

# Virtual Community Management as Socialization and Learning

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**Abstract.** How does a (virtual) community thrive and survive over time? From having studied a thirteen-year old Swedish-language adventure mud, I here suggest that our understanding of the answer has to be built on a social theory of learning that takes into account that learning has to do with community, practice, meaning and identity. Making a “career” in a community of practice can be regarded as a movement from the periphery to the core, a movement from being a novice to becoming an expert in the activities that are central to the community. On that journey, the individual is over time “configured” into learning how to act, reason and think about the community in the right way.

## Introduction

Most MUDs - text-based social virtual environments - are either young or dead. Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) are the descendants of single-player text-based adventure games such as *Adventure* and *Zork*. The first MUD<sup>1</sup> was created in 1978-1980 at Essex University by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle (Bartle 2003). Although the focus of research during the 1990’s has been on studying muds that are used for purely social or for instrumental purposes (e.g. distance education, language learning), the prevalent usage of such systems is and has always been gaming. And modern-day descendants of mud systems are not used for work or “serious” purposes but rather “just” for fun – running so-called

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<sup>1</sup> The term MUD will be written with lower-case letters (mud) in this text for reasons of legibility (cf. radar instead of RADAR – *radio detecting and ranging*).

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) such as *Everquest* and *Star Wars Galaxies* are quickly becoming big business. But apart from such huge and commercially successful online computer games, most muds are usually not run as commercial enterprises. The code bases for a variety of “strands” of different mud systems are free to download on the Internet. The threshold for starting up and running a mud is consequently low – almost but not quite within the reach of an individual, but surely within reach of said individual and a few friends of his or hers. As examples of digital grass-roots initiatives, the question of sustainability of such systems therefore becomes interesting. Some muds survive and become long-lived while most quickly wither and die. What makes a virtual community hold together, thrive and develop over time? Turning the question around, how does a virtual community die?

If we exclude *force majeure* reasons (e.g. “acts of God”) such as the computer hosting the community unexpectedly “dying”<sup>2</sup>, what remains are two different ways that a mud can die. The first is that the players desert it (or the player base is usurped by newer games etc.). The second is that the developers (managers/administrators) desert it (or fall out due to conflicts with each other etc.). I am here interested in how developer attrition is countered in a mud by holding on to and fostering new generations of developers. I find that question at least as important for the longevity of the mud/virtual communities as any other question and claim that reproduction of the developer base is the key to survival. It doesn’t even matter if developer attrition is high as long as enough new developers can be recruited, instructed and socialized. If that process is successful, the mud and the collective of developers can withstand more serious challenges which in turn increase longevity.

Questions of survival and reproduction become especially interesting in a virtual community that constitutes a bottom-up grass-roots initiative and where all work is voluntary and unpaid and all usage is free. Adventure (gaming) muds are usually such organizations. Numerous articles have by now been written about muds. A minority of them has dealt with adventure muds (most instead deal with muds used for social or instrumental purposes such as education, collaboration between researchers etc.). With few exceptions (for example Bartle 1996, Bartle 2003), what has been written about adventure muds has been based on material collected inside the muds and from the perspective of the players rather than the perspective of the developers who maintain and are in charge of the mud. Here, the focus is however on “the work to make it work”; the work behind the scenes to make an adventure mud continue to run and the principles that structure that work.

The virtual community this research is based on, *SvenskMud*, is a Swedish-language adventure mud - an Internet-accessible multi-player on-line game – and

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<sup>2</sup> It could be that such reasons constitute the majority of failures, but, such failures are quite straight-forward and not of interest here.

it is one of few non-English muds on the Internet<sup>3</sup>. SvenskMud ("SwedishMud") was started in July 1991 by a student at a Swedish University and it is the oldest non-English-language mud in the world. It has been developed in a way that shares many characteristics of how Linux and other open-source programs are developed<sup>4</sup> (Raymond 1999, Moody 2001, Torvalds and Diamond 2001, Feller and Fitzgerald 2002). Since the start thirteen years ago, more than 100 developers have contributed to SvenskMud's 3+ million lines of "code" (not everything is computer code in a more strict sense).

