Chapter 1: Introduction

1. The Purpose of Online Communities

Over the past decade, the Internet has become a major facet of our society. In 1995, the World Wide Web began its initial foray into popular culture, making a method of communication available to the masses that had previously been something only accessible to the technically inclined. This phenomenon has fostered an entire subculture of society, self-labeled as the "Geek Culture." The Web is just one part of the Internet, however. It acts as a gateway to other facets of the 'Net, such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) servers, e-mail mailing lists, and Multi-User Domains (MUDs), which are all designed to facilitate interaction between groups of people spread out all over the world.

The technology of the Internet is continuing to grow, as well. As the population adopts higher speed internet connections, previously restrictive technologies like video conferencing become available to the masses, for a fraction of the cost of previous methods. The proliferation of wireless networks allow us to regain our mobility as users, expanding the ability to keep in touch and keep informed into the realm of limitless possibilities. This is already beginning with the introduction of wireless internet access built into phones and provided at businesses such as Borders and Starbucks. As the physical technology of the devices continues to improve, I foresee a seamless integration of the online world and the real world within the next twenty years.

For now, however, the current technologies of the internet serve as a method of communication for people all over the world, allowing people of similar interests to

find each other, people that might not otherwise meet. This connection in turn fosters the development of personal identity as well as a sense of community that often carries over into "real life." Examples of this carry-over can be seen in various ways: ranging from the application of advice gained via a forum, to "meets" (gatherings of people who met through a shared online hobby, such as EverQuest, or a MUD), to styles of clothing attire (ThinkGeek, a popular "Geek" oriented web site sells clothing with slogans and quotes that are gathered from various online communities. I don't have that much of their garb, but I do have their "NINJ4" sweatshirt, which is from an online comic called MegaTokyo).

This still does not explain the purpose, the "why" of online communities. Amateur Radio operators have been talking all over the world for years, and if you look hard enough, nearly every topic that is discussed online has an equivalent demographic or group somewhere. This weeds out the possibility that it is the sense of global communication, nor does it suggest that it is the subject matter that serves as motivation to form groups online. So WHY online? Why do people choose this method of communication instead of others? More importantly, does this change over time for the individual, and has it changed on the whole since the initial "boom" of the web in 1995?

I see one big reason, and two secondary reasons that spin off from that. The big reason is empowerment. The user is making an active choice to go to a web site or sign in to a forum. Additionally, they become removed from the expectations of the people around them, causing freer expression and action than they would allow themselves in real life. I find myself often sharing things about my life that I would not normally share with what amounts to complete strangers, even talking to them at all. One particular person I know that frequents IRC channels rarely speaks at

all in real life, but is a chatterbox when he gets online. He is currently attending classes for computer graphics, and several of his classmates have never even heard his voice. I've asked him about it, and his response was that he just doesn't feel comfortable talking to people in person.

This removal from expectations ties into one of the secondary reasons people choose internet communities over real-life ones. Anonymity. There is no face, nor age, nor gender on the Internet, unless you choose to give it. Anonymity can be seen online in two ways: first, passive interaction, ie searching through articles and archives instead of talking to others allows for the ultimate anonymity when trying to learn more about a potentially embarrassing or private subject; second, the development of individual persona without the limitations of prior expectations from your real life peers, the exploration of other sides of your own personality in the relative safety of an anonymous medium. I found this second form of anonymity particularly relevant when I first began online with Dragonriders. I knew no one on the list, and felt that this type of anonymity would allow me to be viewed purely on my abilities, without age or appearance entering into it.

The third reason worth mentioning is accessibility. Accessibility is made up of two parts: geography and time. Since the internet is "only a phone call away," there is no physical geographic limitation on what communities you can participate in or people you can interact with. However, since most aspects of the internet (with the exceptions of live chat such as IRC, or MUDs) are a form of passive communication, you are not limited to when people are awake to communicate with them. The issue of time is less of an issue on the internet. There are no library hours for a research web site, nor scheduling conflicts between work and an online forum like there would be with a support group. For example (and this was

especially true before I got married), I used to generally sign in to AVATAR around 10 or 11 at night, and stay on until 3 or 4 in the morning. It was generally a bit quieter (mostly Australian players, plus a few American late night players), which allowed me to work more one on one with troubled players.

The question of whether or not the purpose of online communities has changed (both for the communities themselves and for the individual participants) is a bit more complex, and will be explored more fully in the next chapter ("Developing a Sense of Identity"). The short answer is "Sort of." Accessibility remains as a constant, a core fundamental of the internet. Empowerment stays roughly the same as a desired effect, though the methods of empowerment often change a little from something as basic as active choice in where one goes, to a more refined selectiveness in who they interact with, and establishing social hierarchy.

Anonymity is really what changes the most, both for the popular view of the internet, and for the individual participant. During the height of the internet boom (1995-1998), every media source that bothered doing a piece about the internet would include a segment about security online, protecting the children, and protecting your identity from stalkers. Six years later, the general populace is fairly 'Net savvy, and is a bit more relaxed about the whole issue of anonymity. The view of the internet has shifted, becoming more interactive, a way to establish and declare your identity. This change can be seen in the enormous growth of journaling (also called "blogging," derived from "web logging" or "weblog") sites such as LiveJournal, and personal weblog sites. This change is indicative of the modern Internet User's shift in personality, becoming more willing to declare who they are to the world. I cannot help but feel encouraged that this newfound confidence signifies a maturation of the Internet as a communication medium.

Weblogging is similar to any other traditional journal in that it has regular dated entries, and can range in topics from the deeply personal to the professional or esoteric. The difference is that this journal is made public, available for anyone to view. Additionally, many blogging systems have the ability to allow viewers to leave comments if they wish, making the whole process interactive as well as public. (An example of a weblog would be my website found at http://www.nadreck.org.)

2. My Personal History with Online Communities

I've participated in a variety of different online communities since I got my first e-mail account in 1996 (I had been browsing the internet for fully a year before that). I began with an e-mail based mailing list, writing fan fiction ("fanfic") based on the Dragonriders of Pern series of books by Anne McCaffrey. Corresponding with other writers and discussing the books, as well as our own story lines, created a sense of belonging that I really enjoyed. It was a community, albeit a still maturing one. (The differences between a mature community and an immature community will be expanded on in the next chapter.) I would stay up late in the night writing fan fiction stories to be sent out in the morning of the next day (I did not have a direct internet connection at the time... I would bring them to my father, and he would email them for me).

My time with the Dragonriders Mailing List did not end well, to say the least. I was a fairly tactless teenager with a penchant for strictly adhering to the guidelines set up in the books, and would not hesitate to tell people that they were wrong. They finally got fed up with my arrogance and found an excuse to ban me from the list.

Getting kicked from a mailing list was an extremely sobering experience. I drifted the internet, not really attaching myself to any group or site affiliation until a friend suggested I start writing for a Multi-User Domain, or MUD. I had no clue as to what a MUD was, but it sounded intriguing, so I found a way to get to the network address he had given me (this involved using an networking protocol I'd never used before called "Telnet"). This was Black Skies, a fledgling MUD that had just started, which lacked users and content.

