



Design for Online Community: Beyond the Hype!

A presentation for the Boston “mini” Usability Professionals Association Conference on May 23, 2007

Lynn Cherny, Ph.D., [Ghostweather Research and Design](#)

A small blue triangle pointing to the right, located at the bottom left of the slide.

Outline

- ▶ My Credentials
- ▶ Community in Web 2.0 and 1.0
- ▶ Why the Hoopla?
 - ▶ Some Business Reasons; Innovation in Orgs and Outside; Risks of “Doing It Badly”
- ▶ A Plan of Action for Doing It Right
 - ▶ What is “Community?” Goals, Definitions Online, Offline, in an Elevator
 - ▶ Who’s Going to Be Involved Building it?
 - ▶ Design Principles to Create It and Moderate It
 - ▶ Signs of Community Based on Varied Definitions
 - ▶ Metrics for Measurement
- ▶ ... Research Sources for More Info

My Credentials

- ▶ Author of *Conversation and Community: Chat in a Virtual World* (1999, Chicago University Press), a Stanford University Ph.D. dissertation in dot-com era: ethnographic and linguistic study of a chat community in an extensible virtual world
- ▶ Co-editor of *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace* (1995, Seal Press). Collection of essays by female participants in “early” online communities (IRC, Chat, USENET, Mailing Lists).
- ▶ Interaction designer and researcher: Excite.com, TiVo, Adobe, Autodesk..., now consulting in User Experience and Design.

Web 2.0 vs. 1.0

- ▶ **Web 2.0 – it's a webcentric world today:**

“A phrase coined by O'Reilly Media in 2004 refers to a perceived second-generation of Web based communities and hosted services — such as social networking sites, wikis and folksonomies — that facilitate collaboration and sharing between users.”

- ▶ **Pre-2004, we were talking about community too!**

- ▶ Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993), Hagel and Armstrong's *Net Gain* (1997)

- ▶ Tools then:

Chat, email, IM, lists, BBS, USENET, MUDs/MOOs, other games...

Web 2.0 Paradigm Examples

Examples from digg, flickr tag cloud, LinkedIn, mashups, RSS readers/feeds

Why the Hoopla? (Again)

- ▶ Communities create investment in a place/site/product/activity via other people there; a cause of the famous stickiness
- ▶ Time = Attention = Money for many sites/businesses (“freemium” business models)
- ▶ Brands are more and more customer-centric
 - ▶ Community helps people or helps them help themselves (collective action), which builds brand equity
 - ▶ Lifetime value
- ▶ Open-source lessons/threats

Some Stats on Community Business Value

- ▶ Community users remain customers 50% longer than non-community users (AT&T)
- ▶ 43% of support forum visits happen in lieu of opening a support case (Cisco)
- ▶ Community users spend 54% more than non-community users (eBay HBR article):
 - ▶ *Lurkers and community enthusiasts bid twice as often as members of the control group, won up to 25% more auctions, paid final prices that were as much as 24% higher, and spent up to 54% more money (in total).*
- ▶ In customer support, live interaction costs 87% more per transaction than online self-help.