SvenskMud is a *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) that is founded on computing. After describing what a community of practice is and why SvenskMud is one, I will in this paper:

- (1) Describe how a player makes a "career" in SvenskMud by moving from the periphery to the core of the community as he or she<sup>5</sup> moves from being a novice to an expert in the activities of the community.
- (2) Describe how the community "configures" its members and how such a configuration socializes players and developers from solitary disparate individuals into full members of the community.
- (3) Describe how the configuration process in point 2 itself is reconfigured over time.
- (4) Analyze SvenskMud in terms of Turner's (1969/1995) *communitas*.

## Method

I have studied SvenskMud over a period of three and a half years using a "convergent methodologies" approach (Schiano 1997). The assumption is that a combination of methods makes it possible to discern patterns and draw conclusions that could be difficult to support or even notice with a more narrow approach.

I have - with due permission - collected three different types of data; naturally occurring non-elicited data, elicited data and data from two different sorts of participant observation studies. The collected materials span:

- *Non-elicited data*: information from the SvenskMud homepages, public discussions on bulletin boards within SvenskMud and different sorts of on-line documentation including rules for the developers, programming manuals and the computer code itself that constitutes the game.

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<sup>3</sup> In the mid- to end-90's the proportion on non-English muds were between 1-2%. As of today (2004), the number of non-English muds listed on a popular listings service (<<http://www.mudconnector.com>>) is between 3-4%.

<sup>4</sup> See Pargman (2000b) for an explicit comparison between development of muds and open source software.

<sup>5</sup> Most players are male rather than female and I will therefore primarily use male pronouns in this text.

- *Elicited data*: data from three surveys, interviews and informal conversations with active developers on- and off-line as well as a forum I initiated for discussing different aspects of playing and running SvenskMud.
- *Participant observation* data: observations from using/playing SvenskMud over a period of two years and data from participating in five real-world weekend-long design meetings – or mini-conferences – that the SvenskMud developers organized over a period of five years.

The full results are developed in Pargman 2000b. I have translated all quotes from original Swedish material.

## Communities of practice

Communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) are inexorably tied to a social theory of learning. Such a theory takes as points of departure that:

- Learning is social, learning is part of human nature, and, we are quite good at it.
- Learning is not confined to a certain place or situation and thus has no beginning or end.
- Learning instead happens best when it is a side product of, or part of other activities.
- Learning is not necessarily the effect of teaching. And when we are being taught, we learn many other things than the subject at hand.

According to this type of social learning theory, learning has to do with *community* (learning as belonging), *practice* (learning as doing), *meaning* (learning as experience) and *identity* (learning as becoming) (Wenger 1998).

A community of practice consists of people undertaking a collective endeavor such that newcomers learn the ins and outs from older hands and that a (formal or informal) system of apprenticeship is in place. SvenskMud, and, many if not most professions or workplaces are communities of practice. Becoming a member of such a community of practice is a matter of learning how to act, reason and think in the *right* way, learning how to handle common or unusual, simple or difficult situations. It is a matter of learning everything that needs to be known beyond the technically specified necessary skills and pre-defined written-down instructions and of moving from the periphery to the core as one moves from being a novice to an expert in the relevant activities.

A movement from the periphery to the core can be described and discussed in terms of a “career”<sup>6</sup> of an individual. He or she moves from 1) wanting, trying,

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<sup>6</sup> The term career does not imply that the activities in questions must be work-related. It instead has to do with fulfilling the expectations on a social role and “learning the ropes” of something – whatever that something is (see for example Goffman 1959).

*pretending to be* to 2) becoming identified and *identifying with*, and finally to 3) *becoming* an expert programmer, nurse, policeman, mental patient or inmate. It is a movement from being a legitimate peripheral participant to becoming a full member of the community of practice.

## SvenskMud as a community of practice

A SvenskMud career corresponds to a movement from being a novice player to becoming an intermediate and later an expert player, then becoming a developer (called “magician” in SvenskMud<sup>7</sup>) and finally becoming a Senior magician and perhaps even an Arch magician (see figure 1).

