The online nomads of cyberia[1]
by Alexander Knorr[2]

Abstract

Along with the unleashing of new media, hitting the streets almost globally in an accelerating pace, new fields for anthropology unfolded. In particular services based on the Internet-infrastructure gave rise to a new phenomenon of interest: online communities. The latters' spaces of interaction and 'habitats' are constituted by mediating technologies. This paper strives to communicate two points. Firstly the issue of the complementary utilization of a wealth of channels of interaction, both asynchronous, synchronous, and even parallel, sometimes dubbed multitasking. The essential questions within this argument are asking for the particular qualities of these channels as perceived by the practitioners, and for the latters' management and use of them. Secondly the fact that the community's terrain is not restricted to an infrastructure at a given time, and its social cohesion does not ultimately depend upon the maintenance and existence of particular loci of interaction. The community can only be grasped in terms of a social body, as it can neither be localized in topograpical space, nor pinpointed to particular conceptual spaces induced by information and communication technologies (ICTs). "My tribe" is nomadizing within cyberspace. The paper is empirically based upon fieldwork which started in early 2002 and is still going on, particularly in the shape of 'thick participation' (Spittler 2001) within a transnational technoludic online community of practice. By means of selected examples it will be shown that anthropological methods and concepts are perfectly suited to not only grasp the shape and structure of online communities, but also to get access to, and ultimately gain understanding of the social and cultural practices surrounding new media.

In my paper I will argue that an anthropological theory of sociocultural appropriation (Beck 2001, 2004; Spittler 2002) can help to understand contemporary media practices. The media in question are those supported by the Internet-infrastructure. The practitioners are the members of a certain online community within which I am doing fieldwork since early 2002. I will start with a cursory and partial ethnographical description of the community, then will relate two observed media practices situated on different levels, namely the practice of complementary usage of a multitude of channels, and the practice of nomadizing within cyberspace.

The community I am talking about initially condensated around the shared interest in, and practice of modifying commercial computergame-software. (see Morris 2003, Postigo 2003, Sotamaa 2003) That means making playable additions to existing games, up to making completely new games out of them, plus a vast range of secondary and derivative artefacts. My community is the central slice of the online-fanhood gathered around the games *"Max Payne"* (Remedy Entertainment 2001), *"Max Payne 2"* (Remedy Entertainment 2003), and the upcoming *"Alan Wake"* (Remedy Entertainment [2007]). The quality of Max-Payne (MP) modifications (mods) spans from crude technical exercises to artistical comments on, and interpretations of contemporary history, society, culture and popular culture.
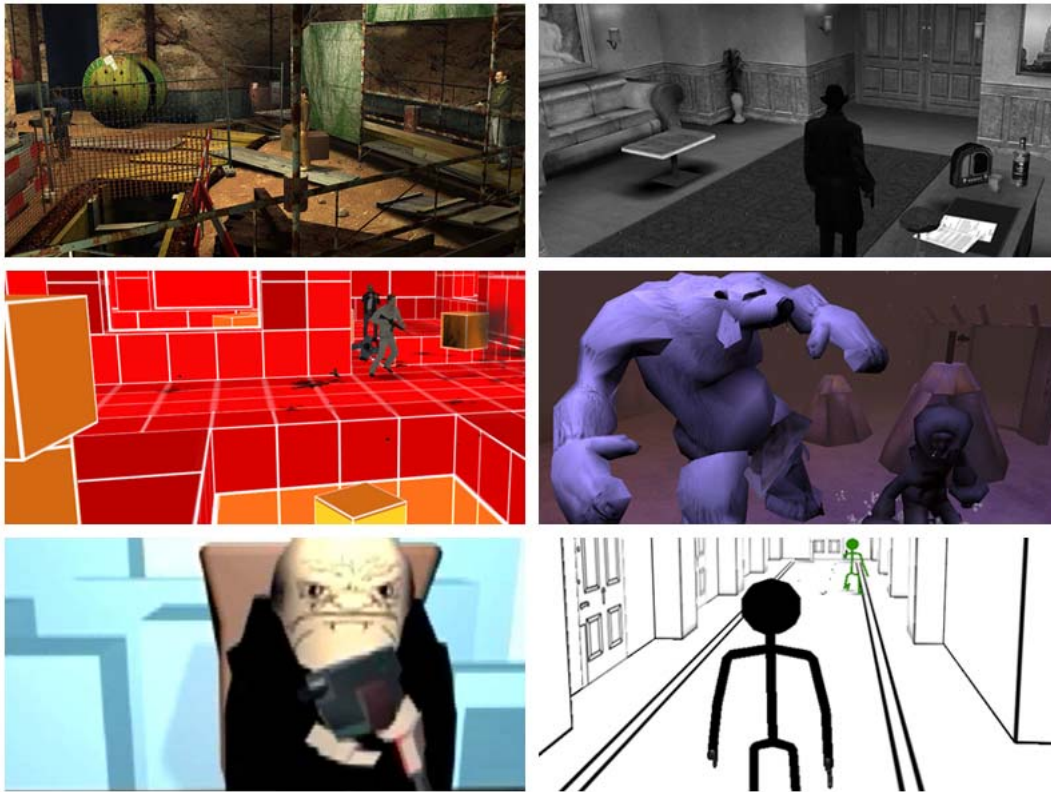
Figure 1: Examples illustrating the range of graphical styles in MP-modding

