

Panel

Intelligent Design or Felicitous Evolution? Sustaining Order and Activity in Online Communities

Organizers:

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Panel Topic

Community is once again a hot topic. In its broader sense, as a catchphrase for social collectivities ranging from diffuse social networks to explicitly defined entities such as work groups, it appears and reappears throughout the Group 2005 program. Whether it is explicit, as in the session on designing network communities, or implicit, as in the several papers that examine how artifacts enable people to coordinate their activities, few sessions fail to touch on the theme.

In this plenary panel, we bring together a group of diverse scholars and researchers to explore how — or whether — it is possible to ‘design’ community. On the one hand, we can certainly point to a series of successes: much, perhaps too much, of the research on online communities focuses on those that prosper. Yet, at the same time, the internet is littered with detritus of failed communities: some stillborn, and others that prospered for a time before falling into senescence.

It is also evident that when it thrives, community — again, using the broad sense of the term — can do so in an unlikely range of circumstances. In the online world it can be found in environments as rudimentary as ordinary mailing lists (witness Baym’s studies of mailing list based fan communities), and as rich as the vast and elaborate 3D worlds of massively multiplayer games. And in the face to face world, it not only exists in the cozy and convivial neighborhoods that give “community” such benign connotations, but in workplaces as unpromising as the insurance claims processing center in Wegner’s study of communities of practice.

Given this record, what can we say? Is success a matter of luck? Is it being at the right place at the right time? Have successful communities succeeded because, for one reason or another, they’ve managed to adapt appropriately to their changing

circumstances? Or is it the case — as the books and consultants that proffer advice on creating successful communities imply — that success is a matter of good design? And, if so, what does it mean to design community? Is it a matter of establishing appropriate norms and rules, clever incentive mechanisms, or being adept at social engineering?

In the panel, each participant will describe a community — however they care to construe it — and outline what makes it work. As moderators we are particularly interested in what enables a community to prosper over a long period of time, and how it successfully adapts to changes, or, conversely, how, confronted with new and unprecedented conditions, it fails to adapt and falls to pieces. With discussion among the panelists, and questions from the audience, we hope that this panel will shed some light on how social systems manage to sustain their activity over time and changing circumstances.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces – Asynchronous interaction, Collaborative computing, Computer supported cooperative work, Synchronous interaction, Theory and models, Web based interaction

General Terms

Design, Economics, Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Collaboration, Community, Computer supported cooperative work, Computer mediated communication, Design, Evolution, Online community, Virtual Community