

Just Awful Enough – The Functional Dysfunction of the Something Awful Forums

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ABSTRACT

The Something Awful Forums (SAF) is an online community comprised of a loosely connected federation of forums, united in a distinctive brand of humor with a focus on the quality of member contributions. In this case study we find that the site has sustained success while deviating from common conventions and norms of online communities. Humor and the quality of content contributed by SAF members foster practices that seem counterintuitive to the development of a stable and thriving community. In this case study we show how design decisions are contextual and inter-dependent and together these heuristics create a different kind of online third place that challenges common practices.

Author Keywords

online community; design; case study; third place

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces

INTRODUCTION

“We here on the Something Awful Forums are very elitist and strict assholes. We pride ourselves on running one of the most entertaining and troll-free forums on the Internet” (SAF Welcome Message)

The Something Awful Forums (SAF) is a loosely connected federation of forums that support a variety of user interests. As we show, there exists an undercurrent of humor coupled with a focus on meaningful community contributions that offers cohesion and connectedness to a “group of goons” that often deviates from common online community standards and practices.

There are numerous examples of scholarship discerning the practices behind successful online communities [4]. There have been compelling analyses of online communities like Wikipedia [3], Reddit [1], and Facebook [5], that examine

the strength of social ties within the platform, the impact of trolling, and the influences of the platform on community behavior. One of the unifying threads in these studies is that the platforms serve as a *third place* for their members, a space outside of work or home where individuals find broader ways to meaningfully connect [15]. Successful online communities typically employ common practices: help users quickly learn community norms [10]; remove barriers for new users [3]; have a clear and sustainable code of conduct [8]; utilize technical and social mechanisms to combat deviant behavior [2]; and present a consistent, predictable, and controllable user experience [6].

This paper presents a case study of the SAF. While the basic site features and activities of the SAF are consistent with typical discussion sites, the site’s policies and social norms are unusual. This study was designed to understand a community that has found sustained success even when deviating from common conventions and norms of online communities. SAF has been consistently active since 1999 and has sustained a community of over 181,000 paying users (as of September 2013). Through interviewing SAF members and analyzing site content and member guidelines, we describe several ways in which SAF challenges conventional practice (*abuse of newbies, amplification of boundary pushers, public humiliation, banning being boring, and lack of internal consistency of moderation*) and two unifying themes (*humor and meaningful contributions of users*). We will discuss how these deviations actually work to strengthen connectedness and culture across the community. Our study of SAF is an example of how supporting unifying concepts like humor and high quality contributions in an online community can create cohesion in what one might assume to be disorder.

WHAT IS SOMETHING AWFUL?

Richard “Lowtax” Kyanka created SAF as an online community rooted in the idea that dialogue should matter and bad behavior, as long as it is funny, is welcomed. SAF is a pay-to-play space, charging a one-time fee for participation. This fee is described on the site as a “filter to keep the environment troll-free.” Users can pay additional fees to give them an ad-free experience, search the website, access the archives, upload pictures, and report questionable behavior.

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SAF is comprised of 31 separate forums or gathering spaces which house an additional 32 sub-forums. Sample forum topics include: gaming, crafting, automotive repair, pop culture, politics, and FYAD - a general forum which stands for “Fuck Yourself and Die” and the only place on the site where flame wars and trolling are tolerated. Each forum and sub forum has its own code of conduct that may differ from the general site’s code of conduct. Punishments are common within the SAF and are classified as probations (brief loss of posting), bans (users can buy an unbanning.), and perma-bans (users cannot pay for a new account or re-register).

METHODS

The goal of this case study is to provide an example of a sustained and successful online community where the community has deviated from common practices and norms. We used multiple qualitative approaches, consisting of content analysis of forum and sub forum codes of conduct, semi-structured interviews with users, and participant observation. We conducted interviews with eight community members: four general users, three moderators and one administrator. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place through text, audio, and video communication platforms. We designed the interviews to focus on how participants got started in the SAF, what they contribute to the community, their perceptions of the site behavior and moderation, and how their participation has changed overtime. Two researchers conducted the interviews and collectively spent over 60 hours lurking within the site in an attempt to understand the cultural norms within the community.