To give you an idea of what I am talking about here, I am showing you screenshots of six mods. The pictures were chosen to illustrate just one aspect, the range of graphical styles employed. From top left to bottom right: The modification *"New Dawn"* tells a story much the way the out-of-the-box game does, but surpasses it in terms of photorealism. In order to achieve a film-noir ambience for *"The Family"*, a mafia-themed mod, everything was reduced to greyscale, except explosions, the muzzleflashes of guns, and blood. In *"Cubed"* the colour was retained, but the environment shaped completely graphical. *"Polar Payne"* lets the player experience over-the-top violence seemingly straight out of a vintage Tom & Jerry cartoon by Tex Avery. For *"Doodz"* the cartoonesque abstraction was pushed even further. And finally *"Xiao Xiao"* allows you to run around a pen and ink 3D-environment as a stick figure. Mind, these are still pictures taken within fully interactive and playable 3D-spaces created from scratch by teams of unpaid individuals.

The media practice of gamemodding itself is a process of appropriation, but not the one I want to focus upon in this paper. Today's aim is set on the community's appropriation of the Internet itself, which we will reach in a minute. The production of gamemods requires not only intellectual, imaginative, and artistical talent, but substantial technological skills and knowledge as well. And of course many, many man-hours. Because computergames are quite complex pieces of software, and in consequence gamemods are too, one individual alone can hardly furnish the resources needed for succesful gamemodding. Sustained cooperation, mutual help and training are indispensable. This already is an adequate reason for community-building becoming inevitable. (see Madanmohan & Navelkar 2004) The shape or structure of the mentioned online-fanhood can be described as layered like an onion's skins.
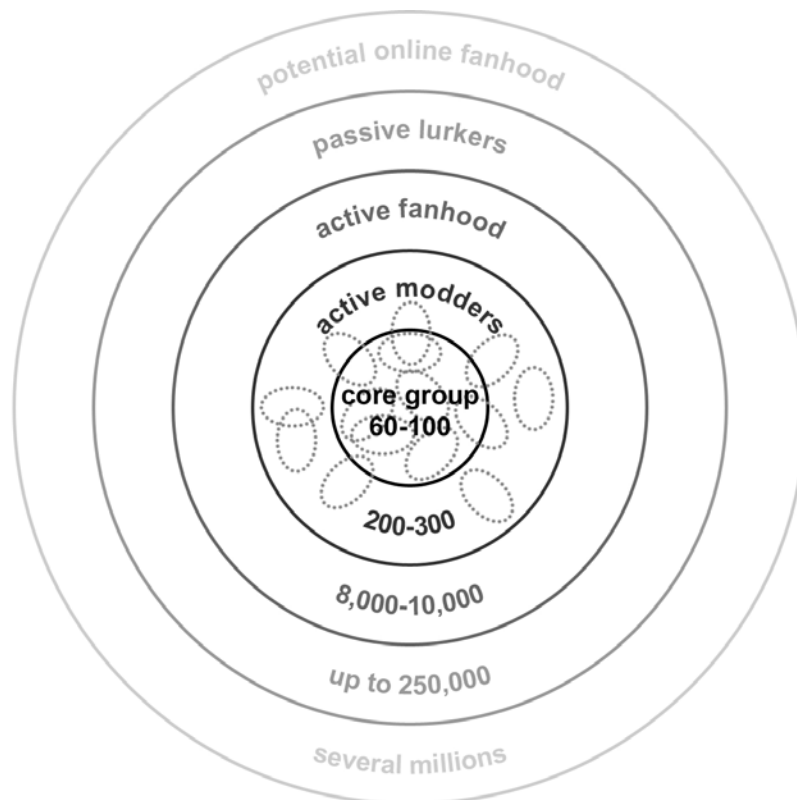
Figure 2: Cursory overview of the community's structure and embeddedness

