Invited Speaker:

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR ONLINE COMMUNITIES: LESSONS FROM EARLY SETTLEMENTS

As online environments become inhabited by groups of people, the key challenges to be faced are not simply technological, but also sociological: the challenges of social interaction and social organization. This is not to diminish the great difficulties in creating new technologies, but rather to emphasize that even these tasks pale beside the problems of facilitating and encouraging successful online interaction and online communities.

The problems of social interaction and organization are often ignored in the computer industry. While many people have begun to talk about “social computing,” as it is used now it is a thin term that applies more to user interface design than to actual social interaction between two or more people. Common responses to the challenge of designing systems that support robust social interaction include pretending this issue is not important, or that there is nothing one can do about it, or that it is simply a user interface issue. In my comments, I wish to argue that all of these responses are incorrect. I also wish to discuss the features of successful and unsuccessful online communities. While there are no algorithms for a community, there are some very useful heuristics, and I will draw from research in the social sciences as well as the practical experience of long-time participants in online groups to discuss various design principles for online communities.

My focus is on the graphical virtual worlds that have recently been released on the Internet — worlds that have added a 2-D or 3-D visual representation of a space to go along with text or voice communication. Extrapolating from the lessons learned from current online communities, I will discuss issues and challenges that are likely to occur in fully immersive VR online communities.

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Peter Kollock is an associate professor of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles and director of the Center for the Study of Online Communities. His research focuses on cooperation and the role of trust and commitment in groups. He studies a wide range of situations in which group members gain by cooperating where an element of temptation to behave selfishly exists, examining the factors that encourage or discourage the emergence of cooperation and community. He uses a variety of research methods including experiments, fieldwork, and computer simulations. His recent work has concentrated on studies of cooperation and conflict in computer-mediated communities, and he has several projects in progress examining social interaction and organization in online groups. Dr. Kollock received his BA, MA, and Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Washington. and he has received a number of award and honors including the Founder’s Prize (SASE), an Advancement in the Discipline Grant (ASA/NSF), and several awards for distinguished teaching from UCLA and the University of Washington. He has been invited to speak on his research nationally and internationally, including presentations in Japan, Germany, Poland, Australia, and the Netherlands.