Most MUDs are based at least loosely on the concepts introduced in the game Dungeons and Dragons. You role-play a character (determining your race from a list including things like gnomes, elves, and dwarves, and your class from things like mages, clerics, warriors, druids, and thieves) that wanders around in a text-based fantasy world, seeking adventure. This means that to be a successful MUD, you need to create something for the players to interact in and with. These are called "Areas," and writing areas was my first job as a designer. An area is comprised of "rooms" (describing the place you are in), "mobiles" (non-player characters used to progress the story), and "objects" (items used to augment your character, further the story, or add mood). This is all done from narrative-style text descriptions of the various rooms, mobiles, and objects. (This is also what separates MUDs from Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games, or MMORPGs. MMORPGS are the next generation beyond MUDs, involving graphics and sound. I'll get more into this in a later chapter.)

At the time, I had no idea what I was doing. I had never played a MUD before, and did not know what sort of writing would be necessary, or how the players would interact with an area I created. Resolving to remedy this, I did a search

online and found some preexisting MUDs. I chose one that reported being "friendly to newbies," and began learning how to play. This was AVATAR (or "Advanced Virtual Adventuring Through Alternate Realities"), where I have continued to play to this day (Black Skies unfortunately went the way of the Dodo fairly early on... for every successful MUD, there are 50 that don't make it). AVATAR proved to be an excellent place to learn the ins and outs of "MUDding", with a lot of great help files and tutorials. What really interested me about the place, however, was the sense of community.

AVATAR had a variety of methods of communication, ranging from personal to global in nature. It was when I started to interact with others on these "channels" that I really began to feel like I fit in. I began to establish a sense of identity as a player of AVATAR, learning the social aspects of the mud as well as the game play. After a few months of playing there nearly every day I began to think about the creation, development, and administration of such a community. I began researching the topic of online communities via the world wide web, and began taking an active role in what more I could do on AVATAR in particular.

After playing on AVATAR for roughly a year, I petitioned for the role of "Angel." Angels are a group of players dedicated to helping other players learn how to play and interact with others. I wasn't an Angel for very long, however, before I was invited to become an "Immortal" which is the group of people who develop, run, and maintain the MUD.

A bit of explanation should be made here. The general way most MUDs function is that players start out at low levels, and then gain levels as they play, until they finally reach a level that is the lowest rung of "Immortal" (the administrative side of

things). AVATAR doesn't work that way. There is no method for a player to "level to Immortal" on the MUD. Instead, they work on a nomination-based system: a player who has been helpful and appears to have a relatively balanced personality is nominated by an Immortal. The nominee is not aware they are nominated. Over the course of a few months, that nominee is watched by the rest of the Immortal staff, until a general consensus is decided that the individual is worth inviting to Immortal. That player is then invited in.

It was quite an honor for me to be invited, as it helped empower and validate my personality online, which had long-lasting positive effects towards my real life personality as well (this was really where the two personas began to merge). This was where I felt I could really do the most good, first by being allowed a creative outlet in writing areas (since only staff members may write areas on AVATAR), and second by allowing me to take a different role in the social side of the MUD. I was able to act as a mentor, advisor, counselor and confidante to a large group of people, and genuinely felt like I was making a difference in peoples' lives.

Over the subsequent years, I rose through the ranks, until I reached my current position of Host Senior. This involved a great deal of learning both in sociological/psychological fields, such as how to create and fairly enforce policies that deal with problematic players (ranging from simply swearing where not allowed or abusing a game loophole, to actual psychological disorders such as schizophrenia and manic depression), as well as technical knowledge such as area syntax, unix and remote networking, and technical writing.

In addition to acting in an administrative capacity on AVATAR, I also continue to play the game, as well as participate in several online forums such as the ones

hosted on AVATAR's web site and those hosted by popular sites such as Penny Arcade and User Friendly. This has allowed me to view these online communities from varying degrees of participation and growth, as well as see different types of communities (some become hostile over time, others are generally nurturing, others are initially hostile but become less so as you become more established within them). I find the knowledge I have gained useful both on a personal level in learning how to better communicate with others, as well as on an intellectual level for the greater understanding of how communities are established and maintained. Just how these communities ARE established and maintained will be addressed over the course of this essay.

3. A Brief History of AVATAR

A further expansion about AVATAR is in order, since that is where I've gained the most insight in my time online.

AVATAR was originally created in 1993 as a MUD called Farside. Farside was owned by a person who called himself "RoX," and was developed by a large group of immortals that were gained through the growing player base. At this point, it was still possible to "level to Immortal," so the Immortal staff was a large mishmash of people, some of whom never did anything, others became power-mad and negatively affected the balance of the game by creating overpowered weapons and armor and giving them away to friends. (This was curtailed heavily by the time I started playing. There were very few overpowered or “twinkish” items in the game when I started, a small enough number that they did not overly affect game balance any longer.)

It was during this time that a user named Snikt showed up. Snikt quickly rose through the ranks of immortals, until he not only gained access to the code, but became one of the most active developers on the staff. He had his own vision of what to do with the game, however, and after a while there was a falling out between Snikt and RoX. Ultimately, the staff chose sides in the disagreement, and those that sided with Snikt left with him to create their own MUD, using the heavily modified code that Snikt and others had worked so hard on. Thus AVATAR was created, back in 1995.

Over the following year or two, AVATAR grew quickly into one of the larger free MUDs on the internet, changing service providers several times as bandwidth became an issue. During this time a new player arrived known as Darii, who turned out to be the principal at a K-8 school in Ohio. She had started playing because so many of her 4th graders were talking about it that she wanted to see what was going on. Snikt and Darii struck up a quick friendship, and Darii quickly reached the senior ranks of immortals. Between the two of them and the help of several other immortals, the staff hierarchy was changed to the current system, creating defined ranks and responsibilities, firming up policies and rules, and setting up a mentoring system for introducing new immortals. Darii's time as a teacher and principal left her ideally suited to these sorts of tasks, which she continues to do now.

By the time I joined in 1997, most of this was already well established. There was a certain level of urban legend and hero worship created around the immortals, set in place at a the very beginning of the game. This instilled a level of respect that was invaluable in maintaining order and control even when the immortals themselves couldn't be on. (This process is one I am constantly coming back to,

trying to figure out what makes this so effective.) Additionally, a new class had just been created called "Angel," which was a group of players specifically dedicated to helping new players become established and comfortable with the game.

There was a great deal of development going on at this time. There were several enthusiastic and talented developers that were expanding on the capabilities of the game on a weekly (and sometimes daily) basis. In addition to programming and designing new features for AVATAR, there was also development being done for the "Revised AVATAR" called AVATAR2 or Abaddon. As time went on, however, the MUD hit a lull. The developers were all busy with real life (graduations, births, weddings, divorces, all the things that really OUGHT to take priority), and as a result, development slowed down a bit, and the Immortal presence on the MUD became reduced.

It was into this stagnation that I came to the attention of the staff. I had been playing for several months, and I was interested in helping however I could. Since the help files I had read on the MUD had said they weren't looking for new immortals, I opted to try and help with AVATAR2. I started out offering to help build, and quickly started sending in spell and skill ideas, class designs, and story additions. By the time I was invited to Immortal, I had already helped write several help files for AVATAR, and tested out several new additions to the game. (This is at least in part how I became noticed by the staff and subsequently nominated and invited to become an Immortal.)

