COMMUNITY, PART II
by Jerry Michalski

When you enter a party, you pick up an amazing amount of information. You can see how people are arranged: in small, loose clusters; in conspiratorial huddles, heads averted or bowed down; in rapt groups, which you might want to join; negotiating something (is it a merger, or simply a golf date?); or paired off in wooing rituals. You can hear laughter coming from some groups, nothing from others and loud debate from a few. You can rely on most people to represent themselves honestly, since others who know them are likely close at hand. It's hard to mask one's identity at a party.

Usually, you can deduce rank and status. Hosts accompany VIPs or special guests. Certain behavior stands out: You would notice if someone talked to himself in the middle of the room, or if most of the participants slipped away to private rooms. All of this information helps you decide where to go, whom to approach and how to approach them. Do you want to argue? Laugh? Are you expected to bow or use an honorific? Hey, there's Zoe! Did that person just wink at you?

You know how to behave: how to introduce yourself, how long to stay in a conversation to be polite, when to interrupt a conversation. You can stand in one group and listen to another. These things hold true for formal business meetings, too. Who's talking with whom matters.

The online world offers few such cues. As we noted last month, a textual environment is a powerful least common denominator, masking cues that might bias users against interacting with someone and allowing equal access to all. But those cues can be useful. They are a shorthand that gets people feeling comfortable quickly and helps them make important decisions, (politically) correctly or not.

The online world need not be a perfect mirror of real life, but it does need a similar set of subtle signals if newcomers (newbies, in online argot) are to feel comfortable quickly (and want to come back) and if people are to be more productive.

The June issue of Release 1.0 framed the market for electronically supported communities, outlined their significance and offered some ideas of...
what functions people would find worth buying. This month we examine three aspects of real-world texture that such worlds should provide:

- Context: what is special about this place? what is in it? what protocols do I need to observe? what can't I do? who governs this place? can I affect the place or the rules? how can I make the context work for me?

- Presence: are others here? are they who they say they are? are they listening? how do they feel about what I just said? are they being snide or loving? how are online and physical presence different?

- Interaction: how can I connect with others? what can we do together? what tools or protocols would help? how can I create and maintain feelings of trust and communion in virtual space?

We consider these features in the context of the race to find what consumers will use and pay for. As we explore, we keep three questions in mind: How can service providers foster or create these features to distinguish themselves and build a stable following? Can new features scale to support audiences large enough to be profitable? And what is the relationship between virtual communities and real-life activity?

Faites vos jeux

Media companies, cable tv, production houses, carriers, software, computer hardware, communication and <insert your favorite industry here> companies are all placing their next-generation service bets now through technology alliances and infrastructure investments. How carriers design their piece of the information highway (especially its on- and offramps) directly affects what services they will be able to provide, and who will create them. If they bet too low, they won't be able to offer appealing services later on; if too high, they will be unprofitable.

For example, some phone companies are counting on ADSL technology (Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Loop, aka video dial tone) to leverage existing copper connections to subscribers. While ADSL is probably satisfactory for movies on demand, it is not responsive enough for real-time interaction, which consumers will probably want. That means coax and high-speed switches -- and more alliances between phone and cable tv companies.

But what are the driving applications? Online multi-player action games are a start, but we believe a key motivator is the desire to connect with others in some meaningful way. Many little companies are doing imaginative work in this area; many will need funding from the big ones. This issue of Release 1.0 investigates some playful offerings and some serious ones, emphasizing how they can help people connect with other people.

Systems you might like

Today, most inter-personal online services are structurally similar to each other, and very different from cable tv or the phone system. Eventually, the spaces in between will be filled by new services. Imagine the following choices in the year 2000:
YourWorld allows subscribers to design their space and the rules they live by, within limits: the space is generally realistic (no bug-eyed please). No business is allowed in YourWorld, which has no memory. That is, the system encourages real-time communications, and wipes the slate clean every three months. People come to YourWorld to learn things firsthand. They want to discover legal systems and invent languages and social norms. Text spoken here.

RealLife blends personal and business life. It has advertising, and an underlying market-making and funds-transfer system. Entire companies subscribe to RealLife, and individuals can run their whole lives through the online service, which offers plentiful mass storage. The system features an integrated media environment, which allows users to switch effortlessly between typing, speaking and video. Portable handheld terminals and real-life notification of online events tie the system to real life. RealLife relies on personalities as guides and attractors.