I will explain from the inside out. The innermost group, the people densely interacting on a daily basis and sticking together for years, "my tribe", roughly counts 60 to 100 people, who are between 15 and 25 years of age, plus occasional exceptions, and three of them are female. This core is a part of the group of active gamemodders which consists of 200 to 300 people. Within this group, at any given time since 2001, there are several partly overlapping modding-teams which are emerging, shifting, changing, and braking apart again through the course of time. This dynamic segments are working on modification projects and for the time being create their own hidden sub-infrastructure. The two innermost layers in turn are a part of the active fanhood, between 8000 to 10,000 people who are interacting and communicating within the fanhood's publicly visible online infrastructure. Around this aggregation there is the group of passive "lurkers", those who are following the activities by reading and by downloading community-produced artefacts, but do not actively participate. The people within all the described layers are recruited from the potential online fanhood, which consists of those who own the original games (all in all about ten million units have been sold) and those who have heard of the games otherwise and now are looking for information online. Principally it is always possible for individuals to join the potential fanhood and then to gradually traverse the layers to finally join the core. In fact that's exactly the path I took.

Allow me to return to this core, to "my tribe". Its members are literally scattered all over the globe. They live in the US and Canada, all over Europe, including the UK, Scandinavia and the Mediterranean, in India and Australia. Quite obviously the community can not be pinpointed to a topographical location within geographical space. Rather the community is constituted within the Internet-infrastructure by the interactions of its members. The single individuals are online

