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Helping as participation in an open online community: An exploratory study

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

The study explores the issues of participation, and to an extent, learning in an open online community of independent game developers, GameSalad.com. GameSalad is a firm-hosted online support forum for a desktop application of the same name. It is geared to provide members and users with a platform for sharing of information pertaining to their game development, and a place to seek and provide help. It is a large community with over 114,000 registered members (as of March 2015), with an average of 106,000 monthly active unique users, and a high degree of activity such as the posting of tutorials and tips, sharing game development progress, and announcing the launch of a new game. However, the majority of the interactions on the forum are concerned with seeking and providing help. This study focuses on issues around community, participation, and learning within online networks and is underpinned by a concern for participatory and social experiential perspectives on learning.

In order to explore participation, an exploratory mixed-method approach was used. This involved a three-phase data collection procedure. First, observation of interaction in the community was carried out (noting the pattern of threads opened, weekly leader boards, resources, and general practices) coupled with document analysis to identify threads that reflected high participation or were deemed beneficial by interviewees. Second, online survey of 35 items including five demographic items, twenty forced 2-point semantic differential scale items, and ten 5-point Likert scale items was carried out, to measure members' perceptions of the community and identity (n = 110 responses). Third, semi-structured sequential

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interviews were carried out with 21 volunteer interviewees online, using the forum's own private messaging system over a period from August 2014 to March 2015.

Although originally conceived as an overarching study of online participation, the study became focused on the more active members of the community, and on the question as to why and how some members of online communities appear to take on helping roles. The findings from both survey and interviews showed a strong sense of community among active members, and that active members saw their identity in the online community as an extension of their off-line self.

Although open to all members, participants who volunteered to be interviewed tended to be among the more active members and many had adopted 'caretaker' or helper role in the community. The interviews showed that giving help was motivated by a mix of extrinsic and intrinsic elements, in particular, helpers were aware of the need to sustain the community and in many cases felt an obligation to offer help as a return or 'pay it forward' for the help they had received in the past. They were motivated by community mindedness, empathy, self-confidence and sense of identity. The giving of help depends on 'mood', this mood is generated not only when helpers feel they have the available time and relevant expertise in order to help, but also when those asking for help have asked in an appropriate manner and provided sufficient contextualisation.

In part, learning in the community is seen as a social exchange, and members put a value on the discussions they saw useful. However, this study reveals some of the

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problems experienced by the company behind the community, tensions among some members of the community, as well as issues pertaining to shared knowledge and artefacts. This study improves our understanding of community of practice, the provision of help, the motivation for helping, as well as the dynamics of participation in an open online community. It gives insight into the sustainability of online community by showing the motivation, strategies for, and consequences of helping. It also gives insight into how informal learning is embedded in social interactions and perceived value. The study is not a unique case but it is one of an underreported area, a highly participative community. Methodologically, this study offers mixed method approach with a strong focus on qualitative data and analysis methods, with an innovative way of triangulating data.

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"I'm sorry, but I don't want to be an emperor.

That's not my business.

I don't want to rule or conquer anyone.

I should like to ***help*** *everyone - if possible - Jew, Gentile - black man - white.*

We all want to help one another.

Human beings are like that.

…"

- Sir Charles Spencer "Charlie" Chaplin,

(Chaplin, 1940)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

- The problem is explained.
- It describes the research interest, the goals, the research context, as well as the importance of the research work.

This chapter starts with a brief introduction to the history of the Internet, the role it has in our communication, the problem of participation found within it, particularly in online communities. It also describes the pivotal moment in the process of carrying out the study. Following this, there are sections on the source of interest, a brief discussion of the problem, the research questions, as well as a discussion of the importance of this study for the wider community. This chapter has been included to give readers an overview of the research, its problem, as well as providing an early understanding of the context under study. The final section of the chapter describes the thesis ahead.

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Of being in touch.

Born out of the fear that the Axis powers would drop a bomb and wipe out telecommunication infrastructures during the World War 2, the ARPANET - a military funded project was conceived, to ensure that military and other important data will survive, in the event of a nuclear blast. This was achieved through a networked computer terminal, where most of the military strategic data would be stored, which had no single geographical point of reference and in the event of a war, would not easily become the target for an enemy attack. This distributed system would ensure that the data would survive even if one of the 'nodes' in the network was bombed, and this was the origin of today's Internet. The system connected computers between participating research laboratories under several universities to form the network. It was first introduced among scientists, and was later released to the world circa early 90's, and has since sparked a movement of information sharing that has revolutionised the way we acquire information.