The Rubber Room has few rules, and those are regularly broken. Creatures of all sorts roam the halls/parapets/marshes. Some are automatons, some are people in disguise. Games and fantasies abound. Video is the principal means of communication. Rubber Room subscribers prize great special-effects jocks, and 3D-jays (we already have DJs and Vee-Jays) have huge cult followings.

TrueNet has trusted communications. People are definitely who they say they are. Pseudonyms and avatars are permitted (in a separate zone), but a flag indicates which people are behind a mask, so you can act accordingly. Another zone is safe for kids. TrueNet groups subscribers into cohorts (by choice, or merely chronological) of a finite, manageable size. TrueNet has special sections where people can meditate together or just hang out, without worrying about connect time.

Clearly these thought experiments open many questions. Can one service have many places with different characteristics, or is one "place" the basic unit of measure? Can people move easily from one service to the next, and have their bills consolidated? How are people billed -- by time online, transaction or number of objects used? Does it cost extra to talk to single women, lawyers or Bill Clinton? How are these features made clear to newbies?

Profiting from your persona: 'zines

The services most likely to thrive are those that entertain, and those that maximize salience (interest and relevance) and communion (the feeling of connectedness that sometimes occurs in communities). That means trusted sources and trusted spaces. Referrals and recommendations are more useful and personal than surveys, statistics and scientific tests (as in the real world). As the number of participants grows and the volume of information becomes unmanageable, moderated forums will increase in importance. People will sell their attitudes, their personalities and their attention (see Release 1.0, 3-92). They will do it by hosting a 'zine (a term that started with low-circulation, science fiction fanzines).

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Release 1.0 is a 'zine.
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Release 1.0 15 July 1993
Subscribers who don't like the feeling of a particular online service or its rules may keep quiet, go through channels to change them -- or leave. One of our premises is that human behavior is more interesting than any mechanized information feed, and more so when it's about stuff that matters. And what can matter more than the rules that govern everyday (online) existence and the objects and features that users encounter? This section focuses on services that offer that kind of power and flexibility, either in software that users control directly, or through jointly developed rules of governance.

Mirroring reality

One way to make the online experience more comfortable and comprehensible is to model it on some known (or imaginable) reality. For example, in 1981, when Dave Hughes started the Old Colorado City BBS, an early bulletin-board system in Colorado Springs, he named sections of it after places one might find in a community: the Old Town Bank for business; Roger's Bar (with Hughes as the electronic bartender) for discussion; the Little Red Schoolhouse for education; and so on.

There actually is a Roger's Bar in Colorado Springs, but the only high-tech element in it is a phone jack that the owners installed at Hughes' request. Most of the other "places" in the Old Colorado City BBS are invented, even though many outsiders believe it is a faithful map of Colorado Springs. In fact, the BBS's popularity led to some sprucing up by the city, which has now taken over the BBS and calls it CityLink. So in a strange, roundabout way, the city that Hughes envisioned and instantiated electronically has affected the physical community it represents.

Build your own: the MediaM00

One of the lessons of early online systems is the importance of participatory design and construction of the shared online space. The Internet is home to some such online environments, most notably MOOs: Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) that are Object-Oriented, minus the swords and sorcery.

Allowing participants to construct personally meaningful artifacts is an essential element of MOOs. They can do this by either defining so-called contributory objects (simple instantiations of existing object classes, such as a costume or greeting card) or programming new objects or places (usually by tweaking existing code). Instantiate a dog, and it will automatically follow you and wag its tail. If you examine the code and learn the language, you can make the dog guard your house, or maybe do tricks or exhibit other dog behavior -- or have it talk.

For example, there is the MediaM00 run by Amy Bruckman, a graduate student in Seymour Papert's Epistemology and Learning Research Group at the MIT Media Lab. MediaM00 is designed to support the professional community of media researchers. Built with M00 software developed by Pavel Curtis at Xerox PARC, the core of MediaM00 resembles the Media Lab: Rooms and their occupants are situated similarly to the real thing (there are no graphics; this is all described only in text). In addition, individuals create their own rooms with special features and creatures. They can also add to or comment on others' creations.

* Release 1.0  15 July 1993
Lately Bruckman has been exploring how children behave online and how systems such as MOOs can affect their learning experience. Bruckman and her colleagues are designing a text-based MOO to be called Moose (MOO Scripting Environment) Crossing, which will feature a multiple-window client program and a Logo-like scripting language.

