Preface

Human beings are not solitary creatures. We tend to gravitate towards other individuals and form groups or communities. The communities we create offer many benefits. They provide us with a sense of belonging. They also help in sharing ideas, expertise, and experiences. Each community has its own set of rules and regulations or a shared code of conduct. While citizenship of a community is voluntary it is important that individuals follow the code of conduct for the community to make it a worthwhile experience for all members.

The advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web changed the way we work and play. The Web provided us with an easy communication channel in which any individual with access to the Web could easily communicate with hundreds and thousands of people. Communication on the Web can be synchronous using technologies such as instant messaging or chat, or asynchronous using technologies such as email. More importantly the Web enables individuals to create communities in cyberspace. Although such communities are formed for essentially the same reasons as traditional communities and provide most of the same benefits, they have one important difference—they are virtual.

A virtual community is a collection of people sharing common interests, ideas, and feelings over the Internet or other collaborative networks. Howard Rheingold (1993) defines a virtual community to be, “Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” These communities are becoming increasingly important forums for individuals and groups that share a professional interest or share common activities.

The Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities and Technologies is a collection of 115 articles that identify and investigate some of the most important issues facing virtual communities and technologies. The encyclopedia also provides a compendium of terms, definitions and explanations of concepts, processes and acronyms. This collection covers both technological as well as social issues related to virtual communities. Technological issues include models, design, development, implementation and quality of multi-user virtual environments. Social issues review trust, behavioral, and cross-cultural aspects of virtual communities.

The encyclopedia covers a whole array of topics in virtual communities and technologies, which can be classified into the following main categories: social impact, cross-cultural issues in virtual communities, behavior in virtual communities, models for virtual communities, human computer interfaces and virtual communities, privacy and security, success of virtual environments, technology in virtual environments, virtual communities for gaming, synchronous and asynchronous environments, case studies and best practices. Let us consider the different topics within each of the categories listed above. The category of social impact includes social impact of virtual communities, political impact of virtual communities, economic impact of virtual communities, and trust in virtual communities. Cross-cultural issues in virtual communities address culture in virtual communities, multi-cultural environments, cross-cultural studies, and cultural issues in community design. Behavior in virtual communities focuses on individual behavior and group behavior in virtual communities. Models for virtual communities include social models for representing virtual communities, business models, technology-based models, e-learning models, and knowledge management models. Human computer interfaces in virtual communities covers topics in design of virtual communities, user friendly interfaces, design of peer-to-peer networks, and mobile technologies and HCI. The area of privacy and security includes topics such as copyright issues, privacy issues, business implications, and trust issues. Success of virtual environments includes effectiveness of virtual environments, service quality of virtual community websites and applications, and ROI in business-oriented virtual communities. Technology in virtual communities covers platforms, hardware and software, peer-to-peer networks, and web services. The area of gaming addresses issues in virtual communities for gaming, game design, social issues in gaming, and cultural issues in gaming and virtual communities.
The area of synchronous and asynchronous environments includes bulletin boards and chat capabilities and their roles in virtual communities. The encyclopedia also provides case studies and articles on best practices in the area.

Researchers interested in this area first submitted a proposal that was reviewed by the editor for appropriateness and relevance to the field of virtual communities. After review of proposals the editor invited some authors to submit complete papers. Each paper was blind-reviewed by at least three other researchers. Some of the authors volunteered to review other papers submitted for the encyclopedia. Based on the reviews received, the editor made the final acceptance and rejection decision. Only submissions with positive reviews were accepted for this encyclopedia. The decision and reviews were communicated to the authors.

The Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities and Technologies is one of the first encyclopedias regarding this fast-growing area of the Internet. The importance of this area is growing as more and more people around the world gain access to the Internet. Over a period of time, these individuals develop relationships and friendships on the Web and form communities there. I believe that this publication will serve students, faculty, researchers and managers well as a research and reference publication. This compilation of 115 articles, definitions, and concepts provides valuable insight into virtual communities.

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