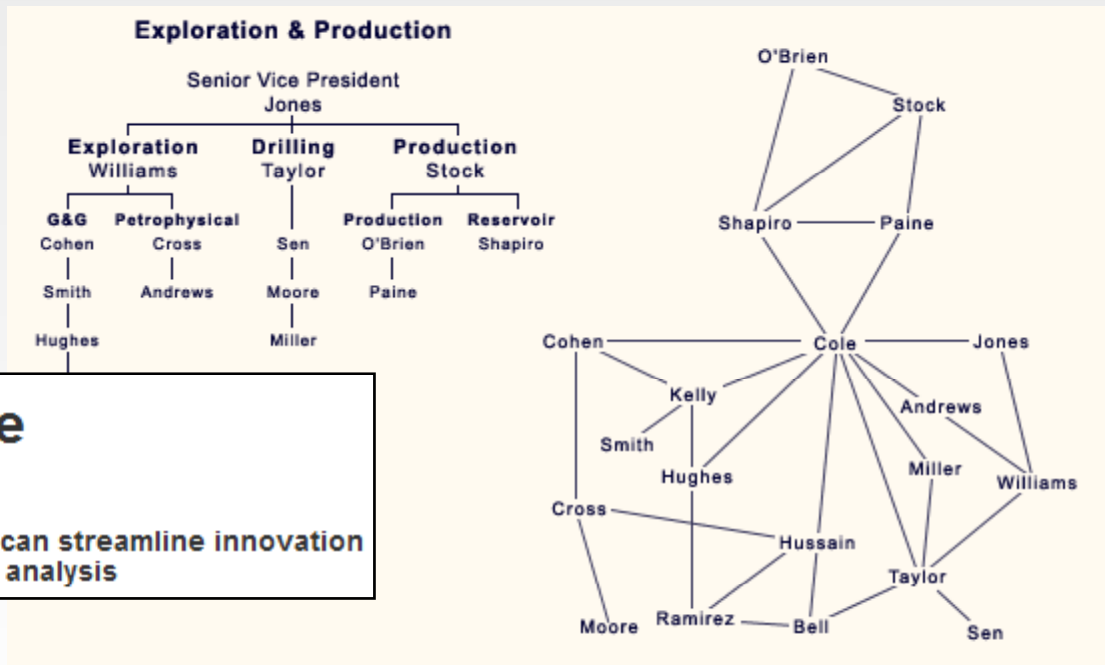
(Bill Johnston, Forum One)

Social Networking and Innovation

- ▶ Company innovation & organizational studies on SNA
- ▶ Involvement by customers in the corporate processes (“crowdsourcing”)
- ▶ Communities can be self-organizing competitors

IBM: Untangling Office Connections

Researcher Kate Ehrlich says companies can streamline innovation and collaboration through social-network analysis



Risks of Doing “It” Badly...

- ▶ “Paid inauthentic discourse” (Rheingold), “Pseudocommunity” (Beniger), “Imagined Communities” (Anderson)

“Reversal of a centuries old trend from organic community based on personal relationships, to impersonal associations integrated by mass means”

- ▶ Empty places & credibility loss for company hosting
- ▶ Blatant commercialization of existing communities may piss off the target “audience” beyond repair
 - ▶ e.g., Fanlib.com – boycott, bad word-of-mouth...
- ▶ High financial cost (tools plus people/org support)

Get your goals and design right!

You Need a “Community Plan of Action”

- ▶ Identify the community goal
- ▶ Learn from various definitions
- ▶ Who will build it? Pick your skill-set
- ▶ Follow some relevant design principles
- ▶ Look for indicators that suggest you “did it” (community-behavior)
- ▶ Find metrics to measure it formally (business stats)

The Community's Goal / Raison d'être

- ▶ The goal is for them, not you (even if you have one too)
 - ▶ “This is a social experiment.” (uh-oh)
 - ▶ “A place to talk about books we love.”
- ▶ The public goal is what they see when they get there, so they understand how it applies to them (or doesn't) – good UI design principles apply!
- ▶ Don't compete with what they already use (do your competitive research well, and use anthropology techniques)
 - ▶ *Does a group already exist? Where do they “live” now?*
 - ▶ *Do they have existing reasons to communicate? May help or hurt you. (FaceBook, LiveJournal, Professional communities...)*

Community Definitions for Internet

- ▶ In 1993 in *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold defines **virtual communities** as

“Social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”

Community Definitions for Internet

- ▶ In 2000 in *Community Building on the Web*, Amy Jo Kim:

“A community is a group of people with a shared interest, purpose, or goal, who get to know each other better over time.”

- ▶ In 2002, in a CACM article on “Audience-Specific Online Community Design,” Dorine Andrews:

“Community is no longer defined as a physical place, but as a set of relationships where people interact socially for mutual benefit. Online community is a social network that uses computer support as the basis of communication among members instead of face-to-face interaction.”

Talking to Execs in Elevators : Brief and smart definitions

We need to clarify “community” for the confused business person and use it responsibly, or we can’t responsibly design it or measure it.

→ Not “chitchat and warm fuzzies!”

- ▶ **“Community”** requires social interaction over a period of time.
- ▶ Community is an emergent property of group behavior, and some tools and content can support that group behavior better than others. The design challenges are more complex than designing for individuals.
 - ▶ Corollary: **Technology ≠ Community!**

Why Should We Care About Any Other (Longer) Definitions?