We also conducted a thematic content analysis of 45 codes of conduct in SAF. There is one global code of conduct for SAF. In addition to this global code of conduct, there are 44 sub-forum codes of conduct within the 63 sub-forums that members must adhere to during their time in the community.

DEVIATIONS FROM THE EXPECTED

The SAF has several deviations from common online community practice that make it an interesting subject for further review. We describe five areas where SAF deviates from common practices (*abuse of newbies, amplification of boundary pushers, public humiliation, banning being boring, and lack of internal consistency of moderation*) and two unifying themes (*humor and meaningful contributions of users*).

Abuse of the Newbie

New users are essential for a thriving community – they help grow the user base as well as replace the normal attrition of departing current members. Logically, there is an incentive for communities to welcome these new users as well as help them navigate from the periphery of the community to more constructive membership roles through a quicker new user process [10].

New SAF users have an atypical experience. The SAF takes a more humorous and irreverent approach to the cultural acclimation of new users. Figure 1 below is an example of such approach. When a new user signs up, unless they spend an additional \$5 for a custom profile picture or gif, they receive the “stupid newbie” profile picture.



Figure 1. Standard new member avatar

New members are also more susceptible to violating community standards and getting probated or banned. In the general conduct section of the global community rules, lurking is the first activity that is brought up and is highly recommended to the new user because of the benefits to both the user and the community [13]. Members are told not to regurgitate content on the site and to only post if “what they have to say is funny, informative, or interesting on any level.” For a new member, this prescription is daunting. This barrier is further compounded by access to the rich history of the site. The SAclopeida serves as the external memory of the site – a community maintained collection of their shared experiences, history and lore. New users are expected to have internalized SAclopedia and all codes of conduct, and lurked within the forums before submitting a single post.

“You should definitely look into SAclopedia. This is where the community documents our history. You can definitely tell when a newer member posts and hasn’t spent anytime looking around there. As mods that’s where we exercise the ability to be an asshole and teach them a lesson - usually through a short probation.” (P8)

Raising barriers to entry is a common practice used to encourage commitment to the community [16]. Compared to other online communities, these barriers to entry might seem extreme yet were not an issue for the participants we interviewed: For example, one of our participants (P3) spent over 10 months lurking before posting.

Amplification of the boundary pushers

Research shows that one method to maintain cohesion within an online community is to punish or regulate users who push the boundaries of the site rules [7]. In the global code of conduct for SAF, there is evidence of the site developers and administration setting up loose parameters that allow for the boundaries to be malleable [10].

“Offensive terms or “hate speech” may or may not be bannable based on the context of the sentence...[T]his rule is 100% subjective and based on the mod reading the post.” (SAF Rules)

“Flames and insults do not constitute harassment.” (SAF Rules)

In a more traditional forum, these behaviors would be deemed unacceptable and would warrant a punishment to the offender. In SAF, these boundary-pushing activities are celebrated and codified within the code of conduct. The idea that rule breakers are given a platform for their activities was further supported through community activity observations by one of the interview participants.

“I don’t think ‘Fuck Yourself and Die (FYAD)’ forum users troll in other forums SA in as an attempt to get a ban or probation, they do it to fuck with other forum members for comedy’s sake. It used to be a common catchphrase in the Forums that [when users were trolling] ‘FYAD was leaking’ back before catchphrases were bannable offenses.” (P4)

By giving the users a public platform to push the boundaries, users are celebrated and rewarded for their efforts. On the SAF homepage, humorous articles are presented, which often deal with provocative subjects being discussed in the community. That “[SAF] actually find authors for [our] front-page-articles from the more active and popular forum members” (P8) is a testament to members being rewarded for embodying these behaviors.

Public Humiliation

A common practice in an online community is to make the moderation of behavior a private action, not an event for a public stage, but between the user and the site moderator(s) [7]. There are several reasons for this approach, primarily to spare the user the humiliation of being reprimanded in front of their peers.

PROBATION	9/16/13 03:28pm	You make pretty bad posts for...anything, really. User loses posting privileges for 6 hours.	Moderator Name
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Figure 2. Excerpt from Leper’s Colony

SAF takes a different approach. The moderation of behavior takes place in a public forum called the Leper’s Colony, another humorous design feature. Figure 2 is an example post taken from the Leper’s Colony. The hyperlink on the type of ban takes you to the offensive post so the community can be entertained by the transgressions that took place. While it may seem harsh to degrade members in such a public manner, SAF members often view bans and probations as entertainment.

