Chapter 11
Space for Lurking:
A Pattern for Designing
Online Social Spaces

Steven Warburton
University of Surrey, UK

ABSTRACT

Despite its negative connotations, lurking is a valid activity for individuals entering an unfamiliar online social space, especially when deciding how to present themselves and their identity online. Providing the space and time for individuals to acclimatise to extant social rules and behaviours is an important design consideration. This chapter outlines key issues surrounding non-participative behaviour in online social spaces and describes the participatory design pattern approach that was used to develop a transferable solution to this recurring problem in the form of a design pattern.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how the participatory pattern workshop model (Mor et al., 2010) was employed to develop a design pattern that addresses a particular kind of problem in the use of virtual spaces that support social engagement. The chapter introduces a design pattern that was drawn from several structured narratives (or case-stories) elicited from educational practitioners who have experienced the difficulties in negotiating and supporting the participation of users within...
online social environments. The issues identified in the pattern were originally drawn from studies exploring the educational potential of immersive virtual worlds such as Second Life, but this pattern is broadly relevant to any online social space such as discussion boards and social networking sites.

**What is a Design Pattern Approach?**

The design pattern approach, embodied in the participatory pattern workshop methodology described here, provides a powerful way of bridging the gap between research and practice. Designs patterns provide a meaningful way of capturing and then sharing knowledge in a particular domain. At their core, they can be described as providing a solution to a problem in a context. As Alexander (1977) writes in his seminal volume on pattern languages:

> Each pattern describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it twice. (Alexander 1977)

Alexander defines a design pattern as being constructed in three parts. First the ‘context’, which asks under what conditions does this pattern hold. Second the problem statement which is often described as a ‘system of forces’. And third, the ‘solution’ which indicates a design configuration that is capable of balancing the system of forces, in effect indicating a path that solves the problem/s presented.

What makes patterns such a powerful design tool is the way in which they can scaffold non-experts in making rapid and grounded design decisions in what might be relatively unfamiliar areas of practice. Gamma (1995) neatly summarises how expert problem solvers design solutions in their everyday professions by reapplying previously successful approaches:

> One thing expert designers know not to do is solve every problem from first principles. Rather, they reuse solutions that have worked for them in the past ... These patterns solve specific design problems and make ... designs more flexible, elegant, and ultimately reusable. They help designers reuse successful designs by basing new designs on prior experience. A designer who is familiar with such patterns can apply them immediately to design problems without having to rediscover them (Gamma et al. 1995)

**The Pressure of Online Social Interaction**

The design patterns approach was applied to an enduring problem area in the use of online or virtual spaces to host educational activities that seek to promote interaction between learners. When engaged in an activity within a group or community there is an expectancy that all members contribute, even if this is at differing intensities. But in online settings it is difficult to know or ensure that all members feel able to contribute. A tension exists in virtually situated settings as social cues are diminished when compared to face-2-face settings. With the lack of non-verbal cues, the action of authoring our online selves becomes a difficult process, one that is neither natural nor straightforward.

Participation in online settings tends to be viewed in black and white terms. Non-participation falls under the term ‘lurking’ and brings with it negative connotations of an unwanted behaviour particularly in educational settings. Beaudoin (2002) identifies lurkers as ‘invisible learners’; others see lurkers as readers and beneficiaries of others’ discussions, who do not share their own ideas (Salmon 2000). More extreme interpretations of lurking have compared silent participants to parasites who leech the community for individual and selfish benefit: