

Why and How Do Members Provide Help For Others Within Online Communities?

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Abstract

This paper looks at how and why people help others in the online communities to which they belong. It begins with a discussion of the motivation to help both as it has been discussed as a trait of being human as well as a practice within online community. It discusses the importance of helpfulness for sustaining community life and the different motivations (both altruistic and personal interest) members have for offering help. It then reports on a study of an online group of independent game developers within the online community GameSalad. The study utilised a mixed method approach for data collection, including exploratory observation, online survey, and remote individual interviews. Data collection took place over a period of 11 months. The focus for this particular paper is that part of the study dealing with help and draws primarily on the interview data. Here five themes were identified: motivation; modes; preferences; effect; issues, each with a number of sub-themes. Some of the reasons for giving help were predictable from the literature. In particular, helpers were aware of the need to sustain the community and in many cases felt an obligation to offer help as a return or 'pay forward' for the help they had received in the past. Those giving help were motivated by community mindedness, empathy, self-confidence and sense of self. The paper goes on to throw new light on the strategies used for giving help and the circumstances under which help is more likely to be offered. In particular, while the giving of help depends on 'mood', this mood is generated when helpers feel they have the available time, relevant expertise in order to help but also when those asking for help have asked in an appropriate manner and provided sufficient contextualisation. Help was generally offered by signposting past debates and by producing bespoke artefacts to demonstrate particular features of the software. It is suggested that participation, and the giving of help, within a community is shaped by past patterns and traditions.

Keywords

Online communities, participation, motivation, help

The importance of helping others

The willingness to help others lies at the heart of any group or community. It is through helping each other that members of communities feel a sense of spirit and trust (Rovai & Jordan, 2004) and, arguably, engaged in creating new knowledge (Palloff and Pratt 2010) in a form of informal networked learning. But how and why do members put themselves out to help others?

A reasonable starting point is to consider whether helping others is a natural process, in other words do we have a general disposition to cooperate? Aristotle (2000) thought that we were social beings and that reciprocal help and support were core to community life. This was philosophical speculation but the urge to cooperate has been well described in social anthropology (Johnson & Bering, 2006) and evolutionary theory too. It is striking also that reciprocal exchange is a feature not just of earlier societies in which relationships might be immediately experienced but of highly differentiated societies in which we encounter a great many people who we may not meet again. Indeed, while Dunbar & Shultz (2007) amongst others has seen a natural limit on group size, or at least the numbers of people one may count on for help, we seem able to extend help to many people on the periphery of our lives, including our online lives. We help when there is little to be gained and many, such as Fehr and Gächter (2002) and Krush et al. (2015) see this as a paradox. Social experiments such as the prisoner's dilemma (e.g Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981) can throw light on this 'paradox' but they are inconclusive about the

logic by which we cooperate and in any case decisions in real life are never made under the artificial conditions of game theory.

In trying to understand helpfulness we need to take account that individuals take on differentiated roles in a community; some seem willing to take on 'leadership' roles while others prefer to only read messages in forums (Takahashi, Fujimoto, & Yamasaki, 2003) or only occasionally contribute. There is a mix of extrinsic and intrinsic issues which affect members' perceptions of that environment (e.g. Paulini et al. 2014). A recurring issue is that of 'chicken and egg'. Members of new communities may be willing to provide help, given a level of social presence and a worthwhile pool of community knowledge, but without their participation there is little in the way of presence or pooled knowledge in the first place.

Within the literature on online participation, there is surprisingly little research on the specific issues of helping others online: why people do it; how they do it and with what consequences for themselves. Hammond (1999) found 'communicative learners' within early online forums, people who showed greater involvement and took on the role of supporting a group. McLure et al. (2000) explored a variety of motivations to participate online and concluded that the motivation to help emerges from a general satisfaction in sharing experiences/knowledge with others and a belief that one can learn by explaining even if the explanations concern the problems of beginners. Altruism and 'pro-social' behaviour are important too though often founded on an expectation of reciprocity; furthermore a small minority may see providing help as an opportunity to promote their own resources, surreptitiously or otherwise. In general, people need to perceive a personal, though not necessarily a material, benefit, if they are to continue to volunteer (Chuang et al, 2015). In other words, volunteers needed to identify with the communities and be cognitively interested in the challenges put to them.

There are then a mix of motives involved in helping but this is an under-developed field. We know little about the conditions under which people help, the strategies they may use in helping, and what they get from helping. In addressing this gap, we present a study of game developers within a very active online community.

The context

The study on which we are reporting is an open community of independent game developers. This community grew around a shared interest in a mobile game authoring software which enabled users to create mobile games. Communication took place via a forum bulletin board. This was a very large online community with 114, 000 registered members at the time of data collection and huge amount of activity. The general aim of the study was to understand the 'why and how' of this level of interactivity. Data collection was carried out from July 2014 to May 2015 using a mixed method approach: exploratory observation (getting a sense of the flow of messages followed by focused analysis of particular threads and themes); online survey (a link was provided for members to which 110 members replied), and individual interviews (carried out online using a private messaging system amongst those (n=21) who had volunteered to take part in the research within the online survey). Interviews covered motivation and behaviour in regards to participation; the contribution received from and given to the community; the relationship between online and offline life; reflections on critical incidents and an opportunity to offer one's story as a member of the community. Both the survey and interviews were intended to capture a broad range of participation levels but in the event, and perhaps not surprisingly, the sample of interviewees were skewed to the more active members and the interviewees in particular tended to be regular providers of help. While the research covered many general topics, the data threw unexpected light on giving help from the perspective of longer established members of the community and people who could be characterised as 'helpers'.