It’s fun to see why they’re banned...[s]ome of my favorite threads are people slowly falling apart, resulting in a ban or such. We all like to watch other people burn..[I] think that is the common bond that ties most SA people together...[a]t least most old-time SA people. (P5)

The thematic analysis of the codes of conduct revealed that over half (54%) of the 34 forum codes of conduct incorporated some form of public humiliation, mostly associated with the moderation system. Several codes of

conduct find ways to both humiliate based on actions taken by users as well as attack potential attributes of those users.

“If you create some bullshit thread like ‘SELLING MY LOVE!’ you’re probably an idiot and you will be banned for being a goddamn moron” (The SAF Mart Forum Rules)

Banning the Boring

Something Awful is a unique environment where finding the boundaries for what is considered “shitposting” and what is considered valuable contributions can be a daunting task, especially for new users. This challenge is reinforced via the message a user receives when posting a comment in any of the forums (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Forum post pop-up window

Between lurking in the community and reading the codes of conduct, long-time users often tend to implicitly know where the boundaries are for quality as it relates to posting in the community.

“There is sorta a line – you can be fucked up to a point. It is hard to articulate, but you know it when you see it.” (P3)

Another interesting concept within SAF is the high volume of moderator effort focused on low-content community contributions as opposed to contributions that are offensive or inflammatory. Previous research shows that under-contribution is a problem for online communities [13].

“No low-content or no-content posts. Posts that add nothing to the thread will be probated. Humor is content, horrible attempts at humor probably aren’t.” (Discuss and Debate forum)

By heavily penalizing the low content posts, SAF has created a culture that focuses on the quality of the content that keeps members engaged with the community. Over the course of a week we analyzed the moderator rationales for 471 punishments in the Leper’s Colony and found that 51.8% reflected actions associated with boring content, including lack of content and improper grammar¹. Below are examples of these rationales:

- A post this useless deserves a reward!
- There’s no thread to talk about that because it’s the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever seen anyone say. Go live on Tumblr where morons like you congregate.

¹ A second coder coded 20% of the posts with 88.6% inter-rater reliability.

- The only thing set low is your posting standards. Please take a day and suck less when you get back. Gracias.

Lack of internal consistency of moderation

Another interesting component of SAF is the lack of internal consistency of the guiding rules. In many instances, there is an explicit statement that the moderators don't care if it seems unfair:

"Decisions do not have to be fair. If a moderator thinks you are being a dick, you will be banned, regardless of whether you broke a specific rule." (Inspect Your Gadgets Forum)

Some moderators talk about not wanting to have written rules and just seeing what works for them as a sub-community.

There may be other rules in the future, but to be honest I'd prefer it if this were it. I'd like for people to extend this philosophy to reporting people as well. If you want a fairly relaxed forum maybe go easy on the trigger unless something is really a problem." (Rapidly Growing Deaf Forum Rules)

Four of the total sixty-three forums had no written code of conduct or no pointer that the global code of conduct still applies. The community doesn't seem to see this lack of consistency as a problem as seen with other research [12]. They see this ambiguity as an extension of being a part of the community – knowing where there are inconsistencies and either trying to exploit them for a humorous attempt

DISCUSSION

Consider these rules of thumb:

- Erect high barriers of participation for new members.
- Treat new members as inferior.
- Publicly shame members not only for being inappropriate, but also for being boring.
- Deliberately leave standards for conduct unclear.

Intuitively, the above practices don't make a lot of sense. It's amusing to imagine other online sites adopting them. For example, can you imagine Facebook or Twitter management publicly shaming someone for a boring status update or tweet? Surprisingly, SAF has incorporated these heuristics and have maintained an active and diverse community since 1999.

The broader lesson is that design decisions are contextual. Decisions are also inter-dependent—together these heuristics create a different kind of online third place. This short case study contributes insights into how an unusual kind of site is constructed, which opens up intriguing questions about what other genres of online community could be created with different social norms grounded in different design decisions. The HCI community could benefit from further exploring the contextual basis of online community design decisions.

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