Wellman et al. (1996) note that press about the Internet (during 1.0!)...

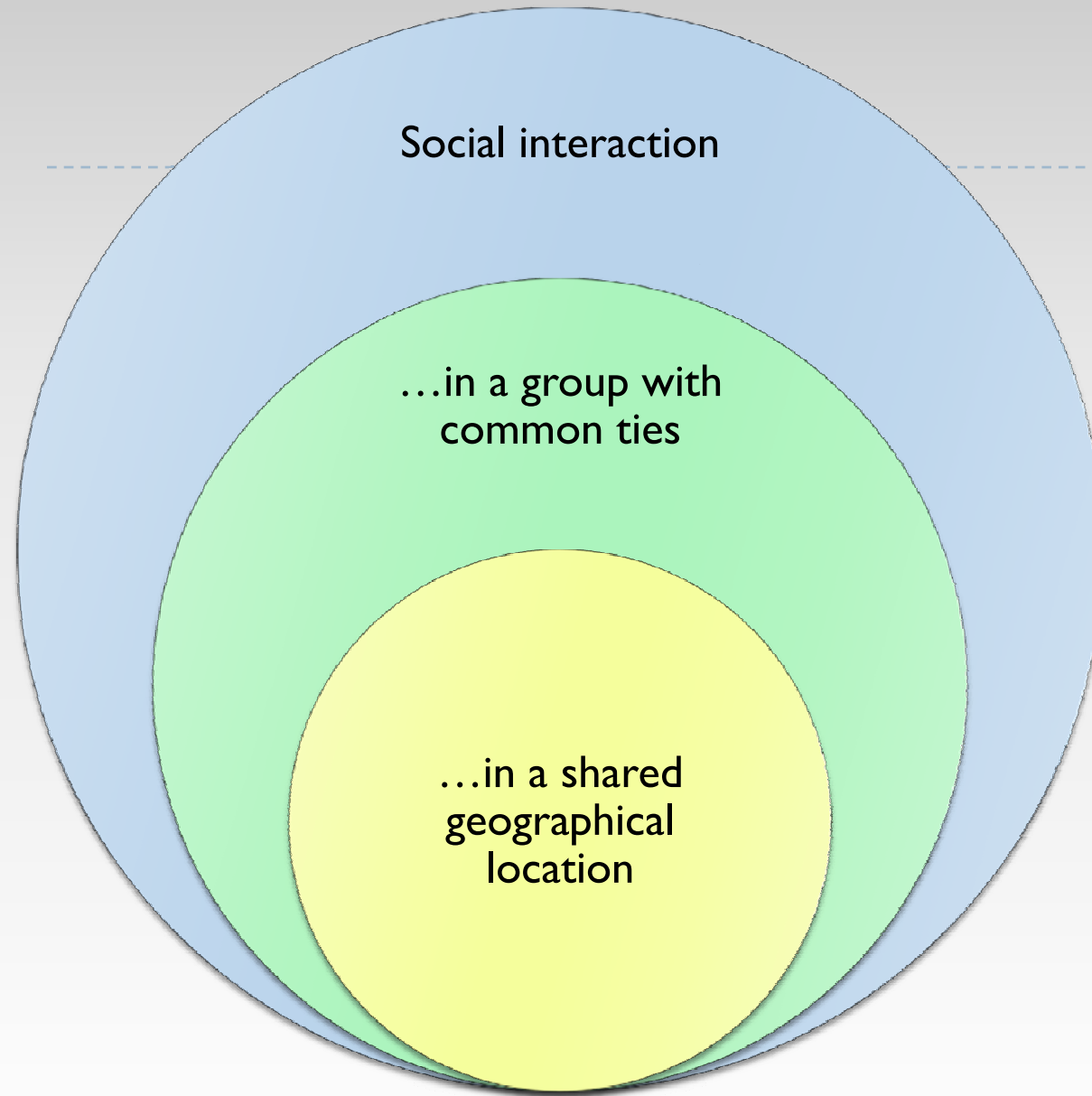
- ▶ tends to describe “community” as if it had been invented yesterday
- ▶ as being either thoroughly good or evil
- ▶ as if life online has no connection to life offline, and
- ▶ as if the past century's research on the nature of community were irrelevant

Can we learn from previous work here when building and measuring?

