

What makes a virtual community work?

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1 INTRODUCTION

Most muds - text-based social virtual environments - are either young or dead. That being so, what makes a mud long-lived? More generally; *what makes a (virtual) community hold together, thrive and develop over time?*

2 METHOD

The community my findings are based on is a *community of computing*. SvenskMud is a Swedish-language adventure mud - an Internet-accessible on-line game - and it is one of the few (1-2%) non-English muds on the Internet.

SvenskMud ("SwedishMud") started in July 1991 and I have studied it over a period of several years. I have - with permission - collected six different types of naturally occurring, "non-elicited" data (e.g. homepages, public discussions and on-line documentation), three different types of "elicited" data (e.g. surveys and interviews) and data from two different sorts of participant observation studies. The full results are developed in Pargman (forthcoming 2000).

3 CRITERIA FOR COMMUNITY

There is no universal definition of community. Based on Hillery (1955) and others, the following criteria are often suggested as areas of agreement:

- **Membership** based on geographical proximity.
- **Time horizon.** Long expected existence of the community and of the individual in the community.
- **Relationships.** Personal (smaller communities) or overlapping networks of relationships (larger communities). Ongoing face-to-face interaction.
- **Shared institutions, values and practices.** Shared history and artifacts, concerns, goals, procedures and symbols.
- **Commitment and responsibility** both to the larger whole - the community - and to individuals (not necessarily based on personal relationships).

- **Collective accomplishments** or political action (creation of collective "goods") emanating from organized or semi-organized groups.

These criteria are not independent of each other but are instead intimately connected. Of the six criteria, I regard three primarily as "input", two as core criteria and one as "output" of community:

Membership and long time horizon lead to relationships. Relationships and a long time horizon (can) lead to the formation of community. *Community is characterized by shared institutions, values, practices, history, artifacts, concerns, goals, procedures and symbols as well as mutual commitment and responsibility to the community and to community members, not necessarily based on personal relationships.* A community offers the individual a chance of being part of a collective enterprise, of being part of something that is greater than the individual. Collective accomplishments and political action are possible outcomes of communities.

Virtual communities should be judged according to the same criteria, though some none-core criteria (such as geographical proximity and face-to-face interaction) would have to be somewhat altered. An important characteristic of virtual communities is that social issues and concerns become difficult to separate from technical issues and practices that relate to the "material" substrate these communities are based on; computer code and programming practices for manipulating digital discreet discontinuous silicon-based units of logic.

4 SVENSKMUD AS A COMMUNITY

Many of the advice to developers on how to program in SvenskMud as well as guidelines for the content are at the same time advice on the proper behavior of a SvenskMud developer (called "magician" in SvenskMud). As such they represent lessons regarding the specific values, practices, goals and procedures that represent "the SvenskMud way" of solving problems, of relating to players and to other developers, of debugging code etc. From the rules for SvenskMud magicians, a developer learns that it is an ideal in SvenskMud to...

"Cooperate!

Always use objects that already exist to do different things. A suitable way to do that is with the instruction "inherit". LPC [A mud-specific variant of the C programming language] is an object-oriented programming language with multiple inheritance.

- If there are no ready objects [that does exactly what you want to do] then talk to a magician who has already created [a similar] object so that you both will use the same object (it saves time and energy!)."

One of the 10 spoof commandments in the handbook for magicians (only available to SvenskMud magicians) states that "You shall steal". The explanation states that "if you don't know how to do certain things, then try to recall where you have seen something similar and check out how it is done there. The best way to learn is to see how others do things". This commandment is complemented by no less than two more commandments that say the same thing. One states that "You shall covet your neighbor's house and his rooms" and the explanation states: "run around in other areas, check out what they build, send a lot of bug reports and then do better yourself".

Perhaps SvenskMud is one of the few programming environments where the developers spend considerable time reading other persons' code for no other reason than to learn? The habit of reviewing the programming code of others and of having your own code reviewed is according to Weinberg (1971/1998) an excellent but sadly neglected practice to improve the code itself and the abilities of programmers. One magician who learned to program in SvenskMud intimately ties together social concerns in SvenskMud to technical practices when he describes how he works in SvenskMud. Another feature of his statement is the implicit commitment and responsibility to the community.

"I read what the other person [I have a project together with] has programmed and correct it and he corrects what I have done. We toss everything back and forth between us all the time. You learn incredibly much by doing so, he sees what I do and I see what he does and then you get acquainted with the code and you correct it. And it's impossible to correct the code if you don't understand what it does.

It becomes totally different here. If a magician creates something that is really bad, that affects the views of the players on the other magicians too. It casts a shadow over all magicians.

If a player comes and reports a bug in someone's area you look into and read through the code that bugs and

then you learn the other [magician's] ways of coding and in the end you know that if something bugs in his files, he has probably made such-and-such error."

5 DISCUSSION

I claim that the answer to what makes a mud long-lived and holds it together is one and the same; succeeding in making it into a *community* based on shared values, practices, symbols and a spirit of mutual commitment and responsibility. As to the all-importance of shared values, concerns and goals in building - or *growing* communities, one of the leading SvenskMud Arch magicians [e.g. a senior developer] once incidentally remarked that "if three Arch magicians have different opinions, then the wrong persons are Arch magicians"!

Space does not here allow me to go deeper into complex issues of where specific SvenskMud values originally come from and how they are imputed in the new developers, but I have here given a few examples of a spirit of community as exhibited in a nine-year old mud. Understanding and mastering the "affordances" - the dramaturgical cues offered by the virtual world - serves to socialize a player long before that player has the option of becoming a developer. This theme is further developed in Pargman (2000) where I state that "by playing SvenskMud, a player will get accustomed to many of the concepts that govern the SvenskMud world and will come to understand the SvenskMud goals, symbols, procedures and values"

6 REFERENCES

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