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TAKING THE COMMUNITY FOR A RIDE

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Abstract

The ComeRideWithMe Project set out to share online the experience of a real-life adventure - in this case a world motorbike tour. The paper discusses aspects of both the system design model, and the online community that formed around the project. The project website can be found at <http://www.comeridewithme.com>.

Keywords

Virtual travel, technomads, online communities, virtual experience

Introduction

The ComeRideWithMe Project covered the stories of a group of motorbike riders as they rode from Singapore to London over a period of six months. The project examined the challenges of maintaining close contact with an online community. The Royal Children's Hospital School became involved in the project and it was hoped that long-term patients at the hospital would be able to develop and maintain a sense of community with the riders. A primary aim of the project was to enable the patients to escape the geographic and temporal limitations of their situation by actively experiencing the adventure with riders. In order to create links between Australian based hospital patients and children in similar situations overseas, the riders also visited a number of children's hospitals, schools and orphanages along the way.

System design considerations

The design of the online systems addressed issues of trust, administration overhead and aesthetics. How should a site, tailor made for an online adventure, look and function? What levels of administration are required? How can an environment of trust and safety be created within the community?



Fig 1 ComeRideWithMe home page

Site aesthetics and functionality

Staff and students researching on-line communities at Griffith University experimented with various site models as they tried to identify and satisfy the requirements of this project. The site interface is designed

around a summary of current journal articles leading to the full articles, a map system, a multiplayer game area and links to the village message-board system. A system for dynamically updating the maps from the riders satellite track data was developed too late to be included in the site. Behind the scenes the system implemented had at its core, a database driven journal entry system for the riders to enter pictures and journal articles of the trip.

Administration and maintenance requirements

The previously mentioned data driven entry system allowed tasks of content management to be automated. This vastly reduced the weekly maintenance overhead, and made it easier to keep the journal articles current. In most cases a journal article was written and published on the website within 48 hours of the events described in it. This was important as it allowed community members to participate in discussion the events while they were still current. The second area requiring maintenance activity is in the area of user administration. The next section describes a process of referral to achieve two goals simultaneously – distributing the administrative activity, and promoting the safety of the online environment.

Creating an environment of trust and safety

After some deliberations it was decided not to place security restrictions on browsing the articles. All journal articles were to be available to the general anonymous viewers. With the involvement of schools and hospitals providing for the security and privacy of the children was always a major priority. This was partially achieved via a process of 'referral' (Kautz, 1998). The referral system in this case took the form of applications from identifiable 'responsible adults' representing legitimate institutions. Recognised groups and schools who were interested in joining the ComeRideWithMe community were invited to register, nominating a responsible adult, the 'chief', who would be accountable for the activity of their 'villagers'. An asynchronous communications system was developed based on this village metaphor. Most of the villages had real geographic locations such as the Royal Children's Hospital Village, R'dale Scouts Village, Miss A's Grade 2 Village etc. Some administration tasks such as creating new village members and assigning passwords fell to chief in each village. This distributed the administration overhead without compromising security and the result was that, at least in the area of user administration, the system was reasonably scalable.

Region	Number of Villages
Australia	21
South East Asia	2
Central Asia	1
Africa	1
North America	1

Fig 2 Villages by region

In some cases villages were formed from groups without a geographic location. For example, the Griffith University's IT Summer Camp made up 4 villages and the Interested Aussies Village picked up a number of people not connected with any schools or community groups. The riders themselves had a rider's village where they would post messages. Eventually there were 26 registered villages in the system in 8 regions. Although there was fairly constant and lively interaction taking place on the village messageboard it quickly became apparent that the majority of followers of the site were not actually in villages.

The Development of Community

As the project progressed messages began to reflect a strong sense of intimacy with the riders and the project began to take on a sense of community.

Where's Phil?

Hi there Ken, I've been following with interest your adventures in Asia but after just returning from holidays discovered that Phil has been replaced by Sally. Did you guys have a blue or something...?

There are various views on developing a sense of community which vary considerably depending on the type of group being discussed – e.g. groups based on giving and receiving expert advice (Greenspun, 1999), groups primarily based on social networking (Garton, 1997). Perhaps the closest to a formula for a community based around a virtual adventure is from Singhal and Zyda (1999) with their 5 characteristics of a virtual gaming community.

