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Designing with/for teams

As discussed in my mid-term analysis of Braille Scale armor modelers neo-tribe, a pervasive negativity often surfaces on on-line forums when new kits are released by major manufacturers which is in part due to many modeler's perception that major manufacturers are not addressing their needs. In this neo-tribe, on-line forums are vital for the community and thus, when negative threads start the overall tone of the group can degrade to the point where in-fighting occurs. In its most positive form, these online forums function as Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP) as defined by Bos et al. (2007) where participants share modeling and subject knowledge. Due to the fact that participation in VCoP is voluntary, negative threads can become off-putting and possibly result in individuals no longer participating. Based on this understanding, in an attempt to create a more positive VCoP which allows participants to apply their expertise, the Sapien's Community Tool for Teams (2000) will be used as a model. For the Braille Scale VCoP, two Sapien styled communities will be created: Team and Business Unit.

The first, and most important is Team with the expressed purpose of developing participant's interpersonal relationships (Sapien 2000, p. 12) within the VCoP. This community will help recognize participants' contributions, no matter their expertise, while also working to diffuse negativity as it arises. Acknowledging that negativity is based on valid experiences, the challenge will be to take negativity and convert it to constructive dialogue. In addition, this community will illustrate to the participants who do not undertake negative dialogue that the VCoP is actively working to maintain a positive atmosphere. Ultimately, the roll of this community is to create an environment where participants can express opinions without detrimentally effecting the VCoP.

Knowing that a number of VCoP participants feel frustration that manufacturers aren't "listening to them", the formation of a Business Unit community will help establish an authoritative voice to present to manufacturers. Considering the large amount of both subject and modeling expertise inherent within the VCoP, this community will direct participant expertise to manufacturers in a form and tone appropriate for business. It will also work with manufacturers to communicate their business and design decisions back to the VCoP so modelers understand some of the decision making processes of the manufacturer.

Currently, the Braille Scale VCoP is a rag tag group of modelers that could, with structure, actually become a point of expertise and advice for manufacturers and could, with effort, actually help direct the design and feature of future kits.

References

Bos, N. Zimmerman, A, Olson, J, Yew, J, Yekie, J, Dahl, E, Olson, G, 2007, "From Shared Databases to Communities of Practice: A Taxonomy of Collaboratories", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communications* 12:652-672.

Sapien, 2000, *Building Communities at Sapien*, Internal Document, 24 pp.