

Virtual Communities

A Paper By Juston Western

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Tulane University

Virtual communities raise questions pertaining to our sense of identity and social interaction within the realm of cyberspace. The ability of an individual to portray his or her own personality within a virtual community becomes increasingly important. Discovering what social phenomena are unique to virtual communities and finding what elements of traditional relationships are lacking within cyberspace are issues that have recently come to the forefront of sociology in the 21st century. For a virtual community to be successful, much technical and social planning must go into the project. The focus of this paper will be to show the inner-workings of a virtual community, how it can be used to create social capital for its inhabitants, and why its mass acceptance is both positive and inevitable.

As humans, we many times take for granted how we establish an identity. The ways in which we dress, speak, and carry ourselves do much to define an identity in the real world. In virtual worlds, however, those factors carry little to no weight. When entering a virtual community, one must choose some sort of identifier to be distinguishable from others. This identifier most often comes in the form of a nickname, or "handle" as it is often referred to (IRC). Some individuals choose to use their real names as handles, while others opt for more creative monikers.

What is it about virtual communities that require individuals to create their own identities? The inherently anonymous nature of electronic communication is the single largest factor. By not being able to attach a face with a name, members of virtual communities are judged predominantly on what they have to say and how they say it opposed to the sometimes superficial criteria imposed in real communities.

This anonymity does not come without its drawbacks, however. Without a tone of voice or body language being present in electronic correspondence, conversations can be plagued by confusion and miscommunication. The faceless nature of virtual communities also provides the ideal setting for illegal activity to occur. Child pornography rings and piracy of intellectual property such as music, software, and movies has flourished with the proliferation of virtual communities. Individuals who would normally not engage in such activity have increasingly been lured into such surly endeavors because of the perceived lack of repercussions. Law enforcement officials were caught off guard by the quick spread of such criminal

organizations, and were forced to train and hire a computer-savvy staff to thwart such activity. (Business Software)

While negative behavior brings some together, the ease of connectivity that virtual communities provide can also have positive applications. Fringe cultures find sanctuary in cyberspace where those with common interests can communicate easily with each other. The ability to transcend spatial limitations provides a vehicle for those who wish to pursue various interests and avoid alienation. I have experienced this phenomenon first-hand. In high school, I was an avid fan of electronic music. Unfortunately, no one at my school or any of my friends shared this interest. After doing some research online, I came across a listserv dedicated to the discussion of electronic music. By being able to communicate with others who shared my enthusiasm, my love and understanding of electronic music was able to blossom.

My experience is not an uncommon occurrence when speaking of virtual communities. It was just a manifestation of a few phenomena unique to virtual communities. By being able to connect with like-minded individuals but maintain a high level of anonymity, virtual communities provide a setting for members to openly speak their mind. This happens so frequently because the fear of being ostracized is diminished and the risk of encountering retaliation for controversial statements is reduced.

With anonymity being such an integral characteristic of virtual communities, one might be led to believe that integration with the real world would not be a priority for inhabitants of these communities. Quite the opposite is true, however. Studies have shown that "many communities can be made stronger and deeper by encouraging people to meet each other in real life" (Nine Timeless Principles). Regardless of the reason for coming together, community gatherings can strengthen relationships by facilitating face-to-face interaction.

As technology progresses, that face-to-face interaction is increasingly becoming a gray area, with the sheer definition of "face-to-face" coming into question. Virtual reality aims to be a computer generated "environment so sophisticated that no matter how the user moves or interacts with the environment the user will not be able to use sensory cues to determine whether his or her current environment is real or virtual" (Biocca, 337). In the near future, face-to-face interaction could take place in such a way that the individuals engaged in that interaction wouldn't have to be spatially connected at all. In his book Virtual Realism, Michael Heim predicts that physical space will

gradually become less important in the facilitation of social endeavors. Instead, the transfer of mental data within a synthetic world will be the frontier for communication and interaction.

The successful shift to this new way of interacting with others will rely heavily on the technical planning that goes into the creation of the virtual environments. Computer scientists are currently involved in the design of "custom social universes" and in the process are "[opening] up a large set of social and moral issues concerning the nature of reality" (Oravec, 51). Because the computer scientists serve as architects, their roles become increasingly complex. When creating a virtual community, attention must be paid to the way in which members of the community will be able to interact. The designers of the community have to first establish the ways in which individuals will exist and communicate, and then they have to devise a way to actually implement those decisions.

Designers of virtual communities have recently adopted a planning methodology that has two keystones: social and interactional. As Peter Thomas points out in his book The Social And Interactional Dimensions of Human-Computer Interfaces, a widely-shared consensus among computer scientists is that "the use of [virtual communities] is not only a matter of an individual user and an individual system; it is situated in a context that involves other users, organizational constraints, policies, realities, and a culture of understandings that are created by, and determine, the uses of technology" (2). Since designers are now focusing on the way a user can access a virtual community via software and hardware, as well as paying attention to the social activity that takes place within that community, the stage is set for quick proliferation of successful virtual communities.

What some consider a "successful virtual community," though, others view as a negative vehicle for escape. The movement away from traditional methods of forming community has made some individuals uneasy about the long-term consequences of virtual communities. At the heart of their concern is the potential for negative psychological side effects caused from the inability to separate reality from virtual reality. Mark Slouka elaborates on this in his book War of the Worlds:

Cyberspace systems would develop and expand, fundamentally altering our definitions of physical space, of identity and community. Already it was routinely possible to interface simultaneously with a

number of different individuals in different parts of the globe. In the not-too-distant future, it would be possible to touch them. Feedback technology would provide the illusion of touch directly to your nervous system. It would be indistinguishable from the real thing. Physical presence would become optional; in time, an affectation. And, having marginalized the physical self, we would marginalize community (in the old sense of the word) as well; a new era in human evolution would be ushered in. (19)

It is that fear of the creation of artificial sensations (both physical and emotional) that lead some to oppose the spread of virtual reality as a medium for social interaction.

Howard Rheingold, one of the first people to write about the existence of virtual communities, views the future impact of online communities in a slightly different light. In his book The Virtual Community, Rheingold expresses his belief that real world communities will ultimately benefit from the spread of virtual communities. Although virtual communities are technologically advanced in the way they facilitate communication, the ideas behind them are actually quite traditional and somewhat utopian. Community members are judged on their intellect and skills, with little to no emphasis placed on gender or race. Ultimately, such ideals will permeate society as virtual communities become more commonplace.

For better or worse, virtual communities will undoubtedly play an integral role in the future of the human race. From blurring the lines between what is real and what is not to enabling a higher state of consciousness, virtual reality will bring about many changes in the way we define interaction with other individuals. With adept leadership in the digital realm, virtual communities are poised to be the arena in which meaningful relationships can be formed. As this occurs, social capital is created and the full benefit of a virtual community is realized.

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