

Discourses of Connectedness: Constructing the Networked, Mediated Community

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on clarifying and expanding the analytic concept of “community” to account for the interaction between groups of networked people, prone to interacting in dynamic and multidimensional digital paradigms. I seek to discuss the questions: 1) How do community managers at a video game development studio in Los Angeles structure and shape their large-scale, global online community through regular interaction and engagement with players online and offline? and 2) How do players co-construct a “sense of community” and “feelings of connectedness.” Using an anthropological approach, this research attempts to explore these questions using digital ethnography, physical ethnography, and computer-mediated discourse analysis.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.0 [Computers and Society]: *General*.

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: *Games*.

General Terms

Theory.

Keywords

Community, Video games, Social Media, Digital Ethnography, Language, Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

This project reexamines a foundational keyword in anthropology: community. While anthropologists have long made use of the analytic concept in linguistic and social analysis, the concept’s definition has been multiple and contrasting, influenced by scholars’ methodological preferences, different schools, and paradigms since its’ initial use in the social sciences (Duranti 1997).

Historically, anthropologists have discussed notions of community in terms of “speech community,” (See Morgan 2004) which emphasizes groupings according to (1) members’ shared linguistic features (see Saussure 1916; Bloomfield 1926; Chomsky 1965), or (2) members’ shared sets of norms and

attitudes (see Hymes 1972; Gumperz 1962; Labov 1972). More recently, however, some scholars have turned to alternative, re-imagined analytic terms for the groups of discourse users they study in an effort to expand or produce new definitions as a result of the difficulties and vagueness in defining exactly what constitutes membership in a given community and how these members interact: discourse community (Bazerman 1978; Porter 1992), speech area (Jackson 1974), speech network (Milroy 1987; Patrick 2002), linguistic community (Silverstein 1998), local community (Grenoble and Whaley 2006), community of practice (Bourdieu 1977; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Lave and Wenger 1991), community of interest (Brown and Duguid 2000), geographical community (Agre & Schuler 1997), and imagined community (Anderson 1983).

This project focuses on clarifying and expanding the analytic concept of community in the current information age, to also account for how groups of people are influenced by not only shared languages, discourses, and physical localities, but by the interconnectedness (Haviland et al. 2010) and temporalities (Ochs and Capps 1996) of digital media and information and communication technologies. As digital media and games have become enormously integrated into people’s everyday lives, “there is a vast amount of descriptive and analytic work to be done coming to grips with the fluid and dynamic relationship between the electronic worlds of words and images and the activities of embodied, breathing people” (Rampton 2000: 293). As technologies (e.g., social networking websites, texting and messaging, video blogging, online games) become more accessible and widely used as a means of supplementing communication and social interaction, a rethinking of the concept of community, as overlapping and both at times mediated and unmediated, localized and de-localized, must be considered.

2. GOALS OF RESEARCH

While the study of digital interactive media (e.g., digital worlds, digital games) has become a growing interest in anthropology, the focus has been on the content and affordances of these media. These studies have only touched upon how interaction in these mediated communities (see Jones 1998; Malaby 2009; Preece 2001; Wallace and St-Onge 2003; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2003) are also structured and shaped by teams of media developers who make up overlapping, localized communities, tied to and often in communication with these same delocalized social groups (see Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010; Newon 2011; Pearce 2011; Taylor 2006).

The goal of this research is thus to better understand how “community” as an analytic concept may be expanded to account for the changing ways in which people are organizing their social

worlds through digital technologies and the sense of belonging constructed through this interconnectedness (see McGonigal 2011). This ethnographic study seeks to explore how a localized community of game developers at a studio in Los Angeles design and create the structures for not only video games, but corresponding online fan communities of geographically unbound players, socialized in technological fluency. Moreover, this research also explores how a “sense of community” is co-constructed by players through interaction and engagement with other players and developers. As online and offline interaction overwhelmingly takes place by means of discourse, the study of language interaction is central to this project.

More specific objectives of the study are to:

- (1) Identify and explore the discourse and linguistic practices participants bring to bear on the notion of community as both mediated and unmediated interaction, mutual repertoire, and shared norms and values.
- (2) Investigate how that language use results in a sort of “sense of community,” of feelings of connectedness, intimacy, and belonging, regardless of geographic or cultural boundness.
- (3) Assess how people construct the boundaries of community membership, how these boundaries overlap, and how these boundaries may be constructed and maintained through digital media.

3. PROPOSED APPROACH

My approach is influenced by linguistic anthropology literature on community (Anderson 1983; Irvine 1997; Spitulnik 1997), identity (Bulcholtz and Hall 2003; Du Bois 1980; Goffman 1967; Gumperz 1983), and on the detailed analysis of interaction (Keating and Egbert 2004). This work is also influenced strongly by computer-mediated discourse analysis literature (see Herring 2001; Herring 2004). Further, this approach operates from an understanding of gaming as a meaningful social practice, in which people engage to learn, play, socialize, and participate in their everyday lives (see Castellani and Hafferty 2009).

4. METHODS AND PRIOR WORK

The proposed study takes place over 12 consecutive months (January-December 2013). To investigate the objectives outlined, data collection methods include (1) participant-observation of online interaction, in-person gaming events (e.g., gaming conventions, e-sports events), and ethnography of community teams at a game studio in Los Angeles, (2) video- and audio-recordings of interaction in these settings, (3) open-ended, semi-structured interviews with community managers, and (4) archiving logs of computer-mediated communication and generated digital content found on sponsored websites, messageboards, and online event game platforms.

In my research thus far, I have found that community managers and players co-construct a “sense of community” through linguistic and communicative styles both online and in game contexts, as well as offline at conventions and e-sports events. I have found that players use language related to notions of temporalities and space to promote feelings of inclusion and connectivity. Further, I have found that players and developers co-construct a “sense of community” through discursively negotiating and evaluating appropriate community membership and behavioral norms.

This research builds on three months of prior experience interning in the community department at the interactive media company in this study (Summer 2009). Although this internship was not research related, this engagement allowed me to more fully understand the day-to-day objectives, activities and responsibilities involved in community management.

This work also draws from my previous research and publication experience. In 2007-2008, I wrote a MA thesis in anthropology that analyzes the discourse of how people negotiate a sort of “sense of community” using voice and text-based chat concurrently, a phenomenon referred to as multi-layered, platform-based code-switching (Boellstorff 2008), to organize collaborative group activities. Based on transcribed data derived from 60 hours of recorded video and audio-recordings, this research explores how expert and novice players of a *World of Warcraft* guild use linguistic structures in the midst of game play to construct community membership, confer responsibility, and negotiate authority and social roles in the group.

5. POTENTIAL IMPORTANCE

Due to pervasive computing technologies and the corresponding, overwhelming, proliferation and popularity of social networking websites, texting and messaging, video conferencing, blogging, and online gaming, the rethinking, redefining, and ultimately understanding of “community” is essential.

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