

# The Computer Clubhouse Village: Sharing Ideas and Connecting Communities of Designers Across Borders

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While the Computer Clubhouse started in one city, over the last 15 years it has grown into an international network with over 100 Clubhouses worldwide (see Chapter 2). Supporting this global community and providing flexibility for local coordinators to organize their Clubhouses has provided a challenge—and an opportunity—for the Computer Clubhouse Network staff. The design of its intranet site, called the “Computer Clubhouse Village” or “Village” for short, supports the independence of individual Clubhouses, while maintaining organization and encouraging the flow of communication throughout the Clubhouse Network.

In the Village members join the worldwide Clubhouse community to share creations, connect with their peers, and have their voices heard. Members can post their work, leave comments on others’ and indicate they like a project by marking it with a “cool ping.” They create highly personalized profile pages with photos, music, and videos. They have a forum for discussing issues important to them. Through the Village, Clubhouse members can get involved with new projects and interact with others outside their Clubhouse in ways unimaginable without it.

The Village also supports the Clubhouse staff and mentors organizing across the disparate, independently functioning physical Clubhouses. It provides an area for mentors to share tools and tips for better scaffolding of member activities (see Chapter 8). In addition, there are mechanisms for staff to manage activities and document processes, which can often be accomplished faster and more efficiently online. The ability to pool lessons learned and exchange ideas is of critical importance, given the scale and diversity of the organization.

In contrast with many current social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace, Village membership is restricted to members, mentors, and staff of the over 100 Computer Clubhouses worldwide. It is important that the Village provides a safe online environment and ensures only Clubhouse community members have access. Every account on the Village represents a member of the global Clubhouse community and only Clubhouse staff can create new accounts. That ensures that every account holder is known personally. Members can safely share personal information, post their photographs, and participate in synchronous, real-time chat or asynchronous threaded discussion postings and e-mails. Many youth at the Clubhouse feel strongly that the Village belongs to them and they may express their grief or troubles in that forum in ways they may not do in person. If a member drastically alters his or her online identity, steals other people’s work, or acts out, someone at the local Clubhouse knows the member personally. When issues arise, Clubhouse staff or mentors can intervene face-to-face in culturally appropriate ways.

The Village is composed of five main sections (Figure 9.1). The “Projects” section includes all the projects people have shared, along with “Things to Try” and “Galleries.” The “People and Clubhouses” section features a home page for each Clubhouse along with links to photo albums and profiles. From their profile pages, Villagers can post

photo albums, galleries, create personal profiles, and e-mail one another. The “Software Studio” section lists all the software available at the Clubhouses, along with help references and links. The “Talk” section contains various discussion groups and chat capabilities. The “Topic Tree” section is an editable repository of Clubhouse-related information. It includes information on various Clubhouse issues such as sustainability, tutorials, digital photography, Web design, and gender equity. Village menus are available in many languages and additional content has been either posted in or translated to Spanish. However, the majority of Village content is delivered in English.

**Figure 9.1: Screenshot of Clubhouse Village**



## TYPES OF ACTIVITIES ON THE VILLAGE

Overall there are three areas of member activity on the Village intranet site. In the first area members create an online presence or representation of themselves, while in the second area they share projects and project-related information. In the third area members socialize and discuss issues important to them.

### Online Presence

Villagers define their online presence and explore others through a variety of mechanisms. The map of Clubhouses across the globe emphasizes the range of cultures represented. This page rotates through featured Villagers' profiles, giving a sense of the diversity of the Village community. Individual profile pages contain personal photos albums, project galleries, and descriptions of who they are. For instance, one boy from the Philippines talked about the friends he had made and what he loved to do at the Clubhouse:

huhhh. . . , i really missed those people who makes me laugh at the summit. . . i will treasure the moments we've shared. . . i really miss you. . . muahhh hi guyz i'm frank. . . from the beautiful, amazing place called philippines. . . I really love ny friends (just check out my album and you'll see our pictures) they are good friends. . . . i'm 15 yrs old. . . I love -photoshop because I can express my creativity through editing pictures -hanging out with my friends -going to the clubhouse to mingle with other members -Philippines I'm funny friendly person.