After becoming an Immortal, I began writing areas and trying to get more involved in the design process. I was the first new Immortal in a year, and many of the other immortals were on hiatus, so I didn't have anyone around me to collaborate with,

which made the initial period a little hard to get used to. Since I didn't really have any sort of background in acting in an administrative fashion, I read through all the files and tutorials (mostly within the game. What few that weren't are either now defunct, or can be found in my bibliography). that I could, and asked questions when other immortals were around and available. Mostly, though, I strove to emulate the more level headed and helpful immortals that I had run into in the past. This turned out to be pretty effective, and over time I became comfortable with my role on the MUD.

Over the past year or two, there has been an upswing in activity again, as events or situations that had taken immortals away wrapped up or stabilized and more of the older immortals came back. New classes have been added, more immortals have been invited in, and overall development has picked up to a reasonably steady pace.

One major change, however, is the shift in the player base. The average player has become more knowledgeable about the game, and more jaded about the game play and staff than in the past. A generation cycle has appeared in the population as a sociological effect. First, players arrive and begin to learn the game. These players are generally enthusiastic, inquisitive, and at the same time a little timid around older players. As they grow into experienced players, they become comfortable with their knowledge of the game, and begin to help others. The most growth in terms of character development occurs during this time. This is also when most players start offering suggestions of what could be improved or changed about the game, and they play the largest "activist" role. After a period of time (how much time depends on the individual), players become jaded. They have played the game for months (often years), and have seen the game play dynamic change several

times. Many times, they have either had administrative run-ins with an Immortal or immortals, or at the very least have heard stories (many actually untrue) about some sort of punishment that they feel was unwarranted. At this point, the player either a) takes time off and comes back a bit less jaded, b) leaves, possibly to return for a brief period but probably not, c) sticks around, becoming more and more cynical until finally their actions make them unwelcome on AVATAR, or d) mellow out and become a "mature player," still playing but not with the frequency that they used to, learning to accept that things change and still finding enough value in the game to continue spending time there. Nearly everyone on AVATAR is in some phase of this cycle.

The cycle in players existed from the very beginning, but became far more pronounced during the lull in staffing and development. There was not a staff presence to reinforce the old impressions, and a lot of the innocence was lost as some of the original players entered that final stage of cynicism. While the staff presence has returned, there has not been any sort of effective effort to regain that level of reverence that was found before. This is not to say that things have run amok, so much as the nature of the social environment has changed. This is where the MUD stands currently.

In some respects, AVATAR could be compared to many real life communities. The player life cycle is in some ways similar to the cycle that many students go through between their freshman and senior years. As freshmen, students are unsure of how everything works, and are generally unsure of themselves. Over the course of their sophomore year, the students have a general understanding of the social and academic realities of the school. The junior year tends to have the largest percentage of activism and “school pride” (in my experiences, anyway). By

senior year, however, this has largely changed to indifference and in a few cases bitterness at the school. Despite the efforts of the previous year, there is often a sentiment that nothing changed, but generally rather than get bitter about it, the students become indifferent to the place the just spent four years in, focusing instead on what comes next – they know they are leaving soon.

Chapter 2: Development of Identity Online

1. Individual Identity

Before I get into the details, I would like to give a caveat to bear in mind in the course of this chapter: there are two types of user on the internet: passive users and active users. Passive users are those that browse the internet but never really participate and interact, save perhaps talking with already established friends. Active users are the focus of this chapter: it is active users that establish an online personality, and participate in online communities.

Identity is defined into two parts: individual identity, and group identity. I'll address individual identity shortly, but for now I think I should establish some working definitions of the terms. Individual identity is the core aspects of an individual personality that guide the actions and thoughts of the individual. Group identity is a bit broader: it influences the individual identity by providing a core set of fundamentals that an individual can use to identify with; additionally it can be defined as a sociological effect, defining the general actions of the group as a separate entity. In other words, individual identity is a persona, and can be influenced by the group identity of the groups they participate in. A group identity, however, is the amalgam of the individual identities of its members. This creates a cyclical pattern, which enables both the individual and the group to change and grow.

So how does the development of identity progress online, and what effect does it have on the user in the real world? To answer this question, it will make the most sense to start with individual identity, and then expand into group identity.

Initial development of online identity can be established in one of two ways. A user can choose to reinvent themselves online, allowing other aspects of their personality to act out. This is the concept of creating an "online persona," and is done for a variety of reasons, primarily to satisfy the desire for anonymity, though it is also done as a method of empowerment ("I can act however I want, because it's not really me!"). This sort of identity creation was far more common several years ago. It is fairly rare to see people lie about much more than their age these days. I believe this is partially because as the average internet user has become more aware and experienced, their desire for personal validation has increased -- this becomes abundantly apparent with the proliferation of weblogs on the world wide web. However, if the basis of your online identity is a fabrication, it becomes much harder to gain that communal validation.

The other initial method of developing an online identity is the one I used when I first went online, and has become the more common route. Instead of creating a new persona through role play, it involves translating your real personality into an online form. This is a far more honest approach, but still doesn't have any sort of forced honesty to it (ie, choosing to omit details about yourself or certain quirks of personality). There is nothing to force you to admit anything about yourself that you don't wish to talk about. What is left is only the traits you wish to try and foster. Really, the two options are "Persona Fabrication through Falsification" and "Persona Fabrication through Omission". I do not believe that a true transferal of a person's real world personality is possible at this stage of involvement (ie the initial stage of persona development). I have yet to see anyone disprove this hypothesis.

At this point, the user has developed a persona to start interacting with others

online. What happens at this point varies depending on what activities the user gets involved in. In the cases of synchronous forms of communication (chat rooms, IRC, MUDs, Instant Messenger applications), the persona grows and changes as the user becomes comfortable with the environment. Because of the nature of the medium, this type of communication is a blend of both written and oral forms of communication, and take on attributes of both styles. This means that the user gains the effect of physical distancing as gained in written communication, while retaining the mental intimacy of oral communication. This acts as a type of empowerment, lowering the communicative inhibitions of individuals, which is why users appear so much more willing to share personal things about their lives online than they are with a group in the real world. This phenomenon has become generally accepted in the research community (Johnson, 1998; Spears et al, 2001; Bruckman et al, 2002), and has certainly proven to be accurate in my own experiences. I recall a few years ago, a young woman on AVATAR was going through a particularly stressful breakup, and had come to me for a virtual shoulder to cry on. I didn't know her very well, but she did not hesitate to share personal details of the relationship with me, nor did I think this was anything strange: by then, I had become accustomed to the open nature of online communication. To add further irony to the situation, the relationship that had her so upset had existed entirely online, without even a phone call between the two. They felt that they had connected so well online that they felt their emotions were genuine enough to not need any further confirmation.

It is in synchronous communication mediums (IRC, MUDs, et cetera) that you are most likely to see a shift towards a more honest representation of the user's real personality. At the same time, however, the real world personality shifts to become more like the online personality, a spill-over effect of the sense of empowerment

gained through their actions online. The real world adoption of colloquialisms, habits, and attitudes familiar to an online community is also often seen as users embrace their new community, finding ways to further identify themselves as a part of the group.

Asynchronous communication mediums (mailing lists, newsgroups, et cetera) is where you are more likely to see people taking on personas as a form of role play. This allows them to explore other sides of their real world personality in a relatively safe manner, without fear of reprisal in the real world. At the same time, this does tend to cause a bit more of a divergence in personality between online and the real world, and in some cases withdrawal from the real world. In the cases of some people I know, this divergence in fact helped them come to terms with their real life sexuality, a topic that had plagued them for years. This divergence in real life and online personas happens more often with asynchronous communication because there is greater distancing between the individual and the group. There is more time between interactions, and those interactions are more like performances than day-to-day life, so there is less chance to accidentally slip out of character.

