

## Managing virtual communities: time to turn to the whetstone

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The choice of the game “Paper Scissors Stone” as the guiding title of this conference is an interesting one. Particularly, when connected to the consideration of politics, business law and changing modes of commerce. The game is one where an arbitrary set of rules has predetermined either a draw or more often a victory between otherwise unrelated items. Why should “paper covers stone” result in the triumph of paper? Similarly if we follow this line of thought into the arena of virtual communities why should the increasingly commercial atmosphere of the Internet alter the formation and maintenance of online communities? Thus, must be wary of assumptions imbedded in the language we use to describe and discuss phenomena after all Chomsky has taught us that our thought processes are constrained by our language; that our conceptualisations are limited to those, which we have the language to express.<sup>1</sup>

This paper shall briefly explore the nature of online communities and the special problems associated with their management and maintenance. Essentially, it shall be argued that there are three basic modes of management. A “Stone” approach where those who hold the resources or bedrock of a virtual sphere hold sway in an autocratic way. A scissors approach where whilst control is still ultimately vested in those with technological ascendancy it is informed by group social feeling, a particularly strong example of this is the use of flaming against offensive speech. Finally, there is the paper approach usually adopted by communities which have their basis in commercial enterprises and informed by formal law and awareness of potential legal culpability. The merits and difficulties posed by each of these modes of management will be considered.

Continuing the analogy we must be aware that whilst in the game merely covering stone with paper will render it ineffective, technological change is one of the major difficulties of virtual community management and cannot simply be made to disappear under a veneer of legal regulation. Similarly, whilst technological control will always trump “blunt” community activism the two harnessed together actually sharpen and strengthen each other. Thus, this paper goes on to try and explore some of the principles of virtual community management which have proven successful in practice:

- Communication
- Diversity
- Encourage ADR
- Provide a group memory/continuity
- Make clear distinctions between adult and child spaces
- Give users a stake in the community by encouraging them to assist with any difficulties or problems which arise.

This paper shall touch upon the idea that these principles (with some modification) can actually be found in many historical and or indigenous legal systems where the sharing of a space or other resource for the benefit of the community was the key function of the legal system. So the issues of community raised are not new but merely perceived as new because they inhabit the virtual sphere. Thus, we return full circle to consider the idea that our thinking on the matter has been shaped by our choice of metaphors.

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<sup>1</sup> Chomsky, N., *Language and Mind* available online at: [http://pnarae.com/phil/main\\_phil/total/chomsky1.htm](http://pnarae.com/phil/main_phil/total/chomsky1.htm)