Chapter 3
Recurrent Interactions, Acts of Communication and Emergent Social Practice in Virtual Community Settings

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ABSRACT

The chapter builds on recent efforts aiming to develop a conceptual frame of reference for gaining insight to and analyzing 'practice' in virtual communities. Following a thorough analysis of related works in new media, community-oriented thinking and practice-based approaches as well as reflections upon recent case studies, the chapter discusses what is it that differentiates offline from online practice, how these two are intertwined in virtual settings and what may be an appropriate methodological frame of reference for analyzing them. In this vein, instead of reproducing arguments for community management (i.e., discovering, forming and sustaining communities) and the underlying methodological challenges commonly encountered in Information Systems research, our effort is focused on understanding emergent social practices through a practice lens framed in technology constituting structures and cultural artifacts. Through a cross case design we formulate the argument that community results from the history of co-engagement of actors in a joint field, while in virtual settings, it is recurrent interactions that lead to an act of communication or the enactment of practice. Our main conclusions are (a) online social practices are shaped through cycles of 'constructing – negotiating – reconstructing' cultural artifacts in virtual settings, and (b) practice-oriented toolkits designed to support cycles of 'constructing – negotiating – reconstructing' cultural artifacts offer new grounds for understanding innovative engagement by virtual communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Virtuality refers to a state where the subject is separated from the body (Sterne, 2006). Throughout the history of mankind, virtualities of various sorts have served a means for human beings to cope with complex, difficult to grasp and explain phenomena. Interestingly, such virtualities are constructed by a variety of instruments such as religious standpoint, political belief, but also more tangible things such as drugs or coding schemes (i.e., Morse code). Nevertheless, each type is characteristically different and distinct. Consider for example virtualities resulting from adopting a religion. They are primarily spiritual spaces, always revealed through recurrent engagement in a code of practice shaped by a system of values. Similarly, drugs result in mental spaces brought about by recurrent set of mind through the material properties of the drug. On the other hand, coding schemes such as Morse code, result in virtualities that lead to communication acts arising from the history of co-engagement of the partners in alternative linguistic domains. In all cases, there is a strong link between virtuality and materiality frequently established through 'cause and effect' relationships.

Irrespective of how they are constructed, virtualities seem to share common ground in the sense that they facilitate recurrent engagement in the designated practice. It is such recurrent experience that leads to an act of communication meaningful to those subscribing to the virtuality. Furthermore, it is this repetitive engagement in a virtual space that may influence the enactment of socio-material practice in physical space, leading to an intertwining between virtual and physical activities. Although elements of the associated practices may be enacted and administered locally by individuals, there is always a 'boundary' core, which is 'common' enough and 'plastic' enough to facilitate local variations. Consequently, in all cases, the resultant virtualities satisfy three key properties: (a) they assume some sort of medium (i.e., spiritual / mental or physical), (b) they are revealed through recurrent engagement in some sort of common practice of the members subscribing to the set principles and (c) the practice of the subscribing members is framed as much in social interaction as in processes, tools and artifacts.

Virtual communities, the subject matter of this chapter, constitute a virtuality which is formed over networked digital media. Since the first introduction of the term in the work of Rheingold (1993), virtual communities have gained popularity in the research agendas of management scholars, social scientists and computer science researchers. Management scholars examine how business-sponsored virtual communities provide a new means for marketing (Stockdale, 2007) and sustaining innovation (Fuller et al., 2006). Anthropologists explore the ways in which Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is giving rise to new forms of virtual communities and the socio-cultural implications of new communication technologies (e.g., Hine, 2000; Fabian, 2002; Wilson and Peterson, 2002; Eisenlohr, 2004). Recently there has been rising interest on the archaeology of virtual communities (Jones, 2003), especially those formed using virtual reality as medium to establish 'places where the imaginary meets the real' (Bartle, 2003). Jones (1997; 2003) coined the term cyber-archaeology implying an approach to online communities as 'virtual settlements'. Subsequent refinements of the concept attempt to expand the domain of study of cyber-archaeology claiming that 'the role of cyber-archaeology is not only to study the 'actual' technologies employed by virtual communities, but also the virtual objects they create within cyber-space' (Harrison, 2009, p. 76).

In this chapter, we pick up these intersecting threads of concern to analyze virtual communities as emergent structures resulting from the members' recurrent co-engagement in a designated practice (i.e., communication, gaming, professional development, science, etc). Our intention is to partly challenge the methodological ground

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