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The Internet, defined as an electronic network of computers and other electronic devices, allows person-to-computer, and person-to-person interaction and information retrieval (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001) to be easier than ever before. Despite the growth of the Internet and reports of its contribution towards dispersion of knowledge, many believe it to be a 'double-edged sword'. While most enthusiasts believe that the low-cost, easily attainable information the Internet provides has brought benefits to people of a lower-income and a growing number of research in the social and psychological effects of the Internet (Kraut *et al.*, 1998; Bargh & McKenna, 2004), there are concerns that the Internet has widened the digital divide. The Internet has impacted communities and social capital, influenced politics and politicians, affected organisational practices, and

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raised cultural issues (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001) which are unsettling.

Nevertheless, the Internet is of considerable value. The citizen of the world today is living in a rapidly developing of interconnected global world. Within this ever-expanding, intricate web of social life, the chance of network collision i.e. making new connections between one another, is greater than before. This is a direct effect of the Internet, or at least what we are making out of it. With the advancement in the way the Internet is built i.e. from a few simple HTML pages and hyperlinks, to more complex web applications built around technologies such as Javascipts and PHP, more and more opportunities present themselves. The underlying reason behind this phenomenon of the Internet is believed to be embedded in our natural instinct - to communicate, to interact, to socialise, as part of 'being in touch' (Rettie, 2003), and with the advent of the Internet, social behaviour had amplified into the virtual realm. Whether this amplification and transfer is a success remains a debate among scholars.

This exponential take up of new technologies has opened up new channels for people to communicate with each other (Rasanen, 2008). Part of these channels are the online communities, offering a 'congregational' venue for people of distributed place and time(zone). These often mimick the real world communities, but to what extent it is mimicked remains uncertain. Although many studies of online communities show benefits (for example B. Anderson, 2004; Cristóvão et al., 2009; Hemmasi & Csanda, 2009; Gammelgaard, 2010) for example greater involvement may: positively affect performance; enable collaborative learning; and facilitate

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knowledge building and sharing. However, the other side of the coin reveals concerns such as loss of social capital and connection to the real world communities. Wellman, Boase and Chen believed that while the virtuality of the communities enhances and transforms its members, context, and content, the same condition can weaken communities (2002). Other researchers (for example Donnath, 1999) shared the same concern.

Perhaps, due to their optimism concerning the advantages of online communities, researchers have kept on trying to understand how online communities work, particularly in relation to the problematic nature of participation in this mediated environment. The unpredictability of human nature lends itself well to online participation and communication, but this makes it one of the trickiest areas to research. Furthermore, from the literature, scholars have found several elements that may contribute to participation, e.g. social presence, sense of community, and identity, but how these elements work together to support participation in open online community, has not been adequately addressed. This research aims to provide an extension of the current body of knowledge on participation, and to an extent, learning within online communities, by exploring the possible nature of participation within an online community of independent game developers, GameSalad.com.

Help: An unexpected, but welcomed change.

This study was set out to understand the highly participative nature of an open online community of independent game developers GameSalad. As the study developed, it became focussed on the more active members as most of the survey

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participants as well as interviewees were among the highly participative members of the community. In particular, interviewees, who were the primary source of data for this study, were among those who contributed to the community, in terms of building shared artefacts, as well as taking a more responsible role in the community, helping other members with their game development problems. As there were only few research studies that have focussed on active participants and helping behaviour, this presented a unique opportunity for me to understand the role of the helpers in keeping the community alive, supporting participation and learning.

> ***"If Statement Question. Is nesting possible in GameSalad?***
>
> *Guys, I'm new to Game Salad, but it definitely is easy to get the hang of and I am enjoying it so far... but I am having trouble understanding how limited or (unlimited) the "if" numeric functions are. Or if I'm making it more complicated than it has to be…*
>
> *Here's my problem …"*

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Titles and queries like the above were a common sight in the forum. A quick browse through the forum revealed nearly all the threads concerned in some form or another, members asking assistance on problems. Typically, queries started with a description of a problem, followed by a lengthy discussion of either the solution, or clarification of the question/scope of problem, or both. At the outset, one of the most striking aspects of participation in this online community was that help was given freely. One of the reasons for membership and members participating in a community, was to seek help and advice. This is perhaps the case for communities that offer support for a particular practice, product, or service.

Thus, this research study explores the issues of community, participation, and learning, focussing on the more active members of an online community who took

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on the helping role. It looks at their motivation to help, the ways they helped others, the effects of helping, as well as elements that hindered the giving of help. This shift of focus was reflected in the research questions, which were previously designed more generally.