My experiences fluctuate between all these mediums. When I first started out online, I developed a persona for use in a role play situation. At the same time, though, I opted to merely augment my normal personality, so it really didn't bring anything new to the table in terms of role playing a different aspect of my real world personality. After drifting away from role playing in general, I slowly reinvented myself to suit the shift to more synchronous communication methods. Over time, my real life personality and my online personality became relatively interchangeable. At this point, I feel relatively comfortable saying that I am of ONE persona for both my real life interactions and my online interactions.

2. Group Identity

To reiterate from earlier in this chapter: a group identity is an amalgam of individual identities that make up a community. This amalgam can often take on a personality of its own, manifested by the general atmosphere of the community. This in turn influences the individuals of the community.

There are several ways to classify different online communities, which in turn helps explain how they develop differently. I am calling these classifications "archetypes" because (like human personality archetypes), they define a general basic behavior pattern, which guide the specific actions of the group. In addition to archetyping, there is another distinction worth making when classifying a community: whether the community is mature or immature as a community. I'll get back to that shortly.

I. *Community Archetypes*

There are a variety of communities out there. Nearly every demographic under the sun is represented online, in one fashion or another, if you know how to find it. However, this does not mean that they function that differently from each other. Really, there are only a few archetypal community models that are followed, each of which draws a lot of their behavior from the organizational models that govern them.

"Democracy" -- this archetype is defined by its administrative method. Democratic archetypes are generally "ruled" by a group of officials elected from the member community, sometimes with a specific leader as well, and sometimes not. These

communities can be generally characterized as catty, involving a lot of internal politics and posturing in attempts to gain power. These groups can grow quite large, carrying on from their own momentum, because they are generally formed with the best of intentions. It only takes a little bit of prodding for the most mature of these communities to regress to a more immature state, however. An example of this archetype would be the Dragonriders of Pern Mailing List.

"Anarchist" -- this is essentially every unmoderated newsgroup and forum out there. The name of the archetype really explains a lot about how this functions: every person for themselves, take personal responsibility for what you say and do (unless you WANT to get into a "flame war", which is a dispute between two or more hotheads, often involving scathing but sometimes childish insults thrown at each other). There is very little structure to this type of community, and any "personality" gained from this type of community is in fact gained from from the individual members. These types of groups generally start out "mature," with no one person or even group of individuals capable of seriously affecting the stability of the community as a whole: even when a few individuals get together and try to institute changes in organization, they are generally rebuffed by the rest of the group, if not outright ignored. That said, it instills the sense of "community" in only the loosest of terms.

"Dictatorship/Monarchy" -- when there is a clear leader/owner of a group, the rest of the community starts behaving very much like a dictatorship (whether benign or malignant in nature is irrelevant to this level of definition). AVATAR is an example of this type of organization. This type of organization has similar issues that the democratic archetype does: gossip and posturing is pretty common in this type of environment. However, unlike the democratic system, there are no bones

about who is in charge: there is ONE boss, and then those he appoints as he sees fit. Unfortunately, this also means there is the constant (though sometimes quiet) accusation of favoritism by the leader in whom is chosen to assist in the administration of the community. It differs from most "democratic" communities in that once it does stabilize into a mature environment, it generally stays that way (at least until there is regime change, but this is the case no matter how the community develops).

"Collaborative" -- professional communities are the primary types of community that fit this archetype. Kind of like a structured variant of an anarchistic type, these communities are mostly deed based, with subgroups working collaboratively on given projects. Everyone is working on something, and no one really is in charge, per se, though there are generally a few "respected members" who help more than most. An example of these groups would be the Open Source community. The Open Source community is a relatively amorphous collection of programmers, developers, and designers who work together or individually on their own time in an effort to advance the technology available to people. It is called “Open Source” because the source code of these technologies developed are available for free use by anyone who chooses to, as long as they don’t use it for commercial/financial gain. Entire operating systems have been developed under this premise, such as the various iterations of Linux, and BSD.

In addition to community archetypes, there are several other considerations in assessing a community. The stability (maturity) of the group for instance, plays an integral role in the life cycle of a community. Over the course of a year long period in a given community, the organizational structure can fluctuate wildly in response to the events that occur there. It is relatively common to see Dictatorship-based

communities shift to a Democratic-based system, or sometimes even into anarchy, in the cases where the leaders leave. Since so much of these communities is based on volunteer efforts, individuals often end up with direct power over whether a community lives or dies by controlling pivotal elements of the community (such as owning the server the community interacts on, or being sole owner of a domain name and web space). This often over time causes a shift into a Dictatorial mode of operation, which is often viewed with animosity by members who feel trapped or bullied. If that singular individual leaves, the community either: a) disappears and drifts apart; b) is given a direct successor, continuing the monarchistic trend; or c) is reacted to by creating charters and councils, shifting to a democratic model (with the issues that arise from that archetype).

In this respect, online communities really aren't that different from their real life counterparts. The departure of a successful coach from a sports team can often have a very similar destabilizing effect to a particularly effective development head leaving a group. That power vacuum is often filled in extremely ineffective manners, sometimes by people simply trying to help, but more often by people seeking to take control (and perceived "glory") for themselves.

II. *Immature vs Mature Communities*

When I talk about "immature versus mature" communities, I'm not talking about the maturity levels or ages of the participants. Age is largely irrelevant on the internet: there are few ways to truly verify a person's age, most of which are far more invasive to people's privacy than is worth the trouble. Additionally, age verification does not even begin to touch on the abilities or maturity of the individual, regardless of age. It is worth mentioning as a validation of my point that

on AVATAR, I have seen children as young as 7 reach the highest levels possible in the game, becoming well respected and knowledgeable members of the community. The issue of the maturity level of the community is more a matter of how they handle situations that effect the community. It is a matter of stability. If something comes up, do they panic, or start sniping at each other? Do relatively small administrative actions cause turmoil in the community at large, or does the community generally roll with the punches and work together to stay informed? How capable is the community at large of handling situations as they arise?

There are a few ways to identify immature communities from mature communities. Immature communities are generally a bit more vibrant, with many more energetic, impassioned users. This passion is both a motivating force for the growth of the community, and also a cause of the conflicts that contribute to the instability in the community at large. That is not to denigrate the abilities or level of involvement of mature communities, it is merely to make the distinction of how the members of the community come across as a whole. Mature communities tend to have a core group of active, dedicated members, and the actions taken are more deliberate and thought out.

In addition to the behavior of the members (energetic or deliberated), there are other ways to delineate immature communities from mature communities. There is a higher rate of turnover in the population of an immature community than there is in a mature community. People get burned out, or frustrated as things change heavily, often leaving in the midst of controversy or melodrama. People get burned out and frustrated in mature communities as well, but there is generally less melodrama involved in them leaving, and the chances of it being temporary while they deal with other things going on in their lives is significantly higher. In a lot of

ways I'd say this is the biggest difference between a mature and an immature community: because the members are more consistent in a mature community, there is more significant influence on the individual identity. You are more likely to have euphemisms and "in-jokes" that stick around over time, and spread to other parts of the internet. I think the most famous example of this would be "All Your Base Are Belong To Us," which is a reference from an obscure early 80s game called Zero Wing. It started out on one web forum, with people cracking jokes about it. From there, they started doctoring images about it, and it snowballed from there, spreading throughout the internet. It even got turned into a techno song, and began making forays onto some popular television shows (Regis and others).