Definitions From Pre-Internet Research

There are lots of definitions!

- ▶ Geographically-Based Definitions
- ▶ Tradition and Practice Definitions
- ▶ Social Network Studies
- ▶ Cooperative Action and the Collective Good
- ▶ Discourse Communities
- ▶ Boundary Definitions
- ▶ Utopian Definitions



Hillery (1955)

Compared 94 definitions of community from the sociology/anthro literature:

Only 69 required geographical co-location.

73/94 agree on a group of people in social interaction having some ties or bonds in common.

91/94 stress social interaction as a necessary element of community life

(The last 3 are just weird, obviously.)

Tradition and Practice Definitions

- ▶ **Arendt (1958)**

The sum of the people, transactions, habitats, traditions, and institutions that form a vital aspect of everyday life. relationships, experiences, values, and norms that serve to orient our actions and ultimate goals... normative and purposive, suggesting **norms of behavior** for members and goals for the group as a whole.

- ▶ **Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991)**

Lave and Wenger's "legitimate peripheral participation" is an important process through which community participants **learn practices through peripheral participation** and increase their involvement gradually (newbies → regulars/experts...)

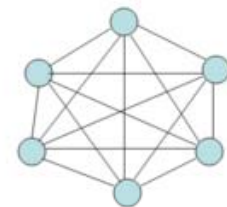
Social Networks (Relevant Concepts)

- ▶ **Strong and Weak Ties (Granovetter, 1973)**

... defined the strength of ties as "a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie."

- ▶ **Cliques: A mathematical definition of connectedness.**

... Formally, a clique is the maximum number of actors who have all possible ties present among themselves.



Cooperative Action / Collective Good Definitions

- ▶ Kollock and Smith (1996), on communities that successfully defend the common good:
 - ▶ Most individual affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules
 - ▶ Right of community members to devise their own rules is **respected by external authorities**
 - ▶ A system for monitoring behavior exists, undertaken by the community members themselves
 - ▶ Community members have access to low-cost **conflict resolution mechanisms**
- ▶ **“Tragedy of the Commons”** → free riders on the community! A common problem.

Discourse / Speech Community Definitions

- ▶ Swales (1990) identifies genres:
 - ▶ (1) a broadly agreed-upon set of common public goals,
 - ▶ (2) mechanisms for communication among the community members
 - ▶ (3) participatory mechanisms used primarily for information and feedback
 - ▶ (4) one or more genres
 - ▶ (5) a specific vocabulary of communication
 - ▶ (6) a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discourse experience

- ▶ Hymes (1972): "speech community" is a group that shares rules for speaking and interpretations of speech performance (e.g., agreement on what is “flaming”)

Boundary Definitions

... indicate who is inside and who is outside a community, distinguish the members from those they differ from or wish to be as different from. These boundaries are usually in the minds of members and those excluded from the group, and perception of boundaries may differ among individuals, even those on the inside of a boundary. (e.g., “the power elite” in my research)

- ▶ Concrete: “registered member” vs. “guest” in forum
- ▶ Symbolic: evaluations of friendship, rivalry, jealousy, similarity

Utopian Definitions

- ▶ Tonnies (1887), *Community and Society*: The contrast between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society).

Incorporates idealism and utopian sentiment into his notion of community, as well as reliance on geographic locale, all of which have persisted within the community studies literature, arguably causing confusion between the study of community as is (empirical description) and as it should be (normative prescription).