Governance: the Well and Habitat

Giving up control and allowing participants to co-create the rules and the space itself seems to be more effective (and maybe less stressful) than trying to design and manage the perfect environment centrally. The self-organizing process is as much a part of forming community as any aspect of a place. The participants may be thinking, "Let's design a place we love and find a way to coexist with others who want to be there" and not, "Let's build a successful online service." But the results may be the same, or indeed better for the provider.

The Well: tools not rules

The Well is a good case study of the evolution of governance in an online service. It had a unique start in that its designers had no commercial charter: They just wanted to create an online place to hang out together, as many of them had done in real life at the Farm, a large commune in Tennessee. Since these developers didn't consider themselves to be great authorities on governance and were not above listening to their subscribers, early members had much to say about the Well's rules of conduct. On commercial services, those decisions are typically made by Management, with little debate among members. That can lead to uprisings, as Prodigy experienced. Habitat, described below, offers more lessons on governance.

Eventually, end-users will have tools that let them filter out what they wish to avoid. For example, a parent could set a filter that would avoid programs with a high violence rating -- assuming some rating scheme (a potential online service).

Over time, through much online discussion, the Well's management and users co-developed community standards. This path is not easy: The Well has had its share of uprisings and staff turnover. One general principle is a preference for tools, not rules. For example, rather than create a specific policy on who is being a nuisance and should be punished, some Well users created Bozo Filters, which are invisible to the people being filtered out and offer a shield to users being bothered. A Bozo Filter skips postings and messages from people on a user-created exclusion list. Of course, there are further complexities: How do you participate in a multi-party online conversation, if you are filtering out one or more participants' contributions? What if the nuisance people begin to say things you'd like to hear?

Habitat: ToonTown online

Habitat is more than a nifty online multi-user game: It is a social laboratory whose participants grow to care. Habitat users can design and inhabit entire characters, which Habitat calls avatars. Players can customize
their avatars with different heads,1 colors and accoutrements. With a joystick, they can make the avatars gesture and move (e.g., point, pick up and drop things, turn and walk). In fact, one group of users scheduled and choreographed online dances, which required calculating data-network latencies so they could send their commands at the right times to achieve synchrony. Habitat characters speak to each other in cartoon-style speech balloons.

To see the sysop, participants have to go to the fountain and invoke the oracle. Habitat has an economy, with Tokens as its medium of exchange. There are vending machines, ATMs (automatic token machines) and goods for sale; there are pawn shops, and even arbitrage (at one point, some players discovered that a pawn shop was offering more for an item than a certain vending machine’s discounted prices).

During its original trial run in 1987, Habitat’s developers experimented broadly, with fascinating results.2 An important breakthrough occurred when they let go of their need to plan everything centrally and said they would build the structures and features that users wanted. For example, one participant (a Greek Orthodox priest in real life) wanted to start a church, so Habitat’s developers created a church, home of the Order of the Holy Walnut, which preached nonviolence and became quite influential in Habitat.

Moral choices in a Toon world?

Death matters in Habitat. Avatars who are killed drop whatever they are carrying, lose what is in their pockets, and then get teleported home, head in hands (literally). Death, coupled with the system designers’ willingness to experiment, led to unpredictable (and very engaging) phenomena.

To provide drama and raise moral issues, Habitat’s developers offered weapons for sale, which rapidly became a problem. Half of the members saw Habitat as a game, and the avatars as expendable puppets, to be killed over and over; the other half saw Habitat much more seriously, and considered life important. One Habitat member wandered around randomly, killing others. Some of the victims were upset. As a compromise, the sysops made Populopolis (the major city in Habitat) a weapon-free zone.

To cope with theft, murder and other mayhem, members created a small-scale legal system. Habitat’s developers suggested electing a sheriff. Three people campaigned, and the sysops gave the elected sheriff a ten-gallon hat with a star on it. Despite having no special powers, he was surprisingly effective. Unfortunately, the Habitat pilot ended before participants could explore the implications of a legal system.

The elephant gun

One Habitat novice wanted to create a labyrinth and play the role of Death inside it. Thus was born the Dungeon of Death. To spice things up, the de-

1 New users have a choice among five or six relatively bland heads; they can purchase others, or might receive others as rewards for work well done. In the system’s test run, the heads became as much a medium of exchange as the Token, Habitat’s currency.