3. Using an Online "Persona" to Enhance or Develop a Balanced Personal Identity

Over the course of the past chapter, I've mentioned several times that when someone first goes online and starts participating in a community, they develop a "persona" (a public facade, the personality projected to the public) that is either a complete fabrication, or an approximation of their real world personality. I've also commented that I feel that when in these initial stages of development, it is difficult (if not impossible) to create a truly honest representation of your real world identity.

This is only when the persona is first created though. As the individual's identity is developed online, the experiences gained through their online interaction affect their real world personality. At a certain point in a person's development online, one of two things happens: the two personalities (online and real-world) begin to blend together, or the two personalities become more distinct (the real-world

personality takes less and less responsibility for their actions online). This is where "net addiction" comes into play. By removing their real world personality from responsibility for their actions online, they are in effect causing multiple personality disorder. Many arrested pedophiliacs exhibit vestiges of this behavior. Though they are far too timid and reclusive to act in the real world, by going online, they are able to do what they want without taking moral and ethical responsibility for what they are doing.

In the case of where the personalities become more distinct and separated, it is relatively common to see increased bouts of depression. While I do not have scientific evidence to support my observation, I feel this increase in depression is partially because the real world "persona" ends up taking a back seat to the online persona in terms of social activity. At a certain point, the real world individual ends up feeling socially starved, leading to depression. While there have been several studies into the relation between depression and online activity, there has been very little research done on what effects the online persona has on the rate of depression.

When the online persona and the real world personality blend together, it is (in my opinion) a far more healthy development. As the two personalities begin to blend, the individual begins to adopt more and more colloquialisms from the communities they participate in online and in the real world. Ultimately, the online persona becomes a more honest representation of the real world persona only partially because the individual becomes more comfortable with the different environment. The major reason it becomes more honest is because the real world persona begins adopting the online persona's habits and euphemisms: the two personas become homogenized, neither side really absorbing the other, so much as intermingling to create a new, more robust personality that is more capable of being truly

represented both online and "offline" (the real world). I have observed this effect within myself over the past several years. As I've participated in various online communities, I find that I begin adopting phrases and actions from it in the rest of my life (on AVATAR, for instance, there is a long list of "socials", commands that add nothing more than emotive ability for players. I find myself often saying "blink" or "boggle" in real life, rather than performing the action).

The blending of the two personas (online and offline) that comprise the individual identity is also a useful method to encourage personal growth and empowerment, due to the empowering nature of online communal interaction. Faced with the successes of their online communication, the individual feels more comfortable trying to establish similar types of communication in the real world. Again based purely on personal observation and not from scholarly sources, I feel that this empowerment makes for more balanced individuals, better capable of dealing with the rest of the world. I would be interested to see further research delving into using online communication as a means to help autistic people learn to communicate in general.

Already "balanced" identities (ie, already possessing a healthy ego and self image) can also gain from the creation of a blended persona, though the change is not as visibly significant. Here the change is primarily a social one. By adding an online aspect of their personality, they are able to expand their social circle, and identify with others on a more global scale. This in turn encourages global community by breaking down prejudices developed through ignorance (such as being prejudiced against a given ethnicity or country because you've never met anyone from there).

Chapter 3: The User Experience versus the Administrator Experience

There is a distinct difference between the experience of participating in an online community as a user, and participating in that same community as an administrator. These differences can often create adversarial positions between users and administrators in a variety of situations, despite the actions, intent, or motive of either side. In order to better facilitate an explanation, it might be worthwhile to explain these two experiences individually.

1. The User Experience

The "User Experience" differs slightly depending on what type of community it is that the user is participating in. In the case of chat rooms and forums, it is generally the act of communicating with the community that makes them a user. In the case of MUDs and other online games (such as CounterStrike, an extremely popular online first person shooting game), being a user (and member of the community) is not only the act of communicating with others, but also participating in the game dynamic itself. I will be talking primarily about the "player" type of user experience, because it is what I have the most experience in, and covers the broadest spectrum of functions.

A "player" (user) has very general roles and duties that comprise the user experience. Most of the user roles and duties are "socially encouraged," ie not forced by policy or formal requirement but rather caused by a combination of social "peer" pressure and volunteerism. These include the act of participating regularly, helping "noobs" ("newbie," a new player still learning how the game or forum operates), and "vigilantism" (the act of the user taking the policing of

community rules to heart. This is encouraged generally only to a certain point: a simple "Hey, don't do that, it's against the rules" is acceptable, pursuing and harassing the player for their transgression is not). I've been a "user" in all of these respects in various communities.

Participation, helping newer players, and self-policing are general roles and duties found in nearly any online community. Game-based communities establish an additional role: that of the gamer. An additional goal or duty of the user is to gain mastery of the game, to understand the game dynamics, and the process of playing. Interestingly, players often will seek game mastery for years, but once they finally do, they often become bored and leave the community. This is not to say that they do not enjoy the social aspects of the community (and in fact this causes many to stay), so much as that without the challenge of the game, the community aspects aren't enough to keep them interested. This contingent of gamers is the "hardcore gamer" segment of the population, a group that is continually being more and more pandered to, since they drive game sales (as reported by GamaSutra).

2. The Administrator Experience

Administrators are users too. In fact, they have generally become administrators through participating in a given community heavily, and exhibiting a level head and talent consistently for an extended period of time. They also generally continue to participate or play as a user in addition to their administrative duties. In some cases, the primary difference between the user experience and the administrator experience is that the roles and duties of the administrator are mandated by their position, and they are often given additional tools to help facilitate those roles.

Overall, the entire administrator experience is much more regimented and formal in terms of duties compared to the general user. Administrators generally have positions and ranks that help dictate what their roles and duties are. The most common administrative position is that of moderator. This is largely a supervisor position, whose goal is to keep things on topic and generally enforce the basic rules (example: if there is no swearing allowed, a moderator would be empowered to deal with the player as necessary, such as removing the offending posting if possible, or punishing the player by reprimanding them or removing certain privileges from the user). Moderators cannot seriously alter how the community functions, however, nor are they (generally) involved in the policy creation process. This is the most junior level of most administrative hierarchies in online communities. This was my primary task for most of my time as an Immortal on AVATAR.

A variant of the moderator/enforcer role is that of a specifically public relations role. These administrators generally have duties involving raising the general awareness of how things are run and creating good player relations with the staff of the game or forum. Often, this also involves dealing with troubled users on a personal level, often taking on the additional role of confidante and counselor, depending on what problems the user might have. This is never an easy task regardless of how trained you are, and more often than not the people who end up in these roles have no formal training at all. I am a strong proponent of screening potential administrators for this reason: placing unbalanced or immature individuals in this position can end up endangering the real lives of other members of the community. While it is too much to ask that all people in administrative positions of this nature undergo at least some minimal form of training, I can't help

but feel that the communities they serve would benefit from it. It might seem silly to spend money on training an unpaid, volunteer staff (putting them through sensitivity and management courses similar to what many businesses use), but having seen firsthand the difference in how people with even a modicum of training handle tricky situations, I am convinced that it would be effective. (Several Immortals on AVATAR are teachers in real life, and went through such training in the process of getting certified.)