for long spans of time on a daily basis and during that time are in contact with the other members via multiple channels. Put to use are: Interlinked, but independent websites and servers, designed, written, and maintained by members of the community and customized to specific needs. Sometimes sites or servers are hidden in order to be accessed by the community or by one of its sub-groups only. This includes FTP (File Transfer Protocol) and SSH (Secure Shell) servers. Then there are one-to-one and one-to-many e-mail, real-time chat services like Internet Relay Chat (IRC), ICQ[3], MSN[4], etc. including their possibilities of quick and direct exchange of large amounts of data which is virtually indetectable by third parties. Furthermore used are Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP, e.g. *"skype"*), video chat, and occassionally the telephone, both landlines and cell phones. Whenever new means of computer-mediated communication (CMC) appear on the scene, they immediately are tried out by the community and quickly get integrated into its interaction-infrastructure. The environment within which the community exists is not formed by one particular service or technology. The Internet itself with its everchanging possibilities is the "natural environment" within which the community's habitat is situated. "Habitat", in this context a seemingly exorbitant concept, especially as it is very often stated that online media are restrictive, rob manifoldness from human communication and interaction. But on the other hand some authors claim that this media capture within their domain the whole diversity of cultural practices and expressions. (e.g. Castells 2000 [1996]: 405) Both is true and false at the same time. My people utilize the described wealth of synchronous and asynchronous channels of interaction in a mutually complementary fashion. Each channel features particular qualities, advantages and drawbacks to particular contexts. Accordingly channels are chosen in respect to the social and technical needs of specific situations of interaction. More often than not multiple channels are used at the same time.
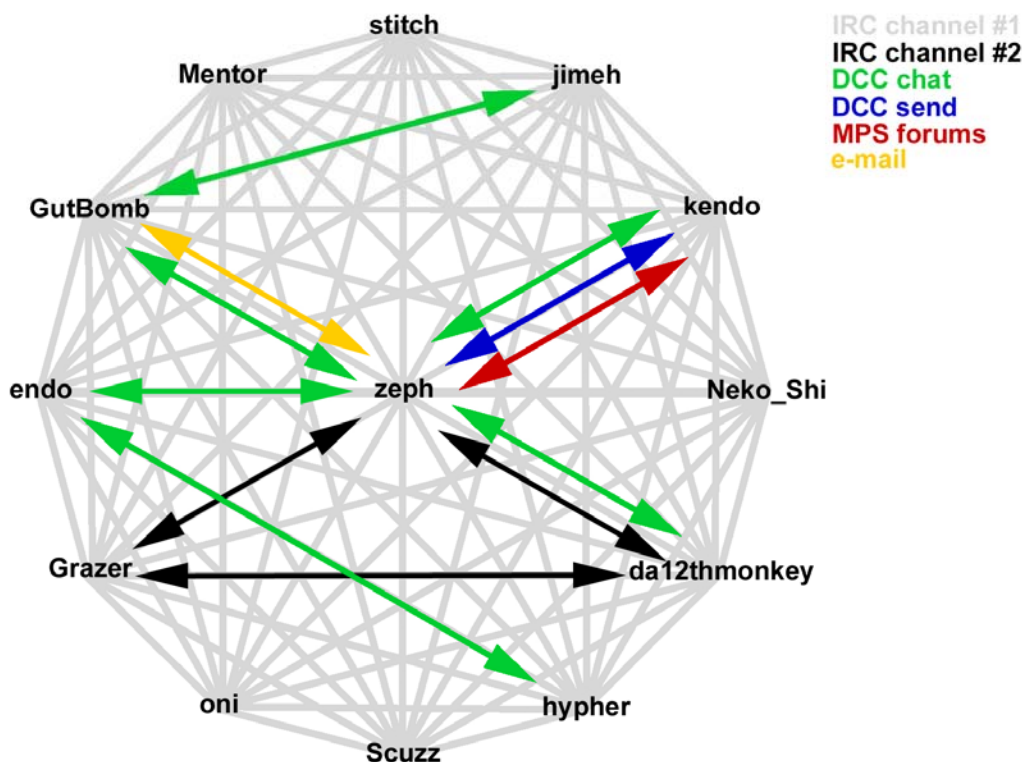

Figure 3: A prototypical but authentical situation of 'multitasking'