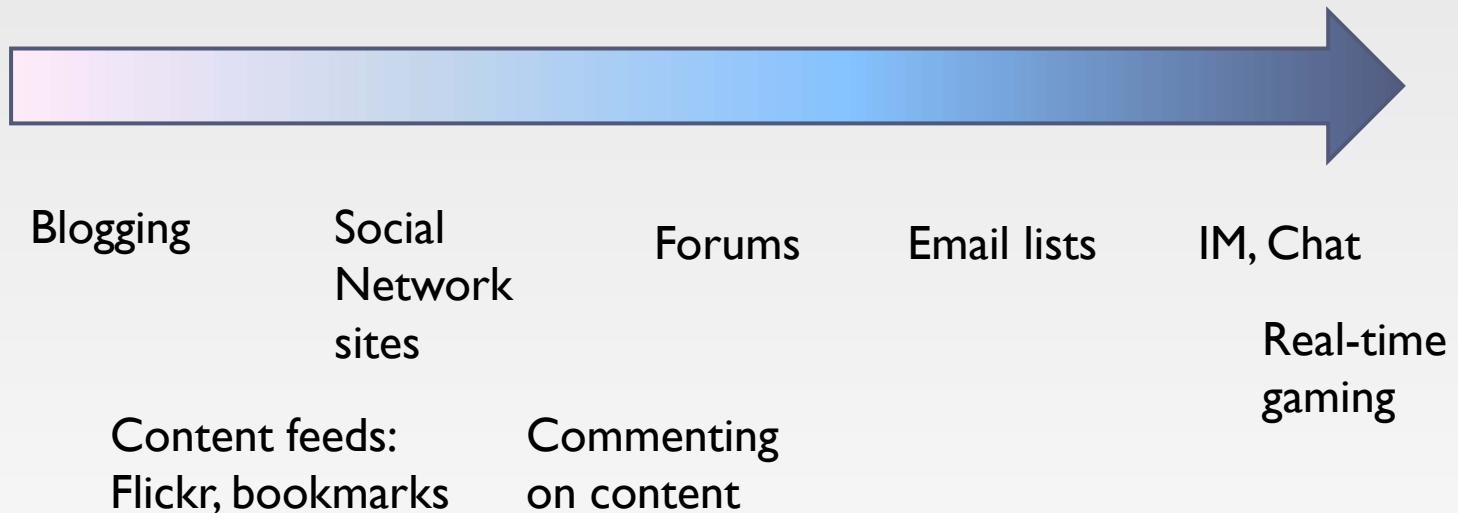
- Remains common in much marketing literature and research scholarship, particularly in the absence of good metrics

Back to the Plan: Who Will Build It?

- ▶ Community interaction is a “**socio-technical**” design problem:
 - ▶ You need more than a web information architect (IA)
 - ▶ You need design for group behavior and interactivity (interaction design, with social and group intuition and awareness)
 - ▶ Plus tools to support evolution / volume over time
 - ▶ Plus analytics for measurement of your success
- ▶ Who will **moderate** your group discussions? (Ongoing support of the community is a resourcing issue for you.)
- ▶ Are you committed in terms of resources? Time to evolve is essential; they don't grow overnight.

The Tools: A Continuum of Interactivity Options

Examples of support for group interaction, increasingly interactive:



Design Principles: Roles, Places, Time

- ▶ Build flexible, extensible gathering places
- ▶ Support flexible evolution:
 - ▶ Facilitate member-run subgroups (group evolution)
 - ▶ Create meaningful and evolving member profiles (“who’s here?”)
- ▶ Integrate the rituals of community life; promote cyclic events
- ▶ Encourage appropriate etiquette / norms / traditions
- ▶ Develop a strong leadership program and design for a range of roles

(cf. AJ Kim)

Principles: Moderation / Leadership Skillset

- ▶ Tactics for success: Seed behavior and content, refresh it, ask **provocative questions** they care about.
- ▶ Invite interesting people to start you off and get you PR— treat them well! (e.g., the WELL and Howard Rheingold's early principles)
- ▶ **Quality over quantity** – encourage it and help it surface (ratings / reputation systems should be used with caution)
- ▶ Models for moderation (cf. AOL and Forum One):
 - ▶ Heavy Moderation – read everything
 - ▶ Light Moderation - Subject lines and rapidly blossoming thread activity is reviewed.
 - ▶ Moderation is labor intensive and can be costly. It's being outsourced in some companies. It's tough to hire for.
 - ▶ Recruit your power users (MVPs)

The people who talk to your customers are the most important people in your company.