Beyond the public levels of administration, there is also the "developmental" level of administration, ie the people who implement the changes made either from higher up or from within their own level. This alters the vessel of the community (how the automated response mechanism works in an IRC channel, creating new areas in a MUD, altering how postings are listed in a forum, et cetera), which can have serious effects on the community as a whole. It is the job of the developer to ensure that the community environment continues to grow and adapt to the needs of the community.

The "top" of the managerial hierarchy is the policy creators, the senior administrators. These are the people who ultimately control any online community. This means that the maturity levels of this level of administration is key to the survival of the community at large, since their behavior will be reflected on the actions of the rest of the administrative staff. The primary role that senior administrators take on is that they are the ones who police the lower levels of administrator (such as the moderator/enforcer/public relations levels), ensuring that there isn't favoritism, cheating, or dishonesty among the staff.

But who watches the watchmen? In my opinion and observation, that is the

responsibility of the members of the community. If there appears to be a corrupt and irresponsible leadership in a community, there is very little you as a user can do to change this, beyond reporting as high in the ranks as possible in hopes of getting past the point of corruption. If that doesn't work though, the responsibility falls to each user to make the decision to leave and/or start a new community with a different power structure. If the corruption is truly widespread, then the community WILL cease to grow and sometimes even shrink or disappear.

3. Common Interaction Between Users and Administrators

There are several general ways that users and administrators interact. These can be broken down into four types: advisor/instructor, punisher, peer, and reporter. It is rarely so cut and dried as that, but if you were to delineate the types of interaction, this is how it would break down.

The role of advisor is when a user seeks out a administrator for advice or help. While initially this tends to stay on topic to the medium at hand, as the user becomes more comfortable with a particular administrator, it can often get into seeking advice and counsel about the real world issues the user is going through. (This progression is also an example of the empowerment I mentioned in the previous chapter.)

When I say "punisher," I'm talking about when it is necessary to take administrative action against a user, which can vary from a verbal warning to denial of service, kicking the user out of the community permanently. In the better communities that I know of, these actions are documented for review by the rest of the staff, and general guidelines as to what actions merit what punishments are

usually well known to both the staff and the user population. I don't know of any administrator who actually likes this part of their job. It IS, however, one of the most necessary forms of interaction to ensure the health of the community. There is a fine line to walk, though. While there will always be a few people who will feel singled out or put upon by getting taken to task for breaking a rule, if this becomes a common sentiment then there are other issues that the staff of the community must address (such as the potential of corruption on the staff).

When an administrator participates in the community as a user, not as an administrator, this would be a peer form of interaction. I commented earlier in this chapter that administrators are users too. Keeping that in mind, there are two ways to look at "peer" communication: "letting down your hair," dropping the professional facade just chatting; or "fraternizing with the rank and file," chatting with the rest of the community "as a user" because you want to keep tabs on what's going on. Personally, I tend to go more for the former than the latter. I participate in a community first and foremost as a user, then function in an administrative capacity, not the other way around. My observation of "admins" (administrators) who try to function the other way around has been largely negative. They are generally the most likely to lose sight of the goals of the community, because they lose touch with what it is like to be a user.

The fourth type of interaction between users and administrators is by far the most one-sided. This is the "public announcement" role. This is generally user-passive in nature, comprising of an administrator or administrators reporting or announcing recent changes in policy, or new enhancements to the environment (for example, new skills or spells or a new area in the case of a MUD, or the ability to have a customizable signature in a bulletin board system).

4. The Problems that can Arise

There are two primary issues that show up in nearly every form of online community, at some point in that community's life cycle. While they are loosely related to each other, neither can really be said to cause the other. They are both considered detrimental to the well-being of the community, and they both have no clear "hard and fast" solution. The order that I have placed them in this essay is entirely arbitrary.

"Us" vs "Them"

What I'm talking about here is the sentiment that there is an underlying animosity between users and administrators, regardless of whether or not there actually is. This is not the fault of either side, so much as minor miscommunications collecting over time to create a shift in public sentiment. This "ill will" builds up over time through a combination of overworked staff failing to convey a sense of professionalism to the public, absentee staff, and a misconceived sense of "oppression" on the part of users.

What makes this type of problem so frustrating is that no matter how much is done to improve the situation, this sentiment sticks around and stagnates. Short of shutting down the community and restarting elsewhere, it is virtually impossible to effectively remove. While you could remove troublesome users who you feel are perpetuating the sentiment, people still talk to each other, and it will just continue to spread.

"Entitlement" and "Privilege"

Robert Heinlein commented on several occasions that the United States had learned that it could vote itself "Bread and Circuses," and had proceeded to do so at an alarming rate. This is exhibited in a sense of "entitlement" to the niceties of life. This phenomenon is not just in the physical world or political arena, however. It also exists online, in a variety of forms. There is a proliferation of "warez" (pirated media, ranging from software to recordings of movies and tv shows) on the Internet, where (despite the realities of the economy), there is a sentiment that these things should be free and available to all. The user feels that they have a right to act as they so choose, and should be able to do so without repercussions. They feel entitled to the resources of the internet.

This is an extremely misguided sentiment. My personal belief that it is largely this disregard for others' time and energy that motivates the government to try and legislate the 'Net, which is in many ways contributing to the problem instead of providing a solution to the issues. The internet is still a very young medium, and must muddle through its excessive immaturity if it is going to grow into an effective resource. There must be an effective balance between free resources and compensated resources (paying the people who provide those resources).

Now that I've finished ranting about how the user needs to respect the rights of the owners of the material they are stealing, I'd also like to comment that software developers and media agencies need to do their part as well. Companies gouge the consumer for inordinate sums of money only to provide buggy software, then charge again for the bug fixes. Additionally, the consumer does not have the same consumer protections that most other industries have enforced by the government.

They complain about software piracy, but fail to uphold their part of the deal in providing a quality working product.

That is all on a more macrocosmic level of the computer community as a whole. On a more microcosmic level, specifically online communities, the effects of "entitlement" are generally seen in the form of disrespect towards the staff and the community as a whole, of abusing the environment to get what they want, and complaining if things are changed from what they want. Generally online communities are free, and the personal projects of a few dedicated individuals. This is often completely ignored in favor of complaining about any changes. Rather than viewing the participation of a free, privately owned community as a privilege, people begin to view it as their right.

Methods to Fix or Ease these Problems

While there is no quick and easy answer to these issues, there are several things that can be done that will (over time) help alleviate the problems. The first and best answer is open and honest communication. While making private administrative actions public can often cause the opposite of the intended affect, encouraging public awareness of the rules and policies as well as improving visibility of the staff in positive situations can do wonders to improve overall morale of the community. This helps reduce the symptoms of "us vs them" as well as the sense of entitlement: the general members of the community better appreciate the work that has been put in by the staff, because of more open channels of communication between the staff and the public. Likewise, the staff members are more likely to keep in touch with what is happening with the general populace this way.

While Avatar has a general understanding of this concept, it still has trouble with effective implementation of it. It suffers regularly from entitlement and "us vs them" animosity, which is occasionally addressed by the upper echelons of staff. The changes rarely stick, however, which is one of the reasons Avatar has failed to continue to grow as a community. This is not to denigrate Avatar: it is quite stable and relatively mature community. However, it will not grow farther without addressing these issues.