2 Chronicled in Cyberspace: First Steps (see Resources, page 17).
Developers created a healing elixir and a special weapon they called the elephant gun: Normally, killing someone took 10 shots from a weapon; the elephant gun could do it in one. One day, sysop Randy Farmer inherited a Death character that was trapped in a corner of the labyrinth with several other avatars, and hadn't been healed with the elixir. Unexpectedly, Death died, and the elephant gun ended up in an ordinary user's hands (other characters can scavenge items dropped when an avatar dies).

**Prometheus unbound**

In the Disney movie "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," real characters who go into ToonTown (the part of town inhabited by cartoons) are suddenly subject to a new set of physics, laws and behavioral rules, dictated by the nature of cartoons. They can expect to talk to cars and to survive if a safe falls on them from the building above. While the Disney studio could control its environment and its inhabitants' reactions, Habitat's creators found that any time they tried to make something happen or to circumvent the rules, it would backfire; if they left things alone and went along with the agreed-upon rules, users responded with intense usage and loyalty.

Although some users will be happy with authoritarian systems that offer guaranteed service and little autonomy, others -- we suspect many others -- will prefer services that walk the fine line between setting the rules and allowing participants to write their own. The rules needn't be completely consistent. They can even be warped, but the participants have to play by the rules -- including the owners.

Despite entreaties and polite requests, the user refused to return the gun to Farmer. Instead, the elephant gun became a prized possession; eventually, the sysops ransomed the gun for 10,000 Tokens and staged a melodramatic exchange, complete with intermediaries and news stories in the Habitat paper. Online time skyrocketed. Unknown to Farmer, the same thing had happened the day before to a different sysop, who had used his Sysopian powers to retake possession of the elephant gun, threatening to cancel the user's account. This had caused a major ruckus among the participants, who felt that even the system's overlords should have to play by the rules. (Of course, online time jumps when people use the system to complain and commiserate, too.)

**Wanna build an electric community?**

Habitat was born over a lunch between Chip Morningstar and his Lucasfilm officemate Noah Falstein in 1985, inspired in part by the science-fiction novel True Names by Vernor Vinge. Operational testing began in December 1986 on QuantumLink, Quantum Communication Services' Commodore 64 offering. Despite the low-power Commodores and 300-baud modems, Habitat delivered a

3 Quantum also ran a Macintosh (and later pc) service called America Online. When that business grew to dominate, the company changed its name to America Online.

*Release 1.0* 15 July 1993
surprisingly rich experience. In fact, much of what the developers learned was how to optimize a system for use by many unpredictable (human) entities, while preserving independence from underlying hardware with an object model.

Habitat was tested for about a year with 300 users. Six months later, a stripped-down version, now called Club Caribe and given a Club Med motif, was back on Quantum/America Online. It runs to this day, but only on Commodore 64 front ends. Along the way, Fujitsu licensed the idea and wrote new software for its FM Towns multimedia machine, which features a CD-ROM drive; it still runs a Habitat system in Japan on NiftyServe.

Morningstar spent much of the intervening time at Amix, and is now working with Randy Farmer (the principal Habitat sysop and developer, and the key front-end programmer at Amix) and Doug Crockford (a colleague from Lucasfilm) to shop their ideas around through their recent startup, called Electric Communities.

**IDENTITY: YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE**

Online services have ways for saying "I'm here; who else is?" Problem is, even when you find out, you often can't be sure. Subscribers will pay for services that permit and guarantee many different kinds of identity. Coupled with identity is the issue of presence. VCO and the Electronic Cafe International are two projects that help people project their presence through the electronic medium.

**Presence**

Many online conferences have hosts who act as greeters, and an "introductions" topic, where new members describe themselves. Simply reading and not contributing is known as lurking, and there's not much you can do in between. You either post something, which can seem risky (especially if you're reading other people's flames), or you stay silent and unknown. "Snapshots" are a nice way to make your presence felt online: Users turn a topic in a conference into a string of short, spontaneous descriptions of where they are, what they are wearing or doing, and anything else they'd like to say. It's sort of a come-as-you-are party without going anyplace.

Most online services have a way of finding out who else is online or in a particular forum at a given moment, but most provide only names. Most services also offer a place to enter a personal profile, but many users don't fill them out, and some fill them out with misleading information.

