ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES – A PRACTICAL SHORTLIST

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KEYWORDS
Online communities, gaming, shortlist.

ABSTRACT

Relating to the shifting role of users in becoming active contributors to the design process, in this paper we look into online gaming communities. A shortlist of conditions for such communities to exist is given, and potential benefits for designers are listed. From these, five guidelines for creating such a community are proposed, which are examined in the light of setting up an online community for a game about climate change that is being developed, which is named “Clima Futura”.

INTRODUCTION

So, as designers we have managed to get our game adopted by a number of users. What comes next? Ideally, we would want these users to create a community; a living social context that revolves around our particular game.

In this paper, we will look into this social phenomenon, as it can help developers in (re)designing and refining an application by for example getting feedback from within the supporting community and lengthen the application’s lifespan by ultimately, and under the right conditions, the community taking over the development role.

This examination is based on the limited amount of literature that exists on online communities that support either games or “serious” applications, and from my own experience of active participation in and observation of such a community over a period of 8 years.

First, we will look at how to define online communities. Next, the potential benefits for game developers are given, and the conditions for an online community to exist are examined. Based on this, we provide five guidelines for setting up an online gaming community, both in theory and from practice, the latter based on a game about climate change, “Clima Futura”, and draw a conclusion.

DEFINING “ONLINE COMMUNITY”

To start with, Stolterman et al. (1997) define an online community as “a group of people trying to achieve something as a group of people that are using new information technology as a mean”. Simply said, a group of people join forces for a period of time to discuss and contribute to a topic, not in real life, but using a virtual network such as the Internet.

People come to online communities seeking information, encouragement and conversation (Arguello et al. 2006). They gather around similar interests, and form communities as it lies in man’s nature (Kihlman and Johansson 2000), and they contribute to get quicker answers to their questions, to show their skills, and more conceptually, because of compassion and respect for others (Kollock 1999).

For those not familiar with the topic, think of a gardening convention: participants gather around a topic of their interest, show their skill, and help each other. Talk is not restricted to this particular topic, though; participants will also engage in all kind of small-talk not related to gardening. Newcomers, too, will come to the convention with particular questions, and if not responded to correctly, they will presumably not participate in future conventions.

BENEFITS FOR DEVELOPERS

Creating and supporting a “healthy” online community provides the developers of an application a number of benefits, that can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, contributing online communities lengthen lifetime of an application by expanding it in modifications, refining it with new rule sets, maps and exploring new modes of usage (in games, gameplay). A typical example is the Quakeworld community, which has driven the creation of new game clients, modifications and novel ways of gameplay from within its community, lengthening the game’s lifespan from 1996 up to the present day.

Secondly, online communities provide valuable feedback (after discussion, not loose-cannon) and ideas on which future development can be based.

Next to this, online communities provide support (help and possibly patches etc.) to the application’s users.

Finally, although marginal, communities can act as talent-pools through which developers can contact talented contributors (on all aspects of the community, from modding, skinning to documentation, concept art and technical support) directly and thereby bypassing the normal pyramid-like model of working oneself up in the business (similar to Frith’s pyramid model from popular music in Shuker 2001, pp. 114).

All of this is done at no cost for the original developers at all, as community members use their own resources for participating in the community. The question however is, if
The fourth and last condition is that of beliefs, and the social rules and policies it uses. This is made up of a shared common knowledge within the community, its popular values remain more or less fixed or stable, thereby providing the secure foundations on which a community can be built.” (McArthur and Bruza 2001) Thirdly, a community needs a context; “attributes whose values remain more or less fixed or stable, thereby providing the secure foundations on which a community can be built.” (McArthur and Bruza 2001) This is made up of a shared common knowledge within the community, its popular beliefs, and the social rules and policies it uses. Based on these conditions, and partly following Kihlman and Johansson (2000), a number of practical guidelines for creating and supporting an online community can be defined:

- Create a virtual meeting space, which is stable, reassuring and interesting. This mostly means creating an interesting and appealing homepage, that attracts the people that the designers want as participants. Next, it should be made possible for participants to add content and discuss it with each other, which can typically done by setting up a forum. Following our gardener convention metaphor, this forum should minimally contain the following topics: newcomer information, technical support, content sharing and a place for off-topic discussion.
- Give the members influence over the information, which means that participants can contribute without censorship, and have the possibility to get to know others by being able to know who posted what message, and by being able to reply to that message.
- Give the members influence over the environment, so that they can modify it in coherence to their needs (“customization”). Participants should be allowed to create new forum topics, choose a color theme, and even modify the shared interest. In many online communities, the shared interest is modifiable by the community members, making it a major topic of discussion and participation (“modding” for games, for example). This means however, that this shared interest should be made modifiable by its designers, for example by being made up of customizable modules.
- Give the community a history, so that discussions and other shared events are recorded and can be referred to in the future. Such a documentation acknowledges what the community can accomplish and acts as a guideline for social rules and behavior.
- Give the community a means of punishing and regulation; a small group of participants will inevitably break social rules, and a larger group will ask for drastic changes, all of which have to be regulated.