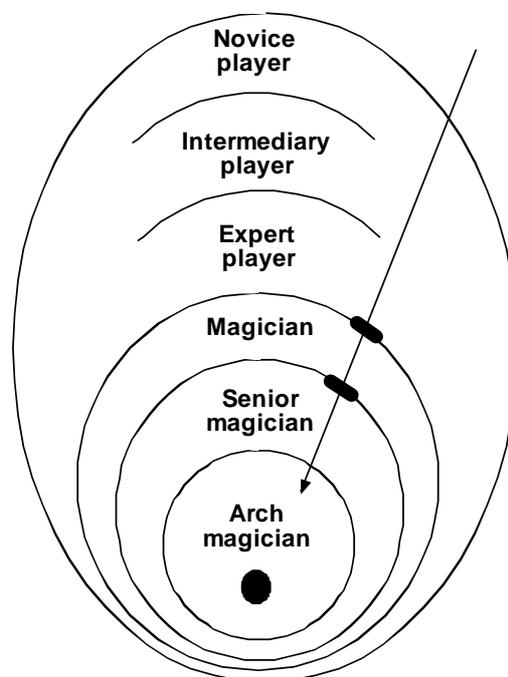


Figure 1. A “career” in SvenskMud as a movement from periphery to core and from novice to SvenskMud expert. A player can stop or opt out of the “career path” at any step in the process. Stronger resistance is encountered before a player can become a magician (developer) and again before becoming a Senior magician. The black dot represents SvenskMud’s creator and formal owner, Linus.

The transition from player to magician is the most important and significant in the career of a SvenskMud player. That movement is deeply significant within SvenskMud and is accompanied by so many requirements and procedures that it

<sup>7</sup> The terms “developer” and “magician” will be used interchangeably in the text from hereon.

is reminiscent of a fully-fledged initiation rite/rite of passage (van Gennep 1909/1960). I have observed that many magicians remember the exact date when they became magicians, much like other persons remember a wedding day or the birthday of a child<sup>8</sup>. The movement from novice player to magician can take one or several years in SvenskMud. In one extreme case, a person who started to play SvenskMud in 1991 almost became a magician 1994 but started to work instead. He returned to SvenskMud 1997 and finally became a magician three years later and altogether nine years after he started to play SvenskMud – at a time in his life when he was the joint owner of a small computer consulting company.

The transition from “ordinary” magician to Senior magician makes demands on the magician in question, demands that he (or she) is perceived to be “a sensible person, can [...] produce code and that he has some sense of responsibility” (interview with Joorin, Arch magician, 981013). SvenskMud is a community based on computing and this is the point when those who can not or do not want to learn to program stop from moving further towards the core.

How then do players become “magician material”? And how are players who are “magician material” or newly minted magicians recruited, instructed and socialized so as to become fully-fledged and productive members of the SvenskMud development team? And furthermore – as is necessary for survival and longevity – how does SvenskMud itself adapt and change over time? I suggest that it is done through a three-tiered process of configuring the player, of configuring the magician and of configuring SvenskMud itself. To “configure” a player or a magician is here equivalent to the process of socializing that player/magician.

### Configuring the player

SvenskMud can easily be perceived as a “blooming buzzing confusion“ for a new player. Not everyone feels inclined to take up the challenge to make sense of a world where you have to learn everything anew, up to and including the commands for how to walk and how to talk.

To become part of the community of SvenskMud players is inexorably connected to learning to become knowledgeable in the activities of that community, i.e. of playing SvenskMud. A player who wants to program in SvenskMud (thereby altering the fabric of the virtual world) will acquire many of the relevant concepts before actually becoming a magician, just by playing and exploring the game. Understanding the “affordances” (dramaturgical cues) offered by the virtual world serves to socialize a player long before that player has the option of becoming a developer.

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<sup>8</sup> The same was true for the mud British Legends (Richard Bartle, personal communication). People who became wizards on the same day there were “twins”.

The handbook for SvenskMud magicians states three different normative purposes behind the many quests that players have to solve before they can become magicians

- ”1. They should stimulate the players’ joy of discovery and encourage mental activity.
2. They should prevent playing from becoming mechanical [...].
3. They should force the players to explore a very large part of the world before they become magicians so they know what there is to be found and create a [mental] image of the world.”