Many profiles are detailed representations of what the members do, who their friends are, what music they like, and what they create at the Clubhouse. Some profiles include photographs of themselves, their family, and friends, or pictures of animals, music stars, and sports stars they like. Active members update their background information regularly. Others add music videos, sometimes running multiple videos at once, creating a cacophony on their pages. Members use their profile pages to broadcast interest in connecting with others or connections they already have made. The Clubhouse and Village are designed to empower members' voices. That speaks directly to an important component of the Clubhouse experience, which is youth not just being connected but also being heard.

### Project Sharing

The "Projects" area is a dynamic one, where different work is featured regularly and contributions are added. Most notable is how members use the projects to express their passions and concerns (see color plates at end of Part II). The project content is informed by the members' interests, which might reflect personal preferences, such as favorite food, music, or anime. Their projects also may illustrate what they see in their worlds such as cars, graffiti, sunsets, or the desert. Many projects convey what is fashionable in the world of youth, and especially teens. Pop musicians and their music are frequently sources of inspiration, as are sports personalities. Other projects may be created with tools such as Blender (3-D models), Lego Mindstorms (robotics), GameMaker (game design), and music composition using the ever-popular music studio.

### Socializing and Discussing Issues

In addition, Clubhouse members spend much of their time on the Village connecting through e-mail, discussion groups, and monitored chat sessions. Some topics are guided by administrators, such as help with the Village, multilingual support, and staff sections. Others are set up for villagers around topics that interest them. One of the most popular discussion areas, "Clubhouse Talk," is dedicated to chatting about everything from

Dance Dance Revolution (a video game which involves dancing) and *Krumping* (see Chapter 6) to favorite sports and foods to Ramadan. The individual posts often reflect what members care about and wish to share about themselves. The larger topic threads illustrate youths' understanding of the diversity of their community and their desire to communicate with one another:

Member 1: If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?

Member 2: . . . there's two places i would go to: Japan and any beach in the world. I want to go to Japan because they make all the things I like such as anime and video games! I would also want to go to a beach because I really want to swim in the ocean.

Member 3: ... love ya [Member 2]! but i would go to rome and amsterdam!! rome because i want to see the leaning tower of pisa, and amsterdam because i like the movie Deuce bigalo Part 2!

This exchange not only reflects these particular Clubhouse members' dreams, but also the global nature of the Village. Members are interested in connecting with their peers and how their peers perceive them. This builds a stronger community that is a comfortable place to share one's creations.

## HOW THE CLUBHOUSE COMMUNITY USES THE VILLAGE

As of April 2007 the Village community was composed of over 6,000 participants, including over 5,000 active youth members, over 400 mentors, over 150 coordinators and assistant coordinators, and various other staff. Over 63% of the youth members were from the United States, 6% were from the Philippines, 4% each from Columbia, Mexico, and Northern Ireland, along with members from the remaining Clubhouses worldwide. Village participants were representative of the larger Clubhouse community (see also Chapter 10) in that the average age was 15 and 50% of members were female. About 75% described their primary language as English, 17% as Spanish, 2% as Filipino, and the remaining other languages included Chinese, Danish, Dutch, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Kannada, Portuguese, and Russian.

Although members use all sections of the Village, they engaged in some activities more frequently than others. By far the most popular section was e-mail, accounting for about half of all page hits. That was not surprising given the community consists primarily of adolescents who are likely interested in connecting with other adolescents. The next most popular activity was viewing members' profile pages, which accounts for 15% of page hits. Additionally youth spent on average about 2 minutes on each profile page, which suggests they were examining the content of those pages. Members developed profile pages to be noticed, and it appears that was happening.

Other Village sections received fewer hits, but visitors stay for up to 2 minutes suggesting that the page content was being more thoroughly examined. These pages included the "Home Page" — which displayed a variety of rotating content and provided a snapshot of what's happening on the Village, "Things to Try," — which provided project ideas; and "Software Studio" and the "Profile Survey" — both of which support interactive, online activities.

