Virtual Play and Communities: The Evolution of Group Roles in Electronic Trace Data

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Introduction
Language use is widely studied in the context of group formation, yet not much is known about the relationship between the development of language and group roles in online discourse communities. It is critical to understand the development of group roles and language in online decision making groups because organizations rely on technological mediation for coordination and information sharing.

We utilize a national adult recreational sports league discussion forum comment thread entitled “the Code,” to analyze the development of the group’s lexicon over 4 years of activity. The discussion forum is utilized by participants in the league to carry on discourse in addition to physical interactions.

Group Roles & Local Group Dynamics
Benne and Sheats identify 3 types of roles that individuals play in groups. Arrow, McGrath and Berdahl define groups as complex systems of global and local origins which relate to group roles which correspond to types of roles. These roles and stages work together in a constant system until the group’s work is done.

Benne & Sheats: Group Roles
- Task roles: “facilitate and coordinate group effort in the selection and definition of a common problem and in the solution of that problem [2].”
- Building and maintenance roles: “are designed to alter or maintain the group way of working, to strengthen, regulate and perpetuate the group as a group [2].”
- Individual roles: “serve some individual goal which is not relevant either to the group task or to the functioning of the group as a group [2].”

Arrow, McGrath & Berdahl: Local System Stages
- Elaborating the coordination network
- Enacting and maintaining the coordination network
- Modifying the network: feedback and learning

Discussion
These findings illustrate a community working together to establish a shared language. The high level of task roles early on illustrates a community working together to establish a shared language. The absence of building and maintenance roles reveals a distinction between the interaction and communication of online and physical groups.

The network diagram of the discourse over the whole time period illustrates a distinct sets of actors.

- Actors in the core of the network in the network are those most responsible for establishing large parts of the shared jargon.

The ephemeral participation of certain actors within the network is correlated to the different group roles identified within each time period.

Future Work
Coupling network analysis and group role analysis with language development process analysis.

References