Even if the SvenskMud developers succeed in their goal of always hiding the computer code from the player – for example by camouflaging error messages – the whole SvenskMud world still constitutes a reflection of that underlying computer code. An implicit understanding of the code is developed through extended use of SvenskMud. The relationship between the SvenskMud world and the underlying computer code is in this sense analogous to the relationship between the lived-in world and the rules of physics that govern the world, a theme that is further developed in Pargman (2000a). By playing SvenskMud, a player will get accustomed to many of the concepts that govern the SvenskMud world and will come to understand many of the SvenskMud goals, symbols and values. SvenskMud players without any previous knowledge of (the workings of) muds or computers thus “subconsciously” prepare themselves for possible future careers as SvenskMud magicians.

This process bears many similarities to the “primary socialization” of a child into a member of society, a socialization that “make appear as necessity what is in fact a bundle of contingencies” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p.155). This is the *purpose* of configuring the player and it is intimately connected to the regrowth of SvenskMud magicians and SvenskMud’s survival over time. I illustrate this through a description of how a career in SvenskMud can start off:

A SvenskMud player would absorb the essence of mudding practice simply in the process of playing they game. A Swedish boy who eventually becomes a SvenskMud magician most likely has access to a computer with an Internet connection at home, since magicianhood nowadays primarily is mediated through Internet Service Providers and telephone lines<sup>9</sup>. Boys in such families, without being identified as apprentice SvenskMud magicians, absorb the essence of SvenskMud practices (of both players and magicians) as well as specific knowledge about many procedures, simply in the process of playing SvenskMud. They know what the life of a magician is like (for example, that he needs to deal with quarrelsome troublemakers at all hours of the day or night), what kind of stories the women and men who have explored the mud far and wide tell, what kind of treasures and other artifacts need to be collected, and the like. As novice

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<sup>9</sup> It is also possible (but increasingly unlikely) that he only has access to computers and the Internet at his public school or a library.

players, they might not make a lot of noise in the mud, but they would hear stories of difficult cases, of miraculous outcomes, and the like. As they become more experienced and grow older, they may be solving quests, killing monsters, getting needed experience points. A novice player might be present when a magician stops for a visit and a conversation at the daily visit to the mud<sup>10</sup>.

## Configuring the magician

Where primary socialization is the original unconscious socialization of a child into a member of society, the secondary socialization is the conscious training into a specific role or position in the social order (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In SvenskMud, secondary socialization corresponds to the training to become a good SvenskMud magician. Let us illustrate this by describing how the hypothetical career above could continue:

Later, the learning is less “accidental”, less peripheral and more conscious. Eventually, after he has become a magician himself, he might look at some of the computer code behind the game, perhaps just out of curiosity and to find out exactly how a specific object in the game worked. At some point, he may decide that he actually wants to write this kind of code. He then pays more attention and joins a project under the supervision of a Senior magician. The Senior magician might see his association primarily as one that is of some use to her. (“darik already knows how to fix such a bug, so I can ask him as I am too busy.”) As time goes on, the apprentice takes over more and more of the work load, starting with the routine and tedious parts, and ending with what is in SvenskMud the culturally most significant, the birth of a new area or a guild in the SvenskMud world. In the words of one magician:

”What makes SvenskMud a good mud for the magicians? The fact that there are other magicians who are willing to train new magicians, up to and including novices of programming”

Where rules for the SvenskMud players are more or less non-existent (the general rule is that everything that is possible is allowed), the activities for SvenskMud magicians are more tightly surrounded by rules. Learning to become a SvenskMud magician consists partly of learning to program LPC - a mud-specific variant of the C programming language - and partly of learning (to share) the SvenskMud values etc. as well as developing a sense of commitment and responsibility to the community.

Much of the technical advice to developers on how to program in SvenskMud as well as guidelines for the content are at the same time advice on the proper behavior of a SvenskMud magician. As such they represent lessons regarding the

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<sup>10</sup> Do note the not-so-incidental similarities between this description of growing up to become a SvenskMud magician and Jordan’s (1989) description of growing up to become a Yucatec Mayan midwife in Mexico!

specific values, practices and goals that represent "the SvenskMud way" of solving problems, of debugging code, of relating to players, of relating to other magicians etc. From an important document, *RULES*, a magician for example learns that it is an ideal in SvenskMud to:

"Cooperate!