The Findings

This particular paper foregrounds what interviewees said about giving help but it is informed by data from the survey and observation of online activity. In analysing the interviews, help was coded as theme in 18 of the 21 interviews and there were five sub themes, formatted in bold below, to giving help (see Table 1).

Motivation for providing help was discussed in depth and three sub themes emerged: *the social obligation to help*; *a desire to sustain the community*; and *contribution to self-esteem and self-identity*. The first of these was raised the most often. A social obligation covered interviewees awareness of the needs of others and for this reason were prepared to 'lend a hand' (no interviewees described being unaware of or disinterested in of the needs of others) and hinted that it was a general practice in the community. Helping was a way of improving /

contributing to sustaining community shared knowledge, encouraging other members' participation and of generating a sense of community among members. Interviewees identified with their community, and expressed a sense of 'we-ness'. There were occasional references to promotion of self-identity by helping (they wanted to reinforce a self-perception that they were helpful as people) and one mentioned that by helping they were improving their status in the group.

Ways of helping were diverse. Help might be given by directly *answering a query* (e.g. 'Is there a way to animate an object?') but more often involved *signposting* to community resources and *building artefacts*. Signposting might involve referring newcomers to past threads – ones that more established community members may remember seeing or they could more easily access. Another strategy to signpost was to point the questioner to people with relevant expertise. Some interviewees seemed to prefer building artefacts (sample project/tutorials) than signposting and seemed to take pleasure in it.

At a first glance, it seemed in respect to **preferences**, that help was given unconditionally to those who asked (and four respondent maintained this was indeed the case) but most tended to be discriminating in who they offered help to and when they did so. The decision to help depended on 'mood', though mood was not an arbitrary feeling. Mood was triggered by (non) availability of time, knowledge of the domain (whether they had the knowledge to help) and the perceived attitude / behaviour of the asker.

The most obvious **outcome** of giving help was the maintenance of community and the spirit and trust that developed within the community. Giving help created the shared knowledge pool which was the explicit goal of the community. Giving help carried some personal benefit. One in particular, felt that as a helper he had improved his knowledge of the software and had "clarified and cemented concepts". In addition, another found that not only giving help but seeing the ways in which others had given help to the same query had helped develop his own skills. Giving help had for some, contributed to a perceived enhanced status in the community and although many felt they had already mastered the skills they needed and were unlikely to need help in the short term, their social standing might be seen as the basis for a future exchange.

Although the giving of help was overwhelmingly seen as positive, there were some **problems in helping** too. For example 'high-maintenance' members could impose too heavy burden on one's time and patience. Some members had become over-dependent on the community and were slow to understand the guidance they had been given. Problems in language construction affected both the accessibility of the questions and interviewees willingness to respond. In the longer term as GameSalad moves from a freely downloadable programme to one that is provided on a commercial basis, new questions will be posed about the role of unpaid volunteers.

Table 1: Sub themes of giving help – frequency of coding of interview data

Sub themes	The general idea	Number of times mentioned by interviewees	Number of interviewees raising this issue
Motivation	Reasons for giving help	37	14
Modes	Ways of helping	22	13
Preferences	Who and when to help	19	12
Effect	Outcomes of helping	8	6
Issues	Problems of helping	4	3

Discussion

Earlier it was asked whether helping was a natural process. These interviewees were not necessarily representative of the community as a whole but overwhelmingly they did see help as a natural and largely altruistic response even when there was no likelihood of an immediate tangible return. Giving help, we saw earlier, is often seen as a paradox but this is only from the viewpoint of nineteenth century liberal economic / political theory. Human being are not necessarily or even primarily motivated to maximise personal benefits and

work to a strict calculation of expected return. In social setting giving help is not to be taken for granted, is not generalised on or offline, it is furthermore culturally mediated, but it is not an unexpected, unnatural or 'deviant' response.

This does not mean that the giving of help is solely altruistic. The key motivation to help was to maintain a community in which helpers gained both personal and cognitive benefits, there was evidence too that helping might boast status in the community and at the margins some self-promotion of one's own resources. This very much support the wider literature in which help has been seen as a product of a mix of motivation and dependent on some form of personal benefit. Less expected, at least to us, the findings have showed a strong element of calculation in the decision to help (Do I have the time? the expertise?) as well as pedagogical understanding in providing that help (How can I answer this question efficiently? What do I need to do to make my answer clear? Who knows the answer to this question better than me?). Thus, there is not always an agreement on the best way of helping but this may offer a good deal of reflection on the giving of help. The giving of help depends on mood but this mood may be possibly generated through a convergence of circumstances (available time, relevant expertise, appropriate manner and contextualisation of the question) and disposition (community mindedness, empathy, self-confidence and sense of self). Online communities have been described as sentiment communities but here the giving of help is not sentimental; interviewees considered the moral worth of the claim for help and whether helpers they had the ability to provide help. Help involves both general disposition and also a reflection on the particular circumstances of the case.

The implications of the view of help in this paper are not straightforward. On one hand, the study of this community suggests that cultures of spirit and trust and all round helpfulness can be generated online. However, a culture of helping cannot be promoted overnight and these interviewees had all become helpers through their history of involvement in community life and through having received help in the past. Helpfulness cannot be imposed, it has to grow and members have to work hard to sustain it.

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