## E-MAIL ON THE VILLAGE

E-mail, as noted earlier, is by the far the most popular activity on the Village. It is the primary mechanism for members to communicate privately. In the 31 months of e-mail studied, 83% of Villagers e-mailed at least once. Villagers sent, on average, 100 e-mails

per person with a median of 3. The distribution of number of e-mails sent is logarithmic, which means that most users sent very few e-mails while a handful sent a lot. Adults working at the Clubhouse have noted that members who use e-mail frequently have short, rapid interactions in the style of instant messaging. When Clubhouse members used the e-mail application, the primary activity was checking to see what messages had arrived. The next most popular activity was actually reading the content of messages, and the least popular was sending e-mail. One might expect that users flip back and forth rapidly between their e-mail boxes and other activities. In fact, people spent as much time looking at their e-mail boxes as they spent on pages for sending e-mail.

A study of the e-mail exchanges among Village members reveals that members use e-mail to connect with people they wouldn't otherwise know (Sylvan, 2007). For instance, though Villagers connect with people within their own Clubhouse, most e-mail connections were made *between members in different Clubhouses*. Most likely, these members had never meet in-person and formed connections via the Village. When Villagers do connect with people within their clubhouse, these exchanges are less frequent and composed of fewer e-mails. These findings suggest that Village is succeeding in building relationships across the Computer Clubhouse Network. Still, there were fewer connections between Clubhouses in different countries than between Clubhouses within the same country. This may reflect the impact of different languages and cultures between countries in prohibiting some connections.

## **UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION ON THE VILLAGE**

Clubhouse coordinators and Network staff have been concerned about what members do on the Village. A statistical analysis revealed that male-female communication was significantly more common than same gender communication. Also male-female connections were found to have stronger ties than same gender connections (Sylvan, 2007). While the designers of the Village and Clubhouse coordinators wanted members to connect with one another and socialize, they were also concerned that the Village could devolve into a "dating site" like the popular MySpace.com. The Village was designed to connect members and support an exchange of their design projects and ideas. In the following excerpt from a chat-based meeting, Clubhouse coordinators summarize the issues around member e-mailing versus being engaged in other Village activities:

Coordinator 1: The Village is a channel for them to interchange ideas.

Coordinator 2: We have to limit the time on Village and we try to motivate them to upload problems and get news from network. I think it's OK.

Coordinator 3: On the contrary, I think it's good because they can contribute diverse visions. But I don't see it as a problem. It's much better if they establish safe relationships within the network as opposed to on MySpace.

Coordinator 4: The Village is a valuable resource but we have to focus it positively.

So are members primarily socializing or are they engaged in project-related exchanges? To answer this question, various online activities were examined including the number of e-mails sent, Village web site visits, profile pages updates, and project postings (Sylvan 2007). A statistical test revealed that people who e-mailed often also visited the Village significantly more often than those who e-mailed infrequently. A second test revealed that those members sending frequent e-mails also updated their profile pages significantly more often.

Posting projects is an important way members contribute to the Village. Uploading is a multistep process that requires more effort than e-mailing or other online discussion activities. Also members need to feel confident that they have a project they wish to

share. Despite these challenges, 26% of all Clubhouse Village members upload their projects to the Village area.

More importantly, people who e-mailed the most post significantly more projects than those who sent fewer e-mails. This finding addresses the concern that members are using the Village for purely social reasons. It still is possible and, perhaps likely, that e-mail could be used to meet potential boyfriends or girlfriends online. However, that kind of activity does not appear to be occurring at the expense of the design goals of the Village. Members who socialized via e-mail participated in other ways as well.

What these findings suggest is that though there was a wide range of e-mail usage, Clubhouse members who e-mailed often did not do so at the expense of other Village-related activities. Instead, they e-mailed in addition to other activities. It appears Clubhouse youth, concerned about who they are and how they fit in, use their projects, profiles, discussion groups, and other forms of text communication to reach out to others.

