Building and Supporting an On-line Community

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Standard Disclaimers

- Unlike code, there is no compiler for philosophy
- Talk is based on my own experiences and sometimes speculative theories
  - ❑ Samba Release Manager and Open Source Developer
  - ❑ Extreme Telecommuter
  - ❑ All Around Introvert
- Slanted towards software projects, but many principals apply to other communities such as user groups, grassroots projects, etc....
- Slides available on-line
  - ❑ http://www.samba.org/~jerry/slides/alf05_community.pdf

What is an on-line community?

- A community is a group of people bound together by some type of common interest
  - ❏ national identify, job affiliation, moral and/or religious beliefs, personal interests, etc....
- Core sustains community during membership turnover
- An on-line community is one whose primary means of communication is some form of electronics communication

Community or not?

- *mosh pit*: (def) An area in front of a concert stage in which audience members mosh.
- *flash mob*: (def) A large group of people who gather in a usually predetermined location, perform some brief action, and then quickly disperse.

Why go on-line?

- Avoid scheduling conflicts for large groups
- Avoid geographic dependencies
- Possible candidates
  - Software development teams
  - Fan clubs
  - User groups
  - Grassroots volunteer organizations
- Sociological study of the Samba community
  - http://news.samba.org/articles/earnshaw_thesis.pdf

Popular Forms of Communication

- Mailing lists
  - in-band public discussion
  - not bound by timezones
- IRC
  - more direct personal contact while still operating in a group setting
  - interrupt driven
- Instant messaging, phone calls, etc...
  - individual contact
- Meetings
  - follow-ups to on-line relationships

What does it look like?

external to
community

Fringe

Members

Core
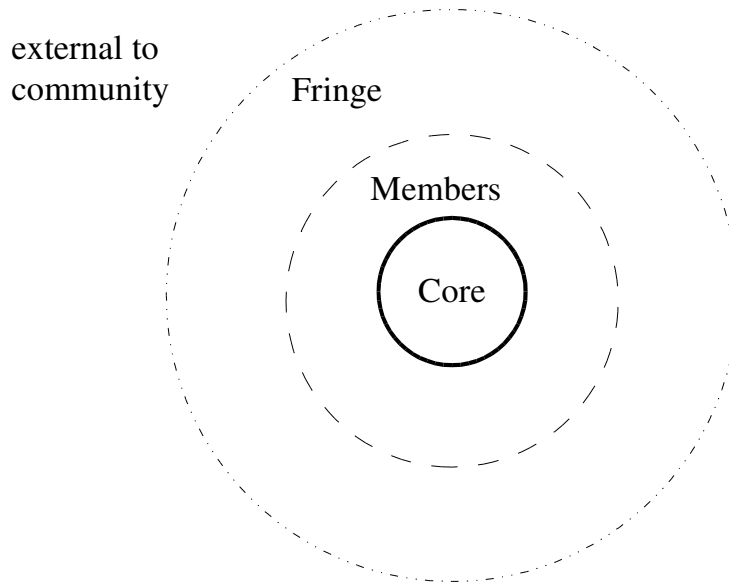
Establishing a Presence

- Carnivals attract people. Carcasses attract flies.
- Where is the heart best of the project?
- Smaller community – primarily mailing lists
  - ❏ much more likely to be able to coordinate real time, on-line meetings
  - ❏ beware of IRC for all but the smallest communities
- Larger community– billboard or broadcast mechanism
  - ❏ newsletter, website, "announce" type mailing lists
  - ❏ an active website is perceived as the mark of an active community

Leaders

- *charisma*: (def) A rare personal quality attributed to leaders who arouse fervent popular devotion and enthusiasm.
- Leader[s] provide
  - ❑ a focal point for the community
  - ❑ a voice for the project's vision
- Charisma does not always translate on-line