**True names?**

There are a few safeguards. On most online services, the name that you choose when you sign up is yours for the duration. You have to cancel your account and re-register to change it. Also, names within a service are guaranteed unique. On America Online and most other services you can't post as someone else, because the system won't let you use his handle.
But it's easy to create pseudonyms; the Sierra Network's interface strongly encourages creating new personae. Nobody can tell that you're not a 65-year-old grandmother or a five-year-old girl whose dad is typing for her -- or anything in between. How are you supposed to know whom you're talking to? Is this a place for real activity, or just one large masquerade ball?

Anonymity, role-playing and gender bending

Anonymity plays a curious role in fostering or constraining participation in meetings (see Release 1.0, 3-93). On the one hand, some comments might never see light without the shield of anonymity; on the other, anonymity can rapidly lead to irresponsible behavior and a breakdown of trust, since there is no attribution and no way of holding people responsible for what they say. Because they put trust and responsibility at risk, anonymity and role-playing can get in the way of a feeling of communion.

Yet online personae can be a way to exercise and work out ill-fitting personality traits. As we describe below, some people have already tried -- and enjoyed -- online therapy. Anonymity has other virtues. Famous people may want to avoid raising a commotion (hey! that's Penn Jillette's e-mail address! let's get his autograph!); corporate officers may want to say something without being quoted as spokespeople. (The fact that typed messages are easily copied and pasted makes such quotations simple.)

It's Pat!

Gender issues abound. The first chapter of Deborah Tannen's book on communication between men and women, You Just Don't Understand, comes to life online: Women tend to use more narrative; men offer facts and achieve status through expertise. A person working with a dozen kids in an Internet MUD noted that the boys all created male personae; the girls all chose to be either male or neuter. Women mistaken as men online report being treated very differently from when they are identified as women. They are taken more seriously and don't have to prove themselves.

Again, the masks can be both helpful and frustrating. A few minutes of logging on with a female persona should give a man a new appreciation of what women experience. For a man, receiving inane, unsolicited messages from males every few minutes can be a really eye-opening experience. Flirting online with a woman your age and finding out she's a 14-year-old boy (call it the Crying Game Effect) can be more than disconcerting: The loss of trust in this transaction can color others. To resolve such problems, people get blunt: They type MORF? (Male OR Female?).

Stacy Horn, who founded, owns and runs Echo, a bulletin-board system in Manhattan (described last month), says that women find the online medium sexy. They can engage other people intimately through writing first, get to know their thoughts and feelings, then deepen relationships if they want to.

VCO: put on a happy (or sad, or sleepy) face

What if you could be present in an online room without necessarily posting comments? What if you could even register your disappointment, boredom and anger? You can.
In 1985, also inspired by Vernor Vinge's True Names, Harry Chesley, an independent Mac software developer, created the Visual Conferencing system for Mac users of Delphi, an early online conferencing system. VCO features an oval conference table with empty seats all around. As people join the conference, "faces" they have created offline go into the seats. When someone types something, it scrolls across the conference table; people with Macintosh Talk (an early Mac text-to-speech module from Apple) can hear the text spoken by the Macs.

Unlike The Sierra Network's customizable but static faces, VCO allows users to create up to eight expressions. Participants can switch expressions at any point. Right away, everyone else sees the changed expression, which could be a yawn, a "gag me" gesture or a look of rapt attention. This is a great way of establishing people's presence and allowing them to provide feedback (see box below), without having to participate. In retrospect, Chesley would have allocated display space differently, making the icons less significant and the text more so. Chesley says, "Text is still the main thing. The other elements are subchannels."

The original VCO took a lot of work to use. To start out, users had to download VCO client software from the online service, then use ResEdit (a Mac utility program) to customize their face icons (e.g., quiet, grinning, laughing uproariously, crying, fading out or snoring). Then they had to upload their own "face files" and download larger, compressed face files that contained other participants' faces. Finally, users logged back in, switched from their telecom package to the VCO front end, and began their VCO session. Anyone joining the conference would see the other participants' faces, only if he had downloaded the latest compressed face files. Also, speech synthesis often lagged behind the typed messages, which meant members sometimes replied to messages out of sync with the conversation.