Always use objects that already exist to do different things. A suitable way to do that is with the instruction "inherit". LPC is an object-oriented programming language with multiple inheritance.

If there are no ready objects [that do exactly what you want to do] then talk to a magician who has already created [a similar] object so that you both will use the same object (it saves time and energy!)."

Another advice for magicians was posted to one of the bulletin boards that is available exclusively to SvenskMud magicians:

"[...] But I would also like to point out something for those who code (most often new magicians). Players are idiots ;-)) and one should code idiot-safe. What I mean is, don't think "I won't bother to code that because no-one will figure out that you can do a thing like that anyway", believe me, they do. If there is some way the code can bug out they will find it sooner or later ;-)) So, it is better to stop most of the ways code can bug directly even if that means more code in the end... it will be worthwhile."

An "underlying principle" that always should direct the actions of all magicians, states that magicians should:

"Never affect the situation of the players directly in the game, neither positively nor negatively.

Your only influence on the players should be exerted via what you have created [programmed], not in any other way."

The SvenskMud rules for magicians are divided into laws and recommendations and they regulate four different spheres:

- (1) *Rules that pertain to "SvenskMud – the game"*. How magicians should role-play when interacting with SvenskMud players and advice on a general level for how to design appropriate SvenskMud content. Examples of this is a law that states that a magician never should hurt a player and a recommendation that states that a magicians should not create weapons that are "too good" for the players.
- (2) *Rules that pertain to "SvenskMud – the computer program"*. Advice on how a magicians should go about when they program in SvenskMud. An example of this is a recommendation that states that magicians should adapt the price of healing to what is stated in the file `/doc/build` and that the lowest price shall be 5 öre/point healed.
- (3) *Rules that pertain to "SvenskMud – the hobby"*. Advice that aims at making SvenskMud an enjoyable environment for every *person* sitting in front of a computer (both players and magicians). An example of this is a

law that states that magicians should be polite towards other players and that magicians should not spread rumors about players or other magicians.

- (3) *Rules that pertain to SvenskMud in relation to the surrounding Swedish society.* Advice on how magicians should behave so as to reduce the possibility of creating a conflict for example between SvenskMud and Swedish laws. An example of this is a recommendation that states that real persons never should be portrayed in SvenskMud. The argument behind the recommendation states that:

“Satire is difficult. It has to be done in the right way not to become slander. With the present interest of the Internet (that started 1994 and 1996 still is high) and my (Linus) experience of the level of ambition that those journalists who have an interest in the Internet usually has, I suspect it would be totally impossible to use satire without being misunderstood. Don’t do it! (Or wait until the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>11</sup> so the journalists get some time to mature).”

The SvenskMud rules are not the only way to learn “the SvenskMud way” of solving problems, of debugging code, of relating to players and to other magicians etc. Another important document is the 50 pages long *Handbook for SvenskMud magicians – an aid for the builders in SvenskMud*. The handbook among other things documents the early history of SvenskMud, its goals and a wealth of specific information on how to program in LPC.

The handbook also contains 10 spoof commandments of which one states that “Thou shalt steal”. The explanation states that “if you don’t know how to do certain things, then try to recall where you have seen something similar and check out how it is done there. The best way to learn is to see how others do things”. This commandment is complemented by no less than two more commandments that say just about the same thing. One states that “Thou shalt covet thy neighbor’s house and his rooms” and the explanation states: “run around in other areas, check out what they build, send a lot of bug reports and then do better yourself”.

This obviously points at something that is considered to be important in SvenskMud. It is also interesting to note that such advice has to do with both “hard” issues pertaining to technology, code, programming etc. and with “soft” issues pertaining to shared values and what is considered to be a desirable attitude to have as a SvenskMud magician.

Perhaps SvenskMud (and open source projects) are some of the few programming environments where the developers both are recommended and actually *do* spend considerable time reading the code of others for no other reason than to learn? The habit of reviewing the programming code of others and of having your own code reviewed is an excellent but sadly neglected practice to

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<sup>11</sup> It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century but satire is still discouraged in SvenskMud.

improve the code itself and the abilities of programmers and software engineers (Weinberg 1971/1999).