A shared sense of space, presence, and time. A way to communicate and a way to share

Although Singhal and Zyda were primarily describing communities formed in artificial 3D environments it is interesting to consider how evolution of the ComeRideWithMe experience satisfied these 5 criteria, and in doing so, developed a strong communal bond based on the shared adventure.

A shared sense of space. By the use of maps and photographs the community is continually taken to the riders location. This can also be placed in the context of the entire trip so that unconsciously a sense of progress or lack of progress results. The journal articles from each place give the community members insights into the riders' experience of a place. Eg frustration with delays; reasons for altering plans due to unforeseen events.

The Myanmar Crossing

Hallo Ken Thank you for the report "crossing the border to Myanmar" and the pictures - I sent the webpage address on to my friends in Switzerland and they (an me too) enjoy to follow your trip from South East Asia - Arab countries - Europe...

A shared sense of presence. The community members construct a sense of the presence from the photos of the place and the people the riders encounter there. In many cases the people met by the riders later posted messages on the village message board addressed to the whole community, further reinforcing the sense of presence.

Hi From Sek

I've seen your website. I am very happy because I saw my photo. Where are you now? Good Luck for your journey. Your Teddy Bear is very lovely. See you later. I think I'll do like your project in the future....Sek. { a man who meet with Suzuki Kantana at southern of Thailand

A shared sense of time. A selection of realtime multi-user games was included in the system - the intention was that members in various countries might like to play marbles and chess against each other. For reasons that aren't entirely clear (perhaps time differences, financial constraints) this feature was the least used section of the system. Instead the profound sense of shared time derived from weekly or monthly time scales as members were drawn into the drama of the unfolding narrative. In many cases people came in part way through the project and quickly fell into the projects weekly rhythm.

What An Experience

Ken I have just spent about 5 hours reading your journal entries. I found your stories fascinating. What an experience. I will keep up to date weekly from now on!!

A way to communicate. The messageboard system, while effective in allowing members of the community to participate was only used by a small number of the hundreds of people following the site. The village system had a link from the home page but in retrospect perhaps it was not featured sufficiently. The many community members who were not part of the village system had no access to the messageboards. Midway through the project it was decided to throw security precautions to the wind and publish a generic login-in password for people not in villages. For quite a few people this was the first time they realised the village system existed.

Chin Up Albear

Hiya!!! I didn't even know this msg board existed....v. cool. I agree with Uncy Neil, Albear is a sook. He's a bear, he's supposed to be big and tough...

A way to share Various narrative devices and recurring themes were employed to encourage the community members to share the unfolding drama of the trip. One device bears (sic) particular mention. Through the unstructured and unpredictable narrative there is a consistent underlying shared joke. Not a particularly clever joke, but a very successful one - simply that Albert is a real person. Albert (pronounced Albear) the Celebrity Bear was originally included for the benefit of the primary school age children following the site. He fast became the favourite with all ages. A constant question to the riders was "How did you get people to treat Albert like a real person?" The answer is simply that the people the riders met enjoyed sharing the joke as much as the readers.

You and that Bear

What's going on? On reading the journals it appears that there's some tension between you two, kenny. Is that the case? ... You just leave poor little Albear alone, he's just trying to have some fun while overseas

Conclusions

The positive outcomes of such projects as this rely both on the systems that support them, and on development of a sense of community. Due consideration must be given to the system's functionality, security and maintenance overhead. Once the support systems are in place the adventure itself must be presented in a way that allows the members to participate in the experience. This paper has described a number of the methods for promoting this. One of the recurring themes in virtual experience is the paucity of stimuli that challenge the imagination and emotions the way that real experiences do. It is interesting therefore to consider the ways in which the ComeRideWithMe community members did experience an emotional connection with the adventures of the riders. Using the stories, images, and village message-boards, each community member is left to construct the virtual world in their own imaginations using their own experiences to fill in the gaps and detail. The messages they posted indicate that in doing so many of the members experienced a powerful affective engagement with the adventure.

Poor Albear

I think it's discrimination, just because you're a celebrity bear, and they are not! I say, if you feel miserable, there's no point pretending otherwise ... To quote Khamal, "why are you people so terribly unkind?" I'm here for you Albear!

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