Chesley made VCO available on other services, including GEnie and the Well (it was later ported to CompuServe as VMCO by Bob Perez, now at Arabesque). It is still available on several of those services. In 1986, Pacific Bell used VCO+, a version of VCO enhanced with an IdentiKit-style face construction kit as part of its ISDN trial in Danville, outside San Francisco. When he started VCO, Chesley was an independent Mac software developer. VCO indirectly helped him get a job at Apple, where he is now finishing work on the Open Collaboration Environment.
A brief aside

While at Apple, Chesley used epidemic algorithms (see below) to build a playful system called RumorMonger, which propagated quickly across Apple. RumorMonger is a no-attribution system. People only have to type the command "spread this," and RumorMonger leaps into action, spreading the rumor to other machines on the network. This quickly caused some problems. In the spirit of anonymous channels, people began sending nasty messages and impersonating other people. Also, because there was no practical marginal cost to creating rumors, many tended to be content free and wasted time and resources.

Researchers at Xerox PARC created so-called epidemic algorithms for distributing data. In the RumorMonger implementation, new rumors are marked as "hot," and are offered to other participants, whose RumorMonger software either accepts them or turns them down depending on whether it has seen them or not. When they are turned down, their "temperature" is automatically downgraded, until they vanish.

Have a cappucino at the Electronic Cafe

So far, most of our examples of electronic support for communities have come from the realm of text-oriented online services. Indeed, developers have largely ignored other media, or have focused on multimedia information services. Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway, innovative artists who met in Paris 18 years ago and have since married, are folding together any channels and technologies they can get hold of, and making them available in a hybrid environment -- half telecom performance facility, half cafe.

Rabinowitz and Galloway have undertaken many large-scale projects over the years. They started with small-format video production, exploring narrow-cast, interactive uses (vs. one-way broadcast). In 1977 they responded to a NASA query for citizen experiments using a Canadian/American satellite. Their project, which took a year to develop and three days to perform, linked dancers outside NASA facilities on both US coasts (one at the Goddard Space Center in Maryland; one near Ames Research in Mountain View). They used luminance-key effects to superimpose one dancer on the other’s environment, creating the sensation that the dancers could touch, and experimented widely with the effects of satellite communication delays on the human interaction. The complete performance took place only in the network, in what Rabinowitz and Galloway call composite-image space.

"With online services, you’re only as beautiful as you type -- and that’s the gotcha."
-- Kit Galloway, Electronic Cafe International

In 1980 they created the landmark Hole In Space, an unannounced, unexplained, life-size, street-level video link that was open for three evenings between the Lincoln Center in New York and a department-store window in Central Park.

Release 1.0 15 July 1993
tury City, CA. Rear-projection screens faced out, for easy access. Some passers-by glanced in and moved on; others understood what the medium offered, and played charades and sang with people on the other end. Some called friends and family and held emotional reunions. People quickly understood the humor of such a link; they flirted and exchanged phone numbers.

For the 1984 Olympics, under commission from the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Rabinowitz and Galloway set up a system they called the Electronic Cafe that ran for seven weeks, connecting restaurants in five different ethnic neighborhoods around Los Angeles. The technology was kludgy, but the effect was electric. The restaurants became cultural centers.

Local artists of all kinds performed on the network and acted as guides for others. People from the Latino community started asking questions (over video links) of people from the Korean neighborhood and from Venice Beach; each was in its native context. People arranged face-to-face visits. The project showed Rabinowitz and Galloway that this technology could work; it led to their present endeavor, Electronic Cafe International (ECI).

There's more. For the last five years, ECI has held a New Year's Eve Telebration, during which they follow the new year around the time zones, ending with Hawaii. They collaborate in another project, the 21st Century Odyssey, in which performance artist Barbara T. Smith circles the globe with a portable cafe kit (no Kona roast, just a laptop plus video- and speakerphones), setting up shop in special places and hooking up with physician Roy Walford in the Biosphere II. She orbits, he is static; ECI patches in other participants and other networks.

Authenticity and balance

Rabinowitz and Galloway, who call themselves avant-preneurs, want to use ECI to let people from different disciplines and walks of life mingle and cross-pollinate, to let them model different behaviors and art forms for and with each other. Note that ECI uses a few facilitation tools, but no object-oriented critters, false personalities or threaded messages.

ECI strikes many worthwhile balances. Rabinowitz and Galloway happily use all kinds of communication media. ECI blends face-to-face with virtual connections, the familiar (a cafe in your community) with the foreign, performances with ordinary life and science with spirit.

