Norms and Conventions in Collaborative Systems

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1   INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Internet has emerged as a new social medium for online participants to initiate contacts, establish relationships and develop social interactions with others independent of geographical location or the need for physical presence. Aspects of these virtual environments that may mirror the physical world include the establishment and application of rules or social guidelines that regulate behaviour. These guidelines may be referred to as social conventions. Oldenburg (Oldenburg 1989) suggests that a common thread that links different societies are informal meeting places, such as a sidewalk café, that he considers vital locales for socialisation and relaxation. He labels these meeting places, "third places" and perceives them to be as fundamental to one's daily life as one's home (first place) or place of employment (second place).

Newsgroups, Chatrooms, MUDs (mult-user Dungeons) which include MOOs (Object oriented MUDs) and virtual worlds are becoming informal areas for

social interaction as people join social networks based on shared interests and a desire for online interpersonal communication. The Internet is increasingly being recognised as a new environment for community building (Reid 1991; Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1996). This means that people must learn co-existence and group socialisation without physical contact, which may reduce perceptions of social presence (Short et al. 1976). Our analysis consisted of 70 arbitrarily selected rule sets that provided written reports of users' Internet usage. The increased emphasis on netiquette conventions becomes clearer when we compare two search engine requests taken one year apart. An April 1999 Internet search request found approximately 100 000 'hits' with the keyword "netiquette" while a similar request in the Spring of 1998 revealed only 12 000 references. (For a complete set of general rules for using the Internet services, please examine (RFC1855 1995).)

In this paper, we are interested in examining Internet norms and conventions and documenting what we learnt from written netiquette rules and guidelines with the aim of learning about the social processes in the virtual communities of the Internet. We place the conventions found in the proper framework by understanding how these virtual conventions relate to real world conventions or technical issues, how these rules are constituted and communicated, and how the application of these rules may be controlled, enforced or sanctioned.

2   SOCIAL NORMS AND CONVENTIONS

Societal rules exist not only for one's personal benefit but provide a collective benefit regulating order and ensuring that individuals can function together by following social conventions. An essential part of the group forming process is the establishment of *social norms* and *behavioural conventions*, whether explicitly defined as rules or even laws, or implicitly defined through observed or sanctioned behaviour. Group norms "develop through explicit statements by supervisors or co-workers, critical events in the group's history, primacy, or carry-over behaviour from past situations" (Feldman 1984, p 47). Knowing and applying the right norms and conventions gives each participant the feeling of being a member of the group.

When these findings are applied to the Internet, it becomes more apparent, that the Internet provides new opportunities for forming groups through social interaction. Internet etiquette or Netiquettes are intended to explain to new users (more commonly referred to as "newbies"), how to behave (Mandel and van der Leun 1996).

Kollock and Smith (Kollock and Smith 1994) believe that it is important that participants adhere to the local rules for behaviour. Conformance to social rules, as in the real world, may differentiate experts and members of the cybercommunity from new users that often unintentionally violate the rules.

Behavioural conventions and social norms may be documented as netiquette guidelines, compiled as FAQs (frequently asked questions), or explicitly outlined upon entering a virtual environment. For example, a chatroom may state the parameters of acceptable conversational topics. Users have also been observed exhibiting behavioural conventions that are not written and posted (Jeffrey and Mark 1999). In general, netiquettes outline guidelines for the actual status of debate within the community with respect to the code of conduct that administrators would like applied. They give recommendation for fair and polite communication. Most rules seem to be reactionary, based on experiences that have occurred previously within virtual environments.

2.1 Environmental specifics

On the Internet, two kinds of environments could be differentiated with respect to the action provided by affordances (Pankoke-Babatz 1999). Asynchronous media support time dispersed communication through the distribution of text-messages (i.e. Email, newsgroups, mailing lists) and synchronous media which provide virtual locations for real-time social interaction (i.e. Chatrooms, MUDs, virtual worlds).