Principles: Transparency, Trust

- ▶ **What You See is What I See:** I can see myself and my posts the way you do. My public appearance is important (“face”)
- ▶ Support **private communications** (easy, secure) between members
- ▶ **Reputation systems** may cause more problems than they solve – are you helping the walk-in make snap judgments about money exchange (ecommerce, ebay) or support long-term use?
- ▶ Clearly indicate what’s marketing / **corporate vs. “real”** user content

*The concept of the public sphere as discussed by Habermas and others includes several requirements for authenticity that people who live in democratic societies would recognize: open access, voluntary participation, participation outside institutional roles, the generation of public opinion through assemblies of citizens who engage in rational argument, the freedom to express opinions, and the freedom to discuss matters of the state and criticize the way state power is organized. It is also possible to alter the nature of discourse by **inventing a kind of paid fake discourse.***

(– Howard Rheingold)

Principles: Support Finding Things

- ▶ Surface **current activity** – where's the action here, make it easy to get to it.
 - ▶ *Current chatters, 44 members logged on now....*
 - ▶ Help visitors find people, history, content/goods associated. Illustrate there is a history of value and sociability that makes this worth their time.
 - ▶ *Most recent threads; last several sales; contest winners, profiles, search*
 - ▶ Help people find the relevant topics, but not “butt in”
 - ▶ Support transition of roles from lurker, newbie, to MVP/expert/leader (“community of practice” concept)
 - ▶ Tagging is a tool for this
 - ▶ Make it easy to “pass things on” or bookmark them in the system (blog perma-links)
- **Dating is ok!** The human hierarchy of needs is always relevant!
Even professionals are (generally) humans looking for other humans.

Indicators of Community, From Good Definitions and Principles...

▶ Communication

- ▶ **Gossip** about members and events exists
- ▶ Special **vocabulary** (discourse) to indicate membership and in/out
- ▶ Multiple communications methods and modes; meeting **face-to-face**/ phone as well as online interaction, changes of modality over time
- ▶ **Trust** among members; emotional ties

▶ Status

- ▶ Boundary defense: “Us” vs. “Them,” subgroups, **cliques** (social networking)
- ▶ Rites of passage for membership (rituals)
- ▶ Different **roles or status** of individuals emerge

▶ Temporal Markers

- ▶ Participation / activity over time by same people (return, attachment)
- ▶ Telling of **historical narratives** (especially to newbies); the group remembers (“community of memory”)
- ▶ Rituals (marking time/events)
- ▶ Evolutionary change (people join/leave, disputes, resolutions, management roles change...)

▶ **Exchange of goods** occurs: social capital, **information**, physical goods, money, gifts

Some Business Metrics for Community

Why are you measuring: Strength of community for the participants, or for the business? (“ROI”) Why not relate the two?

- ▶ Currently a lot of web quantitative metrics are used:
 - ▶ Page views, unique memberships, new memberships
(-Online Community Business Forum Metrics survey, 2007)
- ▶ More advanced businesses metrics:
 - ▶ Calculate word-of-mouth, cost reduction, sales conversion, time on site, membership revenue, value of member-contributed content, loyalty, satisfaction, lurker effects on sales...
- ▶ Research-inspired metrics:
 - ▶ Social network diagrams and calculations, qualitative/ethnographic methods, text analysis... many others, drop me a note!

More Research Resources

- ▶ AOIR: Association of Internet Researchers (came out of sociology and linguistics, multidisciplinary) – Lots of resources here.
- ▶ CSCW: Computer Supported Cooperative Work (focus on ethnography, originally about work and now broader)
- ▶ CHI conference of last 10-15 years (see the digital library at ACM.org)
- ▶ Sociology / Social Network Analysis literature
- ▶ Lots of books on Amazon since 1995... my book *Conversation and Community* reviews definitions and documents one chat /game community's evolution in the 1.0 era
- ▶ Business sources: Harvard Business Review (ebay article), Bill Johnston (Forum One)...
- ▶ Keywords: online games, MMORG (massively multiplayer online roleplaying games, ethnographic studies, participation, MVPs (a forum term for valuable leaders), customer-centric brands

Thanks –Feel free to contact me
for any specific references!

www.ghostweather.com, lynn@ghostweather.com

Ghostweather Research and Design:
Data-Driven Design