Responsibilities of the Core

- Be active members
- Benevolent dictators, Moderators, and Executive decisions
- Help establish direction for the members
  - ❑ software: design goals, release criteria, instructions on enabling technologies such as remote access to resources or tool-chains
  - ❑ user-groups: meeting plans, time and location, community FAQs
- Foster new core members
- Note that the core members are not necessarily responsible for growing the community
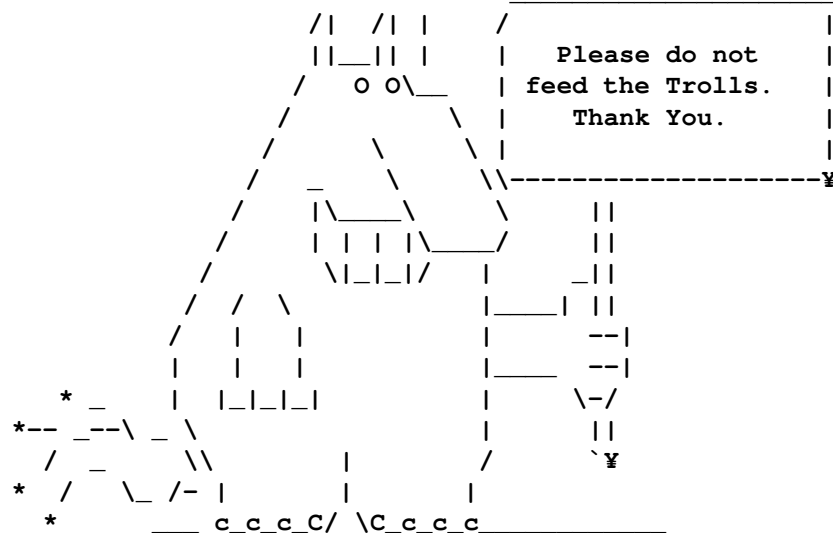
Community Growth

- Buy a Saturn, get invited to a Bar-B-Q
  - ❑ one on one invitation
- American Express: "Memberships has its rewards"
  - ❑ Offer some reason to belong
- If one wants coffee, one goes to a coffeeshop
  - ❑ members come in and out as they wish
  - ❑ create an atmosphere
- "Proselytize the infidels!"
  - ❑ demonstrate the community's reason and purpose
    - ✔ Software benchmarks
    - ✔ Political campaigning
    - ✔ installfests, bootable CD distributions, ...

Trolls

- *Troll*: (def) To utter a posting on Usenet designed to attract predictable responses or flames.
- Trolls can be funny, entertaining, lively, and necessary
  - ❑ communities thrive on the thoughts of individuals
  - ❑ excessive moderation will cause a fork()
- Beware of "bit rage"
  - ❑ on-line communication can be impersonal but it shouldn't be
- Very few people enjoy living in a community dominated by trolls (a.k.a. conflict)
  - ❑ except those at "/. -1"

Use the sign sparingly

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What about the GPL?

- The GPL does
  - promote giving back to the community
  - enforce cooperation
- The GPL does not
  - require any relationships between members of the community
  - you can't spell "community" without "people" (or at least 'u' and 'i')

Why do many LUGs fail ?

- Lack of interaction
  - many LUGs rely on in-person meetings to build personal relationships thus relying on geographic co-location
  - sense of community cannot be built when people meet only once every few weeks
- Lack of direction
  - community's have a underlying sense of promoting or defending those principals which provide the cohesive bond
    - evangelism, friendship, or simply self-improvement
  - with no sense of moving forward, growing, or maturing, the cohesion is weakened
  - mailing lists often turn into "help me" centers

Closing Thoughts

- The social dynamics of on-line communities are as legitimate as those which are primarily based off-line
  - many of the challenges are the same
  - many of the successful techniques are the same as well
- Electronic communication can become a dominating factor and push us towards interrupt driven life
  - go outside every now and then
- Using IRC to talk to people sitting at the same table is still slightly unnerving to me
  - phenomenon does validate the reality of on-line relationships

Questions or Comments?

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