One magician who didn't know how to program before he came in contact with SvenskMud intimately ties together social concerns and technical practices when he describes how he works. Do also take notice of the implicit commitment and responsibility to the community in his statement:

"I read what the other person [I have a project together with] has programmed and correct it and he corrects what I have done. We toss everything back and forth between us all the time. You learn incredibly much by doing so, he sees what I do and I see what he does and then you get acquainted with the code and you correct it. And it's impossible to correct the code if you don't understand what it does.

It becomes totally different here. If a magician creates something that is really bad, that affects the views of the players on the other magicians too<sup>12</sup>. It casts a shadow over all magicians.

If a player comes and reports a bug in someone's area you look into and read through the code that bugs and then you learn the other [magician's] ways of coding and in the end you know that if something bugs in his files, he has probably made such-and-such error."

## Configuring SvenskMud

Configuring new members (players and magicians) is a necessary survival strategy for SvenskMud and every other community of practice. It is through these activities that individuals learn "the SvenskMud way" and that SvenskMud reproduces itself over time, survives and becomes long-lived. One question related to survival remains to be answered here though and that is how the system for configuring players and magicians itself changes over time. If configuration is learning, how then does "SvenskMud - the organization" itself learn and change over time? How does SvenskMud question whether its operating norms are appropriate? Where is the "second loop" of learning (Argyris and Schön 1978) that characterizes flexible organizations in changing environments?

The answer is that the SvenskMud real-world design meetings constitute the second loop of learning. Since Sweden is a relatively small country, the active SvenskMud magicians have taken to meeting regularly once or twice per year. Beyond solving current problems in SvenskMud, these meetings simultaneously serve two other important functions. *The first* is to keep a discussion of SvenskMud's future and possible changes in direction alive. Question of SvenskMud's values, goals and practices are thus consciously externalized and discussed at these meetings. *The second* function is to pull the community of

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<sup>12</sup> Not the least because SvenskMud players have no way of knowing which magician has created what in the game.

magicians together, in effect reinforcing common values, goals and practices. These values are thus internalized which in its turn leads to increased commitment and responsibility of individual magicians. By discussing current problems face-to-face, by eating out and programming together, these meetings serve to closely unite the most active magicians. One of the leading Arch magicians, “Magnus”, has taken upon himself to call together and supervise the SvenskMud meetings:

”Far back in time, Linus decided most things himself, but he had a lot of opposition and he had difficulties getting anywhere. Me, when I became Arch magician effectuated that we should meet physically, IRL [In Real Life], to discuss the difficult questions. [...] If three Arch magicians have different opinions, then the wrong persons are Arch magicians. The Arch magicians [and Linus] have met now [...]. When it has been about bigger issues, the Arch magicians have together made the decisions, even though Linus formally decides. I have wanted greater changes more quickly, [another Arch magician] has been more objective and wants to do things slower”

All the important policy changes during SvenskMud’s hectic and turbulent years in the end of the 1990’s were the outcome of such meetings. A recurring aspect of these meetings was the display of certain “cult” artifacts; the computer punch card with the first sketch of SvenskMud’s original outline on the back, the huge master map covering all the 6000+ distinct location in the SvenskMud world etc. The display of these intensely meaningful and highly significant artifacts has a high symbolic value and represents yet another force that serves to socially construct a common history and a common future (vision) of SvenskMud to unite the magicians. Such rituals (as all rituals) pull the group together and lay a foundation for understanding – *feeling* – what SvenskMud means and what it means to be a leading SvenskMud magician. It allows ordinary persons – most whom are in their teens or 20’s - to be part of a living tradition and of history in the making and to do one’s share to pass that tradition on to future generations of SvenskMud players and magicians.

Part of what it means to be a leading magician in SvenskMud is to have been at a SvenskMud meeting, to seen those cult artifacts, to have met the other leading SvenskMud magicians and to have been inspired by or having programmed with Linus sitting at your side.

## SvenskMud as Communitas

Turner (1969/1995) describes how life-crisis rites, or rites of passage (van Gennep 1909/1960) mark the transition from one phase of life to another in tribal (pre-modern) societies. These life-crisis rites typically occur around events such as birth, death, marriage and status elevation. Such events are still celebrated in the western world but their significance has been waning, e.g. the significance of

marriage decreases when it can be done at the spur of the moment, when half of all marriages end with divorce and when it becomes common to marry for a second or third time.