An Electronic Cafe changes the place where people encounter technology. It's not work, a single workstation with a serious purpose. Nor is it a

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4 Xerox PARC admired it so much, it built a version as part of its Portland Experiment.
5 The 1984 setup: slow-scan video cameras with adjustable frame-rate/resolution from Robot Research; desktop audioconferencing from Derome; a conference bridge from ComTech; TeleWriters (shared electronic sketchpads) from Optel; and terminals connected by BBS software from the Community Memory Project (CMP), a public-access system implemented by Lee Felsenstein (now at Interval Research). They had the CMP software modified so sketches and stills captured could be stored to optical disk, printed or called up later. The cafe sites were wallpapered with the products of these efforts.

Release 1.0 15 July 1993
single person huddled over a pc with a modem, as with online services. Instead, it's a lively, familiar, informal setting that allows people to be comfortable while exploring the unfamiliar. The Electronic Cafe also has natural rhythms. Over time, some people become more experienced with the technology than others. Then someone new asks The Reset Question: "Hey, what's the weather like there?" The process begins again.

Now ECI is based in a studio-cum-cafe in Santa Monica, CA, with links to other ECI sites around the world, including Managua, Paris and the 21st-Century Odyssey project with Biosphere II (where else could Biospherians hang out?). A mobile unit in Europe travels to major shows. There are ISDN subnets in Japan and Europe, complete with CD-quality audio. ECI in Santa Monica will get ISDN this month. Soon it will open cafes in Denmark, Kiev and Manhattan. Notably, Viacom (home of Nickelodeon and MTV) will be opening the Manhattan site (a five-performance pilot), called the Cyberspace Cafe, in its cafeteria overlooking Times Square. Viacom got interested in ECI through some of its corporate IS group programmers; controller (sic) Kevin Lavan found it compelling enough to agree to the experiment.

ECI gets funding from anywhere it can: it charges $5 to $10 admission; it gets commissions from museums, corporations and festivals; and it gets equipment from carriers and vendors that hope to get press exposure and to learn more about the equipment's potential uses.

INTERACTION: CHAOS OR COMMUNION?

Companies spend a lot of money building team cohesion: They send their staffs on Outward Bound rock-climbing expeditions, or on golf and tennis weekends in Puerto Rico. They make an effort to get out of the office environment to build trust and collaboration -- to achieve a feeling of communion that will help them work more effectively. (One powerful such workshop on community building is described in the box on page 14.) The online world doesn't play much of a role here yet; it is still expensive, rather inflexible and not very hospitable. But this is changing.

Good face-to-face meetings create strong feelings, but they fade over time if the participants can't keep in touch. Meeting longtime intimate online friends in person for the first time can be disconcerting; thriving online communities often have frequent real-life get-togethers that contribute the missing ingredient. Combining real-life community-building activities with online activities could make up for their individual shortcomings. It could help balance the interactions, keeping the feeling of communion alive.

The need for balance

In fact, online services will need to balance many subtle elements if they are to foster a feeling of communion, whether for businesspeople or private subscribers. One of these is the division of labor between the system and the participants. On the one hand, bending e-mail or the conference-topic-message format to new purposes can be difficult. On the other hand, one can go too far in designing support software.
For example, healthy groups monitor and regulate their participant’s behavior. Software that sends a canned, automated warning to a participant that is hogging the air (or the screen) insults the user, usurps the group’s responsibility and is likely to delay progress, rather than speed it. But occasional mindful notes can help keep participants aware of the principles they have agreed to follow. Also, newcomers need more help and guidance.

Another element to balance is support for process and content. Healthy communities switch back and forth. One moment they're talking about their lives or are deep into some task; the next, they're examining what’s keeping them from agreeing on some point, or trying to regain a feeling they had earlier. Software can help in this process, by providing easy ways of reviewing past events, or by making it simple to get everyone on a conference call for the extra cues in individuals’ voices. The assistance needed is simple and subtle.

Imagine some of the meeting-support software described in the March issue of Release 1.0 -- from shared whiteboards to brainstorming and outlining tools to concept-mapping tools -- available on CompuServe or America Online, and therefore available around the world, at any time.

Community building at Stanford University

Organizational consultant Kazimierz Gozdz suggests that business teams can reach a feeling of communion quickly by starting without a task orientation, then step out of it to achieve tasks, occasionally re-entering the state to refresh the feeling. Last semester, Gozdz helped Stanford University professor Michael Ray use these concepts in the business-school class Ray teaches called New Paradigms in Business (also the title of a book he recently edited).