The Penny Arcade forums are a bit better about the concept of communication. Looking at the social structure of the environment, this might seem strange to say: designed as a monarchy/dictatorship with anarchistic tendencies, it has a lot of randomness, and a high turnover rate among its community: few people are there for more than few months before leaving (possibly to return after a while). A large percentage of the active posters have start dates within the week or month. That said, the moderators take an active role of participation in the community, and are generally selected from the more respected and consistent members of the group. The developers are also active participants (Ramius runs the server, maintains the underlying code that makes the forums run, and adds enhancements as they are requested. He's also a regular poster on several of the sub-communities that make up the forums). This level of communication helps foster continued growth in the community, and very little sense of "entitlement" or "us vs them" sentiments.

Chapter 4: The Development and Deployment Cycle

As a community administrator or developer, it isn't enough to want to start an online community. Due to the technological nature of the medium, a certain understanding of the technology used is also necessary. This understanding can take two forms (ideally, a balance between the two is the most effective): you can either develop the community infrastructure from scratch, or you can use middleware and pre-existing environments. (An example of development from the ground up would be slashdot.org developing Slash, a content management system that they wrote entirely themselves. An example of using pre-existing environments would be Penny Arcade using pre-developed software such as phpBB, then modifying it to fit more exactly their needs.)

Development from the Ground Up

There is a lot to be said for developing a custom solution from scratch. It is much easier to get exactly what you want out of the application, with no unnecessary frills, and no compromises as to how you want it to work. This makes it an ideal solution for groups with particularly unique needs, or large companies that are interested in creating a custom solution.

The ironic thing about this is that most of these "custom solutions" end up becoming "middleware" (software and technologies made available for others to use for their own needs. These are the "pre-existing environments" that I'll get to shortly). There are very few middleware solutions out there that were designed originally to be middleware. Most of them were the projects of a company or individual(s) to fit their specific needs. Then (depending on the product), the

developer(s) realize that it could be useful to others and make it available, or the company funding it closes, and the software becomes publicly available.

There are some pretty significant drawbacks to developing a custom solution to your needs. It is a LOT of additional work: phpBB, a popular open source bulletin board system, has 9 full time staff and dozens more people who assist when they can. The program is several thousand lines of code, and continues to grow. Not only does it take considerable energy and time to make such a program, but also expertise: most of these applications are written in a combination of several programming languages, such as Perl, PHP, and C. Additionally, knowledge of graphic design and layout is also necessary in environments that involve graphics (anything that is going to be based on the Web, for instance). It should NOT be attempted by the inexperienced. A better solution for them is to use a pre-existing environment.

Development in Pre-Existing Environments

The concept of using pre-existing environments ("middleware") more extensively has really taken off in the past few years. This has been most documented in the gaming industry, where it has become increasingly difficult to push technology forward ("reinventing the wheel") while still getting a marketable product out on schedule. With this realization, many companies have turned to "middleware" solutions such as licensing a game engine (what dictates the physics of the game world, et cetera) from companies dedicated to producing middleware, and then developing their game based on that pre-existing technology.

The game industry is not the only place where this has become prevalent, however.

When the world wide web first became popular in 1995-96, the majority of websites out there were handmade. Those that weren't were either prototypical experiments in automating processes (the precursor to the current use of Java, JavaScript, Perl, and PHP), or were custom solutions built from the ground up for major corporations. As the community-at-large of 'Net users has matured in their use of the environment, so too have their tools to do so. There has been a significant shift that I have seen from writing sites by hand to using pre-existing technology to create the desired environment.

My own personal experiences with this phenomenon is primarily in the "blogging" realm. Online journalling, "weblogging", or "blogging", has been around for a very long time. It is not until recently, however, that the process of getting that content onto a website has been streamlined and automated. This allows users to spend their time creating content, instead of worrying about getting it formatted properly. This automation is due in large part to the development of middleware.

Instead of forcing users to understand and program reams of their own code, pre-existing solutions allow people to gain complex features that they might not have been able to develop on their own. Additionally, most of these systems are open source, which allows the user to view the code itself, and learn from it (and sometimes even modify it).

About a year and a half ago, I started redesigning my website. It had become stagnant, and I invariably spent more time rewriting the design than I did actually creating content to put up. There were a lot of new features that I'd seen around the web that I wanted to implement, but I wasn't sure how to implement them, or even where to begin. After spending several weeks researching, I discovered a

method that seemed like it would work: Movable Type. Movable Type was (and is) a weblog system that could also serve as a rudimentary content management system. A content management system (CMS) is a program designed to manage and streamline content of a variety of types (images, text, et cetera), to allow for separation of the design of a website from its content. If you, as the designer, feel the need to change how the website is laid out, you are free to do so, without worrying about losing or damaging the text and images of the site. A CMS can also do a lot of the little niggling detail stuff, such as properly dating an article, spell checking, copyrighting, linking to related articles and the rest of the site, et cetera.

I have not made any major revisions to my website in nearly a year, now. I have made minor improvements and changes, but largely I've been able to ignore the design (once I finally got the design to a point that I liked), and just focus on creating content: essays, images, and journalling. At this point, I have just under 200 individual entries, a number which I expect to more than double in the coming year. Additionally, every entry has the ability to be commented on by any viewer who happens to decide to do so. I am positive that if I had chosen to try and develop the background code necessary myself, my website would still be in the planning stages.

I think I've made it pretty clear that I'm highly in favor of middleware and using pre-existing technology whenever possible. That said, I greatly appreciate the efforts of individuals developing their own custom solution from the ground up, if for no other reason than that the custom solution of today is the middleware of tomorrow. This is also why I'm a big proponent of the Open Source Community, which comprises of a large group of developers who work on projects in their free time, making their source code freely available to all. These open source developers

tend to work collaboratively, each developer enhancing the work of what has been done before, creating an ideal blend of building from the ground up and then enhancing that work.

Chapter 5: What Do We "Owe" the User as an Administrator?

Before I go any further, I would like to clarify my stance here. There is a distinct difference between "rights" and "expectations." While both can be considered something the administrators owe the user to at least address, they have different priorities in terms of actual implementation. This difference in priorities also changes depending on whether it is a pay service or a free service, which I'll address shortly.

The task of administration varies greatly depending on the community, the social structure of that community, and the rules and policies created for the community. For example, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) as a general online community has not significantly changed since I first went on it in 1996. The social and demographic makeup of the population is the same as it was then: mostly 13-20 year olds, with a small sampling of people higher and lower than that. Additionally, few (if any: I have yet to find one) IRC servers have created and enforced any sort of social policies or structure: every channel on the server is essentially self-contained, with no sort of restrictions on moderator actions beyond what their own morals tell them. There is no recourse for mistreatment other than leaving: attempting to contact a server administrator about abuse from a channel moderator is often grounds for immediate denial of service (their job is dealing with abuse of the server, not abuse of the users).

A counterpoint to how IRC functions would be AVATAR. AVATAR has a codified set of policies and rules that apply to both the general population as well as the staff. Rights of the user and rights of the staff are explicitly laid out, as are expectations for each in terms of behavior. This written groundwork allows for a

greater scope of communication: by making clear what the relationship between the staff and the user is, less time is spent establishing a basic framework for communication, and can instead be focused on the individual topic at hand. There is a specific chain of command that can be used to report offenses or abuse, as well as staff-specific rules of behavior that cut down the potential of staff abusing their privileges. Additionally, the rules are still relatively flexible: they can be amended as needed as things change and grow.