Traditional initiation rites (rites of passage) usually unfold over a longer (but limited) period of time. During that period of time, the person is betwixt and between, in a “liminal”, threshold state outside normal societal structures. These temporary ritual transitions have at times expanded to become permanent conditions in modern societies with a complex division of labor. The most obvious examples are religious movements, sects and orders that position themselves outside of the normal social order. Perhaps less obvious examples are counter-movements that place themselves outside the bounds of the ordinary structured hierarchical society such as the hippies, green or utopian communes and Hell’s Angels. Turner calls these counter-movements *communitas*.

What all such movements have in common is that they offer (the promise of) community, comradeship, homogeneity and equality. ”But the spontaneity and immediacy of *communitas* can seldom be maintained for very long. [...] and it is the fate of all spontaneous *communitas* in history to undergo what most people see as a ”decline and fall” into structure and law.” (Turner 1969/1995, p.132).

Something these movements have in common then is that as they grow and mature, they decline and fall into structure and law and in this process create elaborate power structures within their midst. Their initial ”anti-structure” is thus transformed into structure once again - albeit an alternative structure compared to that of mainstream, surrounding society. It is among these systems of simultaneous structure and anti-structure - of egalitarian values amidst hierarchical structures that sometimes can be spectacularly elaborated - that I place SvenskMud.

SvenskMud simultaneously nurtures an ethos of equality and a level playing field (every player starts his life anew in SvenskMud with two empty hands) as well as a fiercely hierarchical and meritocratic power structure. This might seem like an elaborate contradiction, but what is characteristic about SvenskMud is that its hierarchies have nothing to do with the position that an individual has in the surrounding society and that every person - no matter his or her position in the ordinary society - enters SvenskMud on the same conditions and with the same possibilities. This is true at least in theory but much can of course differ SvenskMud users from each other in terms of their programming, language and other skills, equipment, time and knowledge etc.

There is no official SvenskMud discourse surrounding the issue but both the equality and the hierarchies are so to say built into the system, decreed and implemented through computer code (Lessig 1999). As in other counter-movements, SvenskMud allows those who are powerful in the ordinary structured and hierarchical society the opportunity to be fully and unconditionally accepted as equals (instead of the nagging suspicion that they are only accepted because of

how they have *performed* instead of what they *are*). SvenskMud at the same time allows those who are powerless in the ordinary society (in SvenskMud most significantly youths) a chance at power and fame:

”In a small circle, I was for a while someone everyone looked up to, had great respect of, asked for help with programming from, admired...”

## Conclusions

A community offers the individual a chance of being part of a collective enterprise, of being part of something that is greater than the individual. I claim that an important factor as to what makes a mud survive and become long-lived lies in succeeding in making it into a *community* based on shared values, goals, practices, symbols (etc.) and by succeeding in fostering a sense of mutual commitment and responsibility among its members (further developed in Pargman 2000b). In SvenskMud, this is more specifically done through configuring the player, configuring the magician and configuring SvenskMud itself. That SvenskMud is a successful community is evident in a variety of ways, not the least because it has managed to attain the venerable age of thirteen years – an eternity on the Internet. I again quote a SvenskMud magician to illustrate this claim of success:

”There is a good spirit of unity in SvenskMud. You can trust a SvenskMud magician. Sometimes you sleep over at each others’ place and lend out the keys to your apartment to someone you in fact don’t know the name of in real life.”

An important characteristic that has been demonstrated several times in this paper is that in *virtual* communities, social concerns become difficult to separate from technical practices that relate to the ”material” substrate these communities are based on – computer code and programming practices for manipulating digital discreet discontinuous silicon-based units of logic. Social and technical issues interact and co-evolve in a virtual community in such an intimate way that they often merge (O’Day et. al. 1996). A mud in use is at the same time a technical system *and* a social system (Bruckman 1992) and if one changes significantly, so will also the other.

As to the all-importance of shared values, concerns and goals in building - or *growing* - communities, it is pertinent to finish the paper by once more stressing the significance of what one of the leading SvenskMud Arch magicians [senior developers] quite incidentally remarked: ”if three Arch magicians have different opinions, then the wrong persons are Arch magicians”.

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