I have chosen an authentical but also prototypical situation which was not too complicated, and only a limited range of channels was employed. I've put ego, my humble self, the ethnographer into the center of the graph. To give you a taste of the flavour I left the original nicknames. I guess you can do that in such a private setting like here.[5] At a given time this 13 people were together in a chatroom. That means everybody can talk to everybody in real time, and all can read what is written. This is represented by the underlying grey web. But above that there are more connections. The black arrows indicate that, together with Grazer and da12thmonkey I simultaneously was in another chatroom. Furthermore I chatted with kendo, da12thmonkey, endo and GutBomb via Direct Client-to-Client (DCC) chat in private windows. Endo did so with hypher, and GutBomb with jimeh, as well. I knew about that, because endo and GutBomb respectively told me so via DCC chat. At the same time I exchanged files with kendo via DCC send (blue arrow) and we alternately posted into the same discussion thread at the Max Payne Source (MPS) forums (red arrow). This was because I had asked him a modding-specific technical question, and he had pointed me to an according thread. The two of us found the points we discussed interesting enough for every MP-modder and worthwhile to preserve. So we left our real-time DCC chat privacy and went to an asynchronous and persistent channel open to the whole community. Finally I also exchanged e-mails with GutBomb. This happened because Gut had told me about an e-mail he had received from a third party and then forwarded it to me. Then we wanted to exchange files, but discovered that, because of unknown technical reasons, we couldn't establish a DCC send connection between the two of us. So we sent the files as e-mail attachments, because firing up ftp or SSH clients and to use a file server would have been too much of a hassle at this moment. For me this situation meant that I simultaneously had open two IRC windows, four DCC chat windows, up-popping and closing DCC send windows, the web browser, an e-mail client, the folders from which I sent files and into which I put files that were sent to me, plus occasionally other applications allowing me to handle the files that were sent to me. Mind that the graph only represents the connections *I* was aware of in that situation. Putting other individuals in the center would lead to different pictures. And the graph is a snapshot, situations like the represented one do not persist, but are constantly changing through time.

Not only written text is exchanged lively, but "things", too: 2D and 3D images, both still and moving, sounds and music, software-applications, digital objects, and program-code itself. Because of intense and sustained cooperation, sometimes sailing close to the wind and beyond (legally speaking), and the thereof resulting mutual trust, personal and social proximity between the members of the group, plus the casual and effortless usage and management of a multitude of channels, the threshold of exchanging all kind of information is very low within the community. Besides information concerning the core-interest, a plethora of off-topic issues, seemingly meaningless talk, 'gossip', information about the members' offline contexts, and deeply private issues are exchanged and discussed not only on a regular, but highly reliable basis. 'True' social interaction becomes apparent. Even phenomena like social stratification of the group are reflected and discussed by the members themselves. In short, dynamic and quite complex sociocultural processes emerge. Above all that my people create, customize, and abandon infrastructure to their needs. They shape and change their online habitat, but stick together as a group.

To substantiate this let me return to the community's websites, which are ranging from individual ones, via weblogs, wikis and group-websites, up to multifunctional and multimedially oriented portals suited for heavy data traffic and featuring news-pages, article-, tutorial-, and documentation-sections, file-databases with up-and download function, mostly php-powered forums, and hosted subsites. The used software almost exclusively stems from the open source domain. Just to give you an idea of size, maxpayneheadquarters.com, for three and a half years the community's largest privately maintained portal, had in its peak time 8000+ registered users who had posted 200,000+ forum entries, additionally there were up to 250,000 non-registered lurkers, and the site held nearly 500 fully functional gamemods available for free download. Up to 1200 users were simultaneously navigating the site.

In late 2004 this longtime central locus of the community collapsed and completely disappeared. One might suspect that this delivered a deadly blow to the community. But in a way quite the contrary happened. The longing for social cohesion and community reproduction was much stronger than the impact of the loss of a cherished conceptual place. Immediately after the loss the density of communication between members of the core group sprang up exponentially, especially on IRC, ICQ, and via e-mail. Quickly the creation of a substitute for the lost portal was decided upon and action began. Webspace, bandwidth, and software were allocated, working groups were formed, tasks allotted and accomplished. Finally, within weeks, maxpaynesource.com was born. More than 1000 members registered during the first month of its existence. On the same scale, on smaller scales, and in regard to other technologies, multiple such processes happened since 2002, and still are happening. So, the community can neither be pinpointed to a geographical location, nor to a conceptual place within the Internet. "My tribe" is nomadizing within cyberspace and can only be grasped in terms of a social body defined by the density and quality of sustained interaction between individuals.