RESEARCH INTEREST

The interest to actively explore participation and learning dimensions within mediated environments began when I was dabbling in the idea of community of practice for my postgraduate master research report in 2010. I had a chance to investigate barriers and catalysts to learning within an online community of practice, set up to support the development of an online teaching resources repository in Malaysia. The project, which is now abandoned and defunct (the website is not accessible anymore), consisted of several communities of practice groups to support the development of digital teaching and learning modules. My report was related to one of these groups - the Instructional Designers (ID) group. This group was set up to provide assistance and advice on the design and the general development of the digital modules, working with other groups such as Subject Matter Experts (SME), and Content Developers (CD). Assuming a participant-observer role, I was able to see the development of the ID group, from face-to-face meetings, through to online asynchronous 'meet-ups' on Google+ (https://plus.google.com/). What captured my attention the most, was the pattern of participation within this group during the course of the study and the lack of sustained debate. The fact that the group struggled to attain and retain participation from its members set the direction of my research interest into inquiry towards the enablers and inhibitors of participation in mediated environments.

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In that study, I managed to outline seven factors that acted as barriers as well as catalysts to learning within an online community of practice, while using the Legitimate Peripheral Participation and the idea of participation as learning as the research lens to guide the analysis (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). The seven factors were comfort level; discourse; interest; content familiarity; technology; offline communication; and lurking. Although the identification of barriers and catalysts to learning within online communities is important, generalisation of the findings was limited.

Upon reviewing literature in this area, I could not help but to think about its fragmented nature, perhaps due to the different contexts for which the communities were built. Problems of participation re-occur across the literature (see McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; McLinden, McCall, Hinton, & Weston, 2006; Borzillo, 2007; Guldberg & Mackness, 2009) and this drew me to investigate further. It led me to explore the issue of participation more deeply - to understand how people participate, what motivated them to participate, what did they do, what did they gain from the activities, and if there was any, elements seen as limitations to participation.

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RESEARCH PROBLEM

The aim of this thesis is related to the important but problematic issue of participation in online communities. We have seen the power that online communities can have and that they can be big in terms of membership size and high in participation rate. Sustained communities often exert an impact on their

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members including emotional identification as well as pragmatic gains in various forms, such as provision of a solution to a problem, and outsourcing the creation of resources and shared knowledge from like-minded people. Active members of online communities such as the authors of Wikipedia, the programmers and coders of StackOverflow, the photographers on Flickr, the advocates of open source community at Github and Open Source Initiative may have benefited highly from their commitment to the community, but too little is known about this. Nowadays, we also begin to see a shift in the education sphere, with the take up of the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). However, in order to sustain MOOCs, a sense of community is needed to complement the more formal learning, with a hope of sustaining users' interaction and participation. Sites such as Codecademy, Coursera, Udemy, make use of two-way communication between members for this purpose. The key issue we are still facing is the age-old problem - participation.

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It is truly a chicken-and-egg situation. Communities will not come into being if there are no members participating, but membership will not grow if there are no interactions in the community to entice new members in. Scholars have, for more than half a decade, questioned participation in mediated environment - the psychology behind it, as well as its sociality. Short, Williams and Christie (1976), among the earliest scholars to seek an understanding of how we communicate in telecommunication media, introduced a concept they called 'social presence'. Mehrabian (1971) too have explored a similar concept earlier, under the idea of 'immediacy' in media. These concepts were taken up by other scholars, interested in further understanding the dynamics of human interactions in mediated environment, especially within the boundaries of online communities.

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The Internet brought the aspirations of the 'real world' community into the virtual dimension. Nevertheless, the claim that technologies (and its products including online communities) jeopardises values and social capital of offline communities, by individualising social life (this in contrast to how people have been participating in communities years ago), has been associated with Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (1995). However, Putnam has been criticised by scholars who saw the potential of technologies such as the Internet for connecting people. Through the work of earlier scholars such as Short et al. (1976) and Mehrabian (1971), as well as those who have taken up these ideas, such as Gunawardena (1997), Preece (2001), and Rovai (2002a), we have come to know more about how social presence plays a part in determining satisfaction, and how a sense of community influences participation. For example, Rovai brought in the issue of building a sense of community within an educational dimension, which widened our understanding of the elements that influence members in a community. Together, social presence and sense of community gave us a socio-psychological construct to understand participation, and although this gives us a promising start to understanding the problematic nature of participation in online communities, we have yet to arrive at a point where we can say that it is a definitive solution to the problem.

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The methodological problem concerning participation is that it has mainly been studied through measuring actions that are external to the 'doers', through content analysis of conversations in a community, data mining, and statistical inferences from the community statistics. This is useful only insofar as to inform us of activity but not intention. We need to get to the people who participate, to get their side of the story, to understand their actions in the community. This will enable

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understanding of actions beyond the numbers and words on the screen. It will provide an opportunity to understand how informal learning occurs in a context that does not have a distinct pedagogical structure.

This study aims to provide an account of a highly participative online community, to provide stories of how and why the high level of activities came to being, to understand the drivers of participation, the descriptions of participation, and the limitations of it, as well as exploring the benefits of participation, whether participation is seen as learning by the members within an open online community. It is hoped that an exploratory study into a highly active online community may provide us with important knowledge for those seeking to develop and sustain communities.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In line with the focus mentioned previously, this research attempts to address the overarching question: "*How does help keep community alive?*". Four sub-questions are then pursued hereafter:

1. *What kind of community have active members helped create?*
2. *What motivates and constrains participation?*
3. *What and how do members learn?*
4. *How and why do active members help?*

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RESEARCH CONTEXT

The first attempt.

I am an autodidact. I learned many things, mainly through books and resources that are available online. One of the skills that I learned by myself was how to become a professional photographer. For this, my primary sources of inspiration and knowledge was from an open online community of photographers at PhotoMalaysia.com forum and from Flickr accounts of fellow photographers around the world. The experience that I had in the forum and among the community members were different to what I experienced in the ID community of practice back when I was exploring for my Masters research report. The PhotoMalaysia forum was alive, thriving with comments and new postings of images daily and others commenting on the images posted, giving advices and tips, as well as other general talks on photography techniques. The contrasts with the ID community in terms of participation was enormous and it inspired me to embark on this research study. This study was originally designed to explore the stories of participation in this community forum which I dubbed the 'PhotoPeople' community.

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The community forum was a congregational place for photographers from all walks of life - professionals to 'newbies' to share ideas and their work, as well as a place where members could buy and sell photographic equipment - a well-equipped community. The main focus for the study was on a specific part of the forum, where members would display their own work, and this would be criticised by/commented on by others. It was in this community that I learned how to properly capture images using digital cameras myself, reading others' comments on

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my work, reviewing others' work, replicating ideas in my own work, as well as finding my own 'style' of photography.

I was a member in that community for many years prior to seeing it as a subject for this study. The main reason why I did not pursue this focus on PhotoPeople community was the reason of reach. Not in terms of access to the community, which I had successfully negotiated with the forum administrators, but in terms of getting feedback from participants during the study. After testing the online survey questionnaire earlier with the GameSalad community, I carried out the same survey with the PhotoPeople community. However, after advertising discount vouchers they would be awarded if they opted in to the survey, my efforts went largely unnoticed. The advertisement was placed on strategic points throughout the forum, yet after a month, there were only 15 participants who has replied. This was a surprise for me since I had been an active member of this community for about 3 - 4 years ago. In search for the story behind this lack of response, I contacted some of the old-timers who I befriended during my active years in the community. According to some, participation in the forum declined, partly because of the internal conflicts between members, but the main reason was that the forum had become more focussed as a trading centre in the buying and selling of photographic equipment, rather than the sharing of information and advice in the showcase sections.

From this, I learned a valuable lesson: that online communities live and die in respect to members' participation. An online community can be active at one point, and can meet an early death, or a sudden change of focus in a short time. This made

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me realise how powerful participation can be in a mediated environment. For this, I became much more interested to understand, what drives active members to participate in online communities.

Changing the context.

At the beginning of my PhD journey, I started to delve into mobile applications and games development to satisfy my hunger for a more technical knowledge. Due to gaps in programming know-how, I searched for software authoring application that enabled easy 'drag and drop' programming, and found GameSalad (www.gamesalad.com) to fulfil the requirement. The tool, built and maintained by a company by the same name, had an open online community behind them. My involvement in the community was minimal during the first few months. It later became more frequent as I sought help from other community members for problems that I encountered during my own app development. Little that I knew, my side-learning adventure would become the focus of this research. I went back to the GameSalad community and decided to focus on this community because of the richness of the data that I received from the initial (pilot) study, and that the high participative activities that were happening in this community which were comparable to what I had experienced in the PhotoPeople community 4 years earlier.

The community.

The GameSalad community was running on top of a forum/bulletin-board web application 'Vanilla Forums' (https://vanillaforums.org/). The community was open, in a sense that public could get access to most of the threads and sections on the forum, without the need to become a member. There was a small exclusive

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