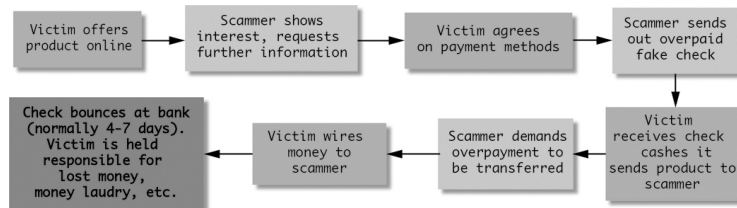


Fig. 1. Overpayment check scam lifecycle

scam a scammer shows interest in a product offered online by contacting the auctioneer. Once the deal is closed the scammer sends a forged check to the victim, often involving another victim as a 'money mule'. The mule acts as a 'transaction processor' who is duped to accept fake cheques or stolen money and forwards it to the scammer. The check is issued for far more money than agreed and the scammer convinces the victim to immediately cash the check and after deducting the costs of the product wire the rest of the money back. The scammers are using a loophole that the check transfer system affords. Normally wire transfers are done within a couple of minutes, whereas it can take up to several days for the bank to refuse to honor the check with the result that the victim loses money and additionally can be charged for money laundering [4].

3 Interactive storytelling with the scammer

In the following paragraphs we highlight some parts of the correspondence with the scammers that we see as interactive storytelling. The story takes the form of e-mail correspondence where two characters are involved; one art patron created by the scammers and our fictional artist 'Anna Masquer'. The scammers posed identity is often based on either identity theft or a confusing mix of several existing individuals, giving them the opportunity to remain faceless and anonymous. While we were aware of the fact that we are dealing with scammers, we use a fictional character and narration to investigate how the scammers react to various turns in the plot. Our character 'Anna Masquer' represents an average contemporary artist in her late 30s. Her story is backed up by a virtual identity presenting herself and her artwork on a Wordpress blog and a Flickr channel [1]. When a prospective customer gets in touch with her, she responds that the photo series 'Faceless' is currently presented in a gallery in Vienna, Austria. Anna acts surprised when she is contacted by an international patron, but sees an opportunity to sell her art. The scammers that pose as wealthy art buyers wants to pay by check and have the artwork series shipped to them. Anna wants to sell her photo series and accepts the check payment. In the beginning the correspondence is quite generic both parts expressing their interest in the deal. The crucial point for the scammer is to convince the artist why the payment can only be delivered in the form of a check-payment.

Freiermuth's rhetorical moves analysis reports that in 92.31% of scam-emails a background narrative is told to justify the claims being made [2]. In our example, a wealthy person interested in the arts wants to buy an artwork. Since he is busy with his professional job, he demands to pay by check. In an email sent to 'Anna Masquer', the patron 'Mac Nuel' states:

"I can only prepay the total amount of this gift product by cheque payment only. This is as a result of my deployment to the gulf of Mexico since we are presently engaged in a Deep-water project at our offshore location hence I am presently not in the UK and cannot make a bank transference from this location offshore".

The check is a physical evidence that can be tracked if the scammer is sending the letter from a different country than where his virtual character is situated, he needs to get creative to present a credible storyline. In the following snippet of an email, the patron 'Joshua Daniels' explains that an associate of him will actually do the payment. By introducing a new character only known as 'associate', the scammer disconnects the physical evidence from his virtually created profile.

"I am very glad to read from you, i am really interested and i stay in Scotland. I am okay with your asking price So i have an associate of me who is owning me the sum of 9000euro I will ask him to issue you a check".

When the victim believes the narrative and agrees to receive a check as our character Anna did, the offer gets more detailed. The art buyer 'Michael Silverberg' justifies an overpayment to cover the shipping costs and to compensate the sellers extra efforts:

"I'm sending you an overdraft which will include my shippers fees as well. [...] So, once you've received and cashed the check, deduct your funds and PLEASE help me send the remaining funds to him (shipper). I'll forward his contact details to you once you've received the payment".

Tensions between the characters start to emerge when the check arrives. The scammers character starts to put pressure on our victim to receive the advance payment before the check bounces and the plot is revealed. Our character Anna who is a victim in disguise aims to linger and keep the correspondence up as long as possible without transferring money back to the scammer. The situation looses its tension when the scammer realizes that the check cannot be cashed and to send another check or to provide a different payment method. In all times, the scammers stopped contacting us. Once the checks were received, we reported them to law enforcement. This was done through the scambaiter community, where a group specializes in reporting fraudulent bank account activities. For the scambaiters, a fake check is considered a 'trophy' [6], a physical representation of the scam attempt that can be used to document and inform ongoing criminal activities to bank officials, who monitor account transactions, freeze accounts and inform local law enforcement.

4 The augmented installation

The installation setup consists of five photo-frames hanging on a wall. Each frame connects to a correspondence with a scammer and holds a photograph and a fake check that was received as an advance payment for Anna Masquers' photos. By using a smartphone or a tablet the visitor can scan each photograph via a third party AR-Browser. Each physical photograph is then overlaid with an AR layer containing a video compilation of images. These images are the result of an online search in an attempt to confirm or invalidate the authenticity of the scammer's character and his online representations. This search result tries to give a face to the faceless scammer, yet fails while the posed art buyer can be anyone or no one of the persons found within the search. Additionally to the images the video contains a voiceover narrating parts of the email correspondence. Due to the similar scripts of the scam only snippets of each correspondence are presented in the artwork. This still enables the visitor to follow the whole narrative path of the 'overpayment check scam' scheme. The installation functions as a documentation of the scam scheme and represents part of the interactive storytelling process that we experienced with the scammers.

5 Conclusions and future work

'Faceless patrons' is an art project that uncovers story scripts that scammers use in 'overpayment check scams'. By accessing an augmented reality layer, people can listen to parts of the correspondence and see results of an online search that tries to give a face to the scammers' characters. Understanding the story structures of the scam scheme enables us to efficiently gather overpayment checks and report them to law enforcement. The artwork is part of an ongoing research on 419-fiction, testing various scambaiting methods to point out its info activist potential. In our future work we want to combine ethical scambaiting methods with interactive narration as media competence trainings.

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