All this is only possible because the community's collective core ideas and interests lie well within the broader field of the mediating technologies which enable the community's existence. Hence the members not only are highly accustomed to CMC and ICTs, but deal with them virtuously and creatively. They are far from being more or less passive technology-consumers. They are not subdued to, and depending on what possibilites they are offered by those who are creating the technologies. Their expertise allows the members not only to utilize the available channels of interaction to the limits of their possibilities, but to mutually complement the advantages and drawbacks of different services, to fathom technologies' openness to interpretation and reworking, and ultimately to actively construct, shape, and change their online-habitat independently from and unrestricted by the range of commercially offered CMC products and services. Such an online-setting is most promising in terms of richness of social interactions and diversity of cultural expressions. (compare Manninen 2001) All this of course makes the paradigm of sociocultural appropriation central to the understanding of the described media practices.

The spectrum of appropriation in an anthropological sense reaches from taking possession of something, via reinterpretation and rededication, up to reworking. (Beck 2001, Spittler 2002) What happens with an artefact, how it is used, is not

determined by the artefact itself, as the latter's most important quality is its openness to interpretation. Within the context of the appropriating milieu new meanings are ascribed to new things, they get charged with "local" meaning. This situations of interpretive flexibility generate surprising processes of rededication. Putting hands on, fitting an artefact into own patterns of action and perception, more often than not leads to reworking the artefact. Especially the appropriation of technology does not mean passive consumption, but active reworking. In the reported case the technologies now function within an own social rationality. Their social appropriation has not lead to the adoption of the manufacturing industry's instrumental rationality. The described practices would be unthinkable within an industrial or professional context where the technologies are embedded into comparatively standardized and therefore inflexible practices. My tribe's practices are based on the absence of formal training. They are not part of a consolidated tradition, but of an emerging one. The community shows a seemingly perfect opportunism in respect to the use of technologies. But this is an expression of a new culture of technology, arisen from the process of appropriation and embedded into gaming and gamemodding culture, and cyberculture at large. It is true that in respect to technological artefacts appropriation and recontextualization means deconstruction followed by reassembling. But it is not a complete deconstruction like it is the case with recycling. And appropriation does not necessarily mean creation, although the creativity upon which both processes are based makes this conclusion very seductive. My people can not create the range of necessary technologies by themselves. They depend on the manufacturing industry and on the corporate power maintaining the Internet's infrastructure. Ultimately they are depending on markets they can not control. (especially Beck 2001: 67, 72-77 and 2004, additionally Hahn 2004, plus Spittler 1993 and 2002) Nevertheless ICTs are appropriated and reworked, and thereby the community's environment, too, and that way changing habitats are created.

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[2] Alexander Knorr currently is "Wissenschaftlicher Assistent" [the rough equivalent of an assistant professor struggling for tenure] at the "Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikanistik" in Munich, Germany. He studied sociocultural anthropology, psychology, and theater science and got his Dr. phil. in 2002. Since that time his research interests shifted from the anthropology of religion and Central Asia towards cyberanthropology. Recent on topic publications are last year's "The stability of cyberspace", in print are "Playful appropriation of gamespace" and "The interpretative flexibility of the source". His current research project *"maxmod::online among the gamemodders—the cultural appropriation of information and communication technologies"*, from which this paper stems, can be followed at his weblog (http://xirdal.lmu.de/cgi-bin/blosxom.cgi/) and website (http://xirdal.lmu.de/).

[3] ICQ is an instant messaging service owned by Time Warner's AOL. "ICQ" is an oronym on the phrase "I seek you". Since quite a time it has become a household word for services offering similar functions and qualities of interaction.

[4] MSN means "Microsoft Network", a collection of online services provided by the Microsoft Corporation.

[5] The individuals mentioned here are perfectly aware of the research-project and unanimously agreed to my using their actual nicknames in my publications.