Neither method is necessarily "correct" (they both work after a fashion), though it can be safely said that having at least some codification of rules and recourse for abuse allows for growth in the community. How much codification is a question left up to the individual community, based on their needs.

Fee Based Services

In the case of fee services, it is virtually a requirement to have some sort of staff culpability to the expectations of the users. By paying for the service, the user can reasonably expect courteous treatment by the staff, among other things. They can also expect reliability of the service itself (ie the server should not be crashing often, the connection to the internet should be reliable, and that connection should not be "laggy" -- slow connection speeds).

At the same time, pay services are faced with less expectation to keep the populace informed: with greater "customer service" comes more customer-business philosophy. The administrative staff of the service are kept relatively informed of what sort of changes are in process, but the general populace is kept relatively in the dark until whatever changes are in store are about to be implemented. This is

partially to reduce liability from people joining the service with the expectation of options that end up never being implemented.

Pay services are generally some sort of game -- with the wealth of free chat services out there, it is not economically feasible to have a purely chat-based pay service. There has to be something else to draw in the user, even if most of what they do is some form of chat. This "other draw" causes these services to generally have a larger population than other services: AVATAR is free and has roughly 4,000 players worldwide; Sony's EverQuest is a pay service and has roughly 445,000 subscribers globally. Square Enix's Final Fantasy XI, which is not yet released in the US, has 250,000 subscribers in Japan alone. The most abundantly obvious reasoning behind this is advertising: pay services have money for effective marketing, free services (generally) do not. Pay services also generally have the money to spend on production, using more advanced technology and proprietary software.

Free Services

The biggest feature of free services is volunteerism. The staff is generally comprised of volunteers pulled from the general population, giving their time and expertise to the community for no cost (and often pay the expenses of keeping the service running out of their own pocket). Development is done because the developers wish to improve the service, and is done out of good will.

Because of the volunteer nature of the community, there is less of a "customer service" atmosphere, which is both a good and a bad thing. While it does mean that the general user is kept better informed as to what changes are occurring, it

also means that you are more likely to have to take your chances on actually finding someone to help you if something comes up. This issue, however, is somewhat negated by the greater general knowledge of the population at large: you are more likely to be able to get your question answered by asking the general community instead of having to ask staff specifically.

The biggest issue with free services is the whimsical development cycle. Any advancement in the technology of the service is at the mercy of developers who are not only not getting paid for their effort, but also generally have full-time professional jobs elsewhere. It is a labor of love, and as such if the love isn't there (burn out, work getting in the way, relationship issues, et cetera), development ceases. Also, since the developers are squeezing in time to do the development around the rest of their lives, they generally don't have time to implement some of the features that pay services are able to supply.

An example of this is the difference between MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). Technically, MMORPGs are the same concept as MUDs (and vice versa). The difference is that MUDs are text-based, and MMORPGs are graphics based. Likewise, MUDs are (generally) free, and MMORPGs are (again generally) pay. What this comes down to is the amount of time and energy the developers are willing and able to spend creating their product. Graphics are far more resource intensive, which makes it economically unfeasible to maintain in a free situation, and requires a much greater attention to development of the game engine than in a text based situation.

This combination of volunteerism and scarcity of resources cause there to be a

slightly different focus on what the administrator "owes" the users. Though there are often rules and guidelines for staff behavior, at the same time it is fairly common to have that coupled with the clear statement that the user has only ONE right: the right to leave. Everything else is an expectation: the expectation of continued development, the expectation of fair treatment by the staff, and the expectation of stability of the service. None of these things are guaranteed, and recourse for failure of any of these expectations is extremely dependent on the policies created by the administration of the individual community.

Both pay and free services have benefits and drawbacks. Pay services have higher production values and larger populations, but generally there is less persistent community on pay services (though strong, viable communities can and do grow out of these environments). Free services tend to have a more consistent, helpful community, but are more subject to internal politics and inconsistent development. Personally, I find that I do best in free services because I prefer helping others, and find it easier to do so in when surrounded by the volunteer philosophy of free services (I tend to avoid getting involved in the politics of a community). That said, it is up to the individual user to decide what community best fits their personality.

Chapter 6: The Transition from Online Community to Real-Life Community

Over the course of this essay, I've discussed my thoughts and observations on the development of both online communities and online personalities from their early stages on through their growth into maturity. There is one phase that I've largely not touched upon, one that very few online communities reach: the transition from "online community" to "real-life community." What I'm talking about is when the online community matures to the point where it facilitates real world interaction between its participants, allowing the community to expand its sphere of influence into the real world in a direct fashion.

I know of several communities who have made this shift into existing both online and in the real world (and started online). The first would be the regular EverQuest Meets, where people who met and became friends on EverQuest are given the chance to meet each other in real life, and expand their friendships into the real world. This is largely self-contained: the method for community growth remains solely online. If anything, this is a recognition of the social ramifications of the medium. My personal experiences have involved a similar social expansion with AVATAR (instead of EverQuest). A few years ago, Snikt (the owner of the MUD) began holding something called "MUD Meets" at his house, which was basically a weekend of any AVATAR player coming down and having a good time. There have been as many as 20 people there at any given time, ranging in ages from 18 to 60 and from locations as distant as the Netherlands and England. In fact, Snikt met his wife on the MUD, and got married at one of these very MUD Meets.

Community growth isn't necessarily always social in nature, however. For example, Renderosity started out as an online forum dedicated to 3d computer graphics and art. They grew to become a well respected and valued resource for members of the industry, and finally reached a point that they decided to expand into the real world by publishing a monthly magazine. The staff is comprised of several members who have donated their time, and the articles are written by forum members (they even sign their user name instead of their real name in most cases). While I was not that great a fan of the magazine's format (the information was good, but it was not well written, the typeset was bad, and page layout was poor), I thoroughly respect the endeavor.

I have had personal experience in this in this type of online-to-real-life expansion, as well. Through AVATAR, myself, my brother (who also plays there), and Snikt jointly invested in the creation of a new company called UberCon, which is dedicated to the creation of gaming conventions. Especially in the beginning, we really utilized the resources of AVATAR to help get this started. The majority of the staff for UberCon are either players or staff on AVATAR. Even the players that did not directly help in the organization or manning of the convention helped indirectly by acting as a sample pool to bounce ideas off. This has thus far been successful: our first convention was in February of 2003, and pulled in around 500 attendees despite a major blizzard shutting the roads down everywhere in a 3 state radius of the convention. Our second convention is planned for October of 2003, and looks like it will even stronger than before.

It was this transition into real life that really caused me to start verbalizing what I'd been thinking about for so many years. It made the whole concept of virtual socializing seem so much more tangible and legitimate. Since I first met some of

my online friends in real life, I have met nearly 60 online personalities from AVATAR alone, and have yet to be disappointed with the experience. That I have yet to be surprised by who was at the other end of the online communication I think reinforces my point that the distinction between real life communities and online communities is beginning to become less necessary, and even beginning to break down.

That is not to say the distinction will completely go away, nor should it. The Internet is a supplement, NOT a replacement, nor even an equal to the real world. Online communities can grow and evolve and prove to be effective methods to communicate and socialize and share resources, but at certain point they must gain a real world counterpart if it is going to continue to grow. I'm looking forward to seeing what the next decade of growth does to the Internet as a society, as more and more cross-pollination between online and the real world begins to occur.

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