Virtual Communities Wish List

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INTRODUCTION

Experience with virtual communities such as Yahoo Groups, Community Zero, Blackboard and WebCT and working with ad hoc and formal groups (such as IEEE committees) has provided a basis for a “wish list” of virtual community capabilities. For any given audience, purpose, life-cycle and culture the relevant elements of this list will vary (Kim, 2000). With emerging technology and evolving experience, additional elements should be added. This, then, is a starting point for identifying the specific requirements for a specific virtual community.

Here, general functions are described, as well as functions as seen by users or administrators of a virtual community. The format is intentionally terse to facilitate the use of this information as the basis for a checklist in evaluating requirements, alternatives and priorities. The general concepts of “push” (data is delivered to users, e-mail being an example) and “pull” (where data is only available when the user chooses to seek it out) are highly relevant. Maintaining community “interaction” is dependent on having a core of participants who are regularly interacting, and the “push” model can facilitate this among less experienced users.

GENERAL FUNCTIONS

a. **Threaded discussions:** In many ways this is the original form of virtual communities: bulletin board systems, “DEC Notes” and, of course, more recently blogs and wikis. In any case, the ability to “respond” to specific items in a tree structure is one way to facilitate interaction and at the same time provide a pointer to the discussion history.

b. **E-mail “transparent” interchange:** Some users will not be prepared to enter into a virtual community for the full range of interactions. Allowing users to receive postings via e-mail and respond via e-mail in a transparent way allows these individuals to participate.

c. **Sequential message numbering and archiving:** Numbering the postings provides an easy way for specific reference, and archiving the postings provides for future reference. When new members enter a community, it is useful to have pointers to key postings that will allow them to come “up to speed” as well as learn the culture.

d. **Document posting, annotation, version numbering for revisions, work flow:** Another potential form of interaction involves “documents.” Where these are relevant objects, the set of services for tracking them, maintaining them and potentially “approving” them need to be considered. Often, these will co-exist with either threaded discussion or threaded annotations that “argue” for specific changes.

e. **Integrating with the World Wide Web:** Much of the relevant material will be outside of the immediate context, and linking to this content within the community or in a broader Intranet or Web environment may be required. Exportable links into specific points within a community will facilitate connection from the outside world. General support for XHTML (eXtensible HyperText Markup Language) tags will provide capable users the ability to link to external content and present well-structured entries. (Style sheets support should be considered, and possibly scripting, or even posting of executables in some situations.)

f. **Polling/voting capability:** with appropriate “rules”—who can vote, can votes be changed and so forth.

g. **Calendar support for group and individual events:** Events are another aspect of community interaction, and along with calendaring, notification (typically e-mail) of events is useful.

h. **Member listing, with appropriate individual control over the “profile” that is maintained and what is available to what other classes of users.**

i. **Sub-groups:** allowing for easy instantiation of limited or open subgroups, presumably retaining some hierarchical relation to the parent, and inheriting most if not all of the parent community’s functions and limitations.

j. **Communities should be configurable as “e-mail list” only with possible evolution to expanded functionality. This parallels the “e-mail transparency,” and provides for the traditional “list server” function in a consistent form that facilitates expanded services if and when desired.**