Netiquettes refer generally to a code of conduct (i.e. 'don't SHOUT', 'be polite', 'avoid disruptive behaviour'). We found that the degree to which these rules of politeness are applied and enforced can be environmentally specific. For example, multi-user newsgroups may have recommendations that must be applicable to the newsgroup population, and may differ between newsgroups. The bilateral relationship of Email may only require the following of conventions acceptable between sender and receiver (Rospach 1996; YOYO 1997).

2.2 Rules for prevention of disruptive behaviour

A major difference between real world and Internet communication is that the Internet provides the possibility of non-physical and anonymous contacts. This anonymity may provide people with the opportunity to lower their inhibitions and create the potential for unregulated, abusive behaviour (Reid 1991). From studying the rule sets, we will comment on three areas of disruptive behaviour: spamming, flaming and gender swapping.

Spamming is the process where individuals post identical messages to different newsgroups sometimes with the intent of purposely disrupting ongoing discussions. It also may mean sending mass copies of unsolicited Email to multiple addresses. This action makes it more difficult for receivers to separate personal Email from 'junk mail' and maintain on-topic, relevant newsgroup discussions. It may also result in local technical problems such as storage overflow and slow response. *Flaming* is a public personal attack against another user (i.e. calling another user names). The absence of a social mechanism to

correct the behaviour and the anonymity of the abusers, may lead to flaming that is initially amusing to bystanders but can quite rapidly get out of control.

Asynchronous communication such as Email and newsgroups are more vulnerable against these kinds of disruptive behaviour (Kollock and Smith 1994). Spamming and flaming may escalate and thus destroy a newsgroup before intervention –if at all possible- is applied by disrupting topical conversations and causing individuals to leave.

Gender-swapping is where a person portrays themselves (usually male pretending to be female) as being of the opposite sex. Turkle (Turkle 1996) believes that the advantage of being a female-presenting character is that one is offered assistance more and given more attention by male-presenting characters in a MOO. Although this behaviour seems to occur regularly in MUDs, Chatrooms and virtual worlds, the attention and sexual advances may be unwanted. It may result in females becoming male-presenting characters to avoid potential harassment (Bruckman 1996). The majority of MUD players are male yet the ratio of males to females online is more balanced suggesting many males are impersonating females (Turkle 1996).

Posted netiquette guidelines do not always explicitly mention sanction mechanisms. Sanctions are consequences for undesired behaviour such as verbal reprimand or referral to the location of posted netiquettes. The intent of sanctions seems to be two-fold; to immediately curtail the disruptive behaviour and to provide a deterrent through example. Furthermore, reactionary mechanisms such as an 'ignore' box that block messages from the offending individual are available to all users. Usually activating an emergency button (i.e. 911 in WBS) (WBS 1998) if being abused, will get an immediate response from an administrator. Administrator-initiated sanctions are available such as disconnecting an abuser, banning a person permanently (WBS 1998) or deleting material deemed to be offensive. Depending on the particular virtual community, the administrators have a high degree of power to define the rules and to sanction unwanted behaviour (Reid 1991). Usually a written agreement exists that is intended to espouse desired community behaviour.

3   RESUME AND OUTLOOK

Social conventions provide a framework for the type of relationships and social atmosphere that a particular community wants to achieve. These conventions attempt to strike a balance between one's expectations and the larger community interests when faced with social and technical issues. In our study of virtual environments, we found out, that social as well as technical forces that support social conventions have paralleled the growing number of users and the diversity of available technical support.

Examples of anti-social behaviour such as spamming and flaming, which are particularly disruptive in newsgroups and mailing lists, were also observed. The cloak of anonymity provided to users may provide explanations for undesirable behaviour and may also be attributed to the deceptive act of gender swapping. Although the Internet opens new possibilities for social interaction and communication, many of the real world social regulations still apply. In particular, there is evidence, that explicitly documented behavioural conventions and social norms are of high importance for the successful formation, cohesion and processing of groups.

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