Nine Principles for Making Virtual Communities Work

By Mike Godwin

To get an idea of how fast the move to cyberspace is occurring, compare it to the growth in suburban housing in postwar America. David Halberstam writes in The Fifties that "In 1944 there had been only 114,000 new single houses started; by 1946 that figure had jumped to 937,000; to 1,118,000 in 1948; and to 1.7 million in 1950." Halberstam attributes the growth to Bill Levitt's innovations in mass-produced housing, coupled with the immense postwar demand for such housing.

Over the last decade and a half a similar boom has occurred in "the Matrix" - the term John Quarterman, of Matrix Information and Directory Services (MIDS), uses for the global web of connected computer networks and conferencing systems whose largest component is the Internet. In 1980 liberal estimates of the number of people online were in the hundreds of thousands - now they are in the tens of millions. "We estimate approximately 29 million users on the main global distributed networks in the Matrix, as of October 1993," writes Editor Quarterman in Matrix News, a newsletter published by MIDS. "This is not all of the Matrix, but it is the largest distributed networks in the Matrix, namely FidoNet, UUCP, BITNET, and the Internet." Add in commercial online services such as CompuServe, Prodigy, and America Online, Quarterman says, and you may get nearly 35 million users. And that doesn't even count those who participate in bulletin board systems (BBSes) that aren't connected to any network.

Of course, not everyone with an e-mail address actually spends much time online. Clearly, a lot of people see a value to having that e-mail address, just as many people in the postwar world saw value in owning a house. "If a new car was a status symbol, a house was something else," Halberstam writes. "Owning a house came to be the embodiment of the new American dream."

But in cyberspace, increasingly, the dream is not just "owning a house" - it's living in the right neighborhood. One of the reasons the Well (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), which has only about 9,000 registered users, is such a tony address in cyberspace is that the perception of community is so strong. A few Well users argue that, in fact, this perception is illusory, but they ignore the fact that the value of a shared hallucination is that it's shared.

Compare the experience of logging on to CompuServe or America Online for the first time - it's a bit like being dropped in the middle of Manhattan without a map or a guide and trying to find a place you want to live. You may eventually find a simpatico neighborhood on the upper West Side or in the Village or in SoHo, but it will take you a while to learn enough about the city to make intelligent decisions. The same thing is true of large commercial conferencing systems and especially true of Usenet - is it any wonder that so many people try these systems for a while and then give up?

The Well seems to have gotten disproportionate press for its size - it's regarded as one of the "great good places" of cyberspace. True, there's sizable attrition of new users, as with all online conferencing systems, and it has yet to come to terms with how it wants to handle growth. But most of the people who stick around on the Well are positively fanatical about its value as an online community. So, taking the Well as my model, I'm laying out here nine principles for planning virtual communities and for making them work:
• Use software that promotes good discussions. Well users like to complain about PicoSpan, the system's conferencing software, but it does several things right, often by using what software designers call "constrained choices." For example, one can't start a new topic merely by responding to an old posting, so discussions and topics tend not to fragment the way they do on Usenet and CompuServe. And you can't respond to individual postings unless you either read everything that's been posted previously in the topic or else make a deliberate decision to skip those earlier postings. This tends to reduce the amount of redundancy and to make threads of discussion more coherent.

• Don't impose a length limitation on postings. Some systems limit the length of postings to 25 lines. This doesn't matter much if what you're interested in is banter and short tidbits, but it puts a crimp in discussions of history or politics or literature. Sometimes issues require serious space in order to be discussed fully. Individuals should be able to post essays as well as one-liners.

• Front-load your system with talkative, diverse people. The Well made a strategic decision early on to give free accounts or comp time to individuals and hosts who could be counted on to make interesting and provocative comments. In a way, the thing that makes the Well work is not that it brings together like-minded people, but that it brings together different-minded ones - users who inspire conversations and sometimes controversy with the strength and heterodoxy of their views.

• Let the users resolve their own disputes. On the whole, Well management has taken a hands-off position when it comes to users' interpersonal disputes and conflicts. Experienced users don't turn to management to complain - they choose instead to hash out their differences in public. And the Well has imposed few rules on public discourse. The result has been that the user population has developed or adopted its own community norms about quoting each other and publishing e-mail, and they are enforced largely by social pressures.

• Provide institutional memory. Some of the Well's conferences have postings dating back to the mid-1980s founding of the system. New users can come online and read about things that happened on the Well, which is based in the SF Bay area, early on. For example, it helps one get a sense of the Well as a community to read how users helped each other during the '89 Loma Prieta earthquake or the Oakland, California, fire.

• Promote continuity. Of the Well's core users, a significant number were active in the very early days of the system, and most have been online on the system for years. What makes the Well feel like a community is what makes anyplace feel like a community - you see the same "faces," know the same personalities, and have ongoing relationships.

• Be host to a particular interest group. The Well is the cyberspace home of Deadheads - Grateful Dead fans regularly congregate on the Well to share information and converse about their favorite band. Their participation provides important cash flow to keep the community operating, and it also provides diversity, as Deadheads go "over the wall" and converse on non- Grateful Dead forums.

• Provide places for children. The Well provides access to the KidLink network for 10- to 15-year-old kids, but, more importantly, it has a tradition of treating young people with respect, on the assumption that what they say is as worth reading as anyone else's contribution.

• Most Important: Confront the users with a crisis.

OK, it's hard to stage-manage crises. But it seems to be the case that events like the Oakland fire or LambdaMOO's cyberspace rape (see "Johnny Manhattan Meets the FurryMuckers," Wired 2.03, page 92) crystallize users' sense of belonging to a place they care about.

There are probably some other rules I haven't thought of, of course. But I think the ones I've listed here amount to a blueprint for successful cyberspace communities; the systems I know to have a truly communal feel (the Well, of course, but also ECHO, several MOOs and BBSes, and a few little pockets of Usenet) abide by most of these rules.

We should remember that Bill Levitt's "Levittown" was only the first attempt at solving a
population boom, and it wasn't necessarily the most successful one. Subsequent developments - like George Mitchell's now-famous The Woodlands, a planned community in Texas - recognized that housing was only part of the picture: Schools, police, and well-designed public spaces were all essential to creating a place you want to be.

If all cyberspace gives you is an e-mail address - a place to hang your virtual hat and chat about your hobbies - you've been cheated. What most of us will want in the future, I think, is a place where we're known and accepted on the basis of what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the content of our character." But in the absence of planning and of a deliberate architectural vision about shaping virtual communities, the incoming hordes of cyberspace inhabitants will be left wholly alienated, isolated, without any sense of belonging.

Virtually homeless.

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