## **DIFFUSION OF A NEW VILLAGE FEATURE**

A way to encourage productive member connections is to augment those activities members already engage in on the Village. As mentioned previously, a core member activity on the Village was visiting profile pages. The "Village Profile Survey" was created to augment members' existing interest in designing their profile pages and surfing other members' pages. The "Village Profile Survey" is not a standardized survey instrument but rather an informal questionnaire that members fill out and put on their profile pages. The survey is composed of 19 questions, including who you are, what you like, what you do at the Clubhouse, and what technologies you use. The survey was first launched on the Village home page, but 88% of Village users who completed the survey did so after finding it on other members' profile pages. This survey also enabled the tracking of how ideas diffused through the Village by examining the frequency of e-mails and page hits on profiles. Members who logged on to the Village more frequently also tended to adopt the survey significantly earlier (Sylvan, 2007).

In a further step, the relationships among answers to the survey were examined. The largest cluster of answers involved people responding about technologies, which is appropriate for the Village community. For example, Photoshop is popular at the Clubhouse and was commonly cited. The technology words were associated with other words such as *fun*, *people*, *game*, and *projects*. This implied those words are associated with social and fun activities by the Villagers. These results are promising because the survey was designed to encourage members to relate to one another as project creators and potential collaborators. Location-related words were also common, suggesting members liked to discuss where they were from and where they would like to visit. Again, this was encouraging because it suggested members may be finding commonalities, both locally and from across the globe.

## **DESIGN DECISIONS ABOUT THE VILLAGE**

When designing and participating in communities for youth, we are faced with challenging design choices. Youth want to socialize with their peers, and it is important for their development that they do so. But online sites that solely provide ways to socialize may lack content that can deepen interactions and create meaningful connections. On the other hand, a site that is too centrally controlled, both in content and expressive freedom, may not be interesting to this age group. The Village designers have achieved a balance between the dynamic and open nature of the Computer Clubhouse community by providing a safe, supportive online environment where youth can interact. Computer Clubhouse Village development remains a fluid process of participating in the community, observing what happens, anticipating needs, and adapting.

On the Village all members' accounts are created by an adult who knows them. Since every member is known personally by someone at his or her local Clubhouse, mentors

and staff who monitor the site can note when someone is struggling or being hurtful. Should problems arise, someone from the local Clubhouse can talk one-on-one with that member to resolve the issue. Youth being seen and heard is part of the Clubhouse culture. Furthermore, the Village not only provides a mechanism for having a voice, it also provides models of how to use that voice constructively. By actively and enthusiastically participating on the site, adults and mentors model what it means to engage constructively in an online community of creators. If members see the richness that comes from people participating civilly and thoughtfully, they will be more likely to do the same. Sites like the Village give youth an opportunity to practice responsible citizenship in online communities.

It is important to note that the Village was not simply created and released to its audience. Designers watched how youth used it, asked them what did and did not work, and tweaked and redesigned over the years. For instance, the first installment of the Village did not have a chat function. However, it became clear members were interested in chatting online. Once the chat feature was introduced, chat sessions had a specified topic that was monitored by staff or the Village design team. Developers of online communities for youth, such as the Village, have to anticipate and adapt to its members' expectations. Designing the Village was an ongoing process of participation, study, and trial and error.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Computer Clubhouse Village is an intranet site designed to connect and empower the youth of the Clubhouse. The site supports the Clubhouse Guiding Principle that speaks to learner empowerment through the creative and socially supported uses of technology. The Clubhouse community comes to the Village to learn about technology and to share ways of using it and creating with it. The Village also provides a window from individual Clubhouses into the global Clubhouse community. It exposes youth to a larger world-view than in their local Clubhouses and neighborhoods. Members find inspiration from peers from different backgrounds and cultures and countries who are passionate about creating with technology. Youth share their different experiences and discover common ground and inspiration.

On this site members of the Clubhouse community can share projects and ideas, discuss issues important to them, and get to know one another. Members use the site to connect with others they would not otherwise be able to connect with. Still, the social connections that the members made do not come at the expense of them sharing and discussing their work. Members who connect with peers from around the world also go to the site more, update their profiles more often, and post more projects. These connections to new people and new ideas expose members to a wider view of the world around them.