**CONDITIONS FOR AN ONLINE COMMUNITY TO EXIST**

Setting up an online community should first involve taking into account the necessary conditions for such a community to exist (McArthur and Bruza 2001), which are, in short: purpose, commitment, context and infrastructure.

First of all, a community needs a purpose, which can either be a practical purpose/goal, such as limiting carbon dioxide emissions in a certain area, or (and often so) a shared interest, such as (parts of, or as an activity playing) a particular game.

Secondly, another condition is that of commitment, which stands for “the repeated, active participation committed to the purpose of the community” (McArthur and Bruza 2001). Here, there are two important interrelated factors in success: (1) that of the community’s willingness to respond (reciprocity), and (2) that of the individual’s willingness to stick with the group over time. If a first-time participant, a newcomer, does not get a reply within a certain amount of time (which no study has yet attempted to measure), he/she is likely not to come back ever again.

Thirdly, a community needs a context; “attributes whose values remain more or less fixed or stable, thereby providing the secure foundations on which a community can be built.” (McArthur and Bruza 2001) This is made up of a shared common knowledge within the community, its popular beliefs, and the social rules and policies it uses.

The fourth and last condition is that of infrastructure being in place, which facilitates communication. This supporting, physical infrastructure is made up of technology and shared resources such as databases, web servers, chat programs (such as mIRC and MSN Messenger), forums and websites.

**GUIDELINES FOR CREATING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY**

Following these guidelines, we can define how an online community for the previously mentioned climate game “Clima Futura” can be set up, which is an actual statement from the promotional part of its proposal document. First looking at the four conditions stated, we might say that climate change is an uniformly shared purpose. For commitment, context and infrastructure, we can follow our guidelines of setting up a community:

First, we should creating a virtual meeting place. For Clima Futura, we developed a website that was to appeal specifically to the target group, without losing valuable scientific information (which can be found at http://www.climafutura.nl, which is securely hosted at the university). Basing color and composition on popular gaming sites and putting the game trailer at the introduction page, it was made to attract and maintain attention. On linked pages, it facilitates the necessary scientific background of the project and game, a way of contacting the design team (an electronic form) and it shows the design team visually (as if to say “you can be part of this team”).

An important missing item is the forum, which should be built to facilitate an community. This can be done using widely used free, open-source packages and creating the topics mentioned above, and adding a topic on scientific background as it is a major part of the project (and game). Some time having passed since being at the forefront of attention, the forum should be brought to the attention of potential participants by word-of-mouth, both online and in real life. Online, this might be done by posting on existing game forums, by using viral adverts, or by setting up a Clima Futura Hyves or Facebook account.

Next, we should give the members influence over the information. Using an open-source forum package, such as
A division that is gaining importance, but which we have not discussed is that of the virtual environment the community uses for communication. This can be external to the community’s shared interest, which is most common. Think of an online community about self-made art such as Deviantart (http://deviantart.com, last retrieved on August 6, 2008) or discussion boards on books, et cetera. The shared interest does not support communication as a tool.

Next to being external to the community’s shared interest, communication can be internally facilitated by it, in other words embedded in, the shared interest, such as a game or an application. Communication then is exclusively facilitated by the application’s interface. This often leads to hybrid constructions in which in-game communication takes place and therefore supports in-game collaboration, which is extended by external facilities such as forums, or real-time external communication tools such as available in Valve’s Steam (http://www.steampowered.com, last retrieved on August 6, 2008).

Within this paper, we have mostly looked at the first of these. It is however difficult to establish the exact impact of virtual environments themselves allowing for community building, as most research on this topic is very recent and as of yet difficult to analyze unambiguously. Typically, this is an interesting topic for future research in general, but also regarding Clima Futura. Most research in this chapter being based on long standing communities, it is important to emphasize that community building is difficult, as it is inherently dependent on human beings that have a multitude of different online activities to choose from. Guaranteeing a community to be successful is therefore never possible, but future research might statistically test the importance of the aspects mentioned in this chapter to provide some sort of measure of successfulness.

Last but not least, the only risk in creating an online community is that the community’s views can clash with those of the game’s development company. When an online community comes up, the developers in a sense lose part of their ownership of their application (Cox 2000). Therefore, the original developers must include a strategy for introducing changes without alienating the existing community, and should therefore be prepared to go into discussion with the community when necessary.

CONCLUSION

Within this paper, the notion of online communities has been discussed. This was done based on the observation that an increasing number of people is contributing to the design process of multimedia applications by providing content created within such communities.

Having assessed possible benefits, such as aiding newcomers and getting feedback from within the community, a number of guidelines for setting up an online community has been given. These guidelines can be summarized as creating a virtual meeting place, giving community members influence over the information that is shared, giving members influence over the virtual environment, giving the community a history,
and finally, giving the community a means of regulation and punishment.
Surely, there is the risk of a community clashing with the developers’ views, but having distinguished potential benefits (for both sides), this is a risk that is worth taking.

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