They began the course with an intense, two-day community-building workshop (the kind described above), which resulted in a strong feeling of communion; however, it also set expectations too high. When the group fell back into pseudo-community, it was unprepared for it, and work suffered. In retrospect, professor Ray recommends starting without the big workshop. Despite the availability of campus computer accounts and e-mail, the class didn’t use them. Ray believes such support would have been helpful, and will explore it in a future class.

6 More specifically, the John G. McCoy/BancOne Corp. Professor of Creativity and Innovation and of Marketing (sic).

Release 1.0 15 July 1993
Scott Peck and Communities

In his book The Different Drum, psychologist M. Scott Peck describes four stages of community development. Pseudo-community, the first, features politeness over honesty. People treat each other civilly, but don't get very close. Participants avoid arguments, or even subject areas that might lead to arguments. Many communities stay in this stage. The second stage, Chaos, often begins when the politeness wears out: Someone drops the mantle of civility and gets angry at someone else. Sometimes personality conflicts emerge and insults fly. People consider leaving the group; some lose hope that it will work, but stay.

Peck believes there are two ways out of Chaos: back to Pseudo-community through the imposition of artificial order ("all right, you be in charge!"), or through the third stage, Emptiness, to what Peck refers to as true Community (which we are calling communion). In Emptiness, people try to shed their preconceptions and biases. They speak personally and avoid proselytizing, judging, or otherwise trying to change others. They commit to the process, listen to others and sit with their words. They use consensus, not voting, for group decisions (Peck does not define consensus as unanimity, but rather as a sense of general agreement). Somewhere during this process, the group often slips into true Community. The condition is temporary; the process is cyclical.

Peck's efforts have led to the formation of the Foundation for Community Encouragement (FCE), a non-profit group that runs workshops using Peck's model of community formation. So far, the group is strictly low-tech, but Kazimierz Gozdz, a Palo Alto consultant who does work for the FCE, has been working to add technology.

A method similar to Peck's has emerged from the work of David Bohm, a UK physicist best known for his theories on the holographic nature of the universe. Bohm's process is called Dialog: through (dia) meaning (logos).

Groups that want to work together smoothly or overcome fundamental differences need to get a better understanding of each others' world views, but there's no time to compare ideas in all realms. Community building and Dialog are ways of getting to shared meaning. The deep bonds that result can help groups work through inevitable obstacles and achieve more together.

Features and place names and rules are the furniture of online worlds. In most services, the furniture is Spartan, and bolted to the floor. People want to move things around until they're comfortable, and add their own objets d'art. They also want interesting places to hang out. In Tokyo, a BBS called TWICS features a very popular section called the ofuru, which means hot tub. America Online has Le Pub.
Shared meaning through Utne Reader Internet E-mail Salons

The Utne Reader, the Reader's Digest of the alternative press, has begun hosting Internet e-mail salons, an online variant of its successful Neighborhood Salon Association (annual dues: $12). To emulate the physical salons, Utne limits a virtual salon's size to 25 participants. Griff Wigley, the Utne Reader's Salon-keeper, does a bit of demographic engineering to get gender- and nationality-balanced groups (participants outside the US and Canada don't need to join the Salon Association). The salon members rotate responsibility for facilitating the meetings. Unlike the Internet, bulletin board systems and online services, where people move to topics, the Utne E-mail Salons change topics frequently. This avoids the "experts only" feeling that sometimes dominates topic-oriented conferences elsewhere.

Skip the book: Take the workshop and get the software

It may be useful to have a tool to design a multi-user software environment that reflects a process you like. Some principles might be manifest as software rules, such as a baton-passing protocol to ensure that everyone in the group speaks every time. In a sense, this is a group-process user interface. You could modify or swap out the text of the principles, depending on what school you'd like to try.

Software agents could act as training wheels, offering participants relevant exercises, concepts or reminders, or showing one participant his contributions and asking him to reflect on his participation. Groupware researchers Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz have created such tools on their own system.

You may want software that lets your group experiment with timing, messages, working norms and vocabulary. Corporations may want to use such elements to reinforce or change their corporate culture. They can call their conference areas Ren and Stimpy, or call meetings "synch points" and "retreats." The language they use will change participants' expectations and behavior.

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For further reading:
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