

The Internet as Intentional Communities

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I. An anecdote often shared among Unificationists about the spirit world is that it is composed of places where like-minded people congregate together. The same largely applies to the Internet, for the most part composed of entirely intentional communities. Every decision to go to a website is mostly intentional, so where you go is very much an expression of personality.

Consider the news websites people go to, the videos they share, the comments we leave. These are all expressions of our unique online personalities. Overall, they generally reflect what we may really think, but doubly so if it's possible to have a mask on to let no one know who we are.

This is not an assault on anonymity, but consider how anonymity removes the fear of backlash. It usually lets people find out exactly what they think when the pressures of society to conform or behave are removed. What is left is raw personality, which can be very scary, and yet very comforting. A person who behaves exactly the same way knows that they own their own behavior, and for others it lets them know what others have pushed on them. Your spirit is also likely on the same wavelengths as your online behavior, because in the spirit world there is no gap between what you think and what is created around you.

II. Think of something which makes people very mad, and go to the comment section of any regular news story that deals specifically with that very thing. There's no guarantee that comments will be intelligent, but people will be posting what they think or feel. Even without anonymous posting, people are probably very quick to judge that specific issue harshly, and the section escalates into an argument. Although it may be a very toxic environment, it means they are being exposed to different ways of thinking, and it is easy to disassociate that the words belong to a living breathing person with hopes and dreams.



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On the other hand, it's very easy to tell when you are in an echo chamber. Everyone agrees with what has been posted, with the things you say. There are no voices of dissent. Echo chambers are much more dangerous to be a part of, because there is no dialogue.

People do not actually have conversations with people who think differently; they present what they *perceive* other people are saying, and tear them down. The practice is referred to as straw-manning and serves as an easy alternative to actually having to listen to people with whom they don't agree.

All of this relates to intentional actions and communities: No one is going to go a place where they feel alienated and judged so harshly. It is much easier to feed people's anger than it is to convince them that other people are worth listening to. So the dilemma exists in a tension between people wanting to feel safe, but not becoming complacent and stagnant.

The Internet's brand of righteous justification is part of an online outrage "industry" that has really taken off recently. Internet outrage is profitable because websites with low journalistic standards quickly take events and present an overly simplified narrative, but one that appeals heavily to only one part of human experience. Usually the stories rely heavily on a sense of justice; because people are inherently good, our spirit demands the world around us to be good. Overall it is a very comfortable way of thinking that requires very little work to share in the "experience" of being outraged. There is a constant stream of things to be outraged by, and so people become motivated to become angrier.

Anger can be comforting, especially when combined with a narrative that explains away any need to look deeper at a situation. All of this is funded by advertisements, so there is a clear incentive to engage in this type of behavior — appealing to the lowest common denominator works. One thing is almost guaranteed in this situation: being outraged should motivate action, not further needs to be outraged.

III. A new development that has taken the world by storm is the rise of online gaming. Existing at the fringe of the public's consciousness for many years, it grew slowly and hit a real boom in the West in 2004 with the release of the iconic *World of Warcraft*. In the East, online gaming had already been

popular; China in particular focused on the computer — and by extension the Internet — heavily because consoles had been banned since 2000.

In the same way that the X-Games pushed extreme sports into the public spotlight, video games have been moving in the same direction of recognition. One example that stands out is an event known as The International, which had a prize pool of \$10,930,698 in 2014, and the first place team took \$5,028,12 of that. It is focused on a single video game, *DOTA 2*, released in July 2013. To put this information into context, the Australian Open of tennis has a prize pool of \$30,883,645 and began in 1905. The online gaming industry will continue to grow because it satisfies people, and has large untapped potential, with 60% of the world still having no Internet access.



Esports Tournament Prize Amounts, 1998–2014 (graph by Aron Ambrosiani)

The reasons for its popularity are very simple: it fulfills a need that people have for adventure or a novel experience, sometimes serves as a sink for their frustrations and anger, allows people to connect to others who generally share the same spirit of gaming, and can all be experienced without having to leave one's home. In light of that, addiction to community-based video games is not unexpected; it becomes compulsive because it can very easily provide everything that people's lives seem to lack. It allows individuals to be powerful when they feel weak. People with poor social skills can find friendships with those who understand their situation better than the world around them. Gaming draws them into a world that can be a little less harsh, a little less judging, and that puts their experience first and foremost.

The appeal from a technical viewpoint is that most games are a constant flow of problem-solving, resource management, and refinement of specific motor skills. This is of course what is beneath pixelated humans slaying goblins, birds crashing into buildings, or lining up virtual candies. It is just another expression of the human spirit to master the express dominion of the (virtual) creation. Could the time be spent more effectively? Depending on why people are playing games, that could definitely be true. It all comes back to being intentional with time, and not letting good fun start to interfere with our original minds.

IV. What are solutions to the problems the Internet presents? There is no clear one and it is unhelpful to presume that the problems will simply disappear. The Internet is poised to become a greater and greater part of everyone's lives. Consider the ability to share videos of your personal life with people all over the world who you have met and enjoyed being friends with. It's too powerful of a tool to not have available, and that capability to share is constantly being expanded, with the popularity of streaming now just being fully explored.

I always understood that one of the points of being a Unificationist is understanding our role in God's providence, and then reaching out to try to heal the world. One thing often overlooked is that the Internet is a part of our world, a part of the way people live. People in the West spend more time on the Internet than they do physically exercising.

This time on the Internet is often spent with very little training and intention. It can be used to heal people's hearts and essentially do God's will. The Internet has become the medium by which much change is happening on a wide scale. It becomes imperative to recognize it as one of the major ways to go

forward in the world. We need to master the time spent on the Internet. The worst it can do is enable normal people to act out the worst way they can, because the Internet does have an effect on those who use it. If a person is caring and loving, but when they go online they barrage themselves in fear, anger and hatred, it effects them.

The phrase “online world” is used to express some idea that the Internet exists in a Cartesian duality with the “real” world, but the terminology is deceptive. It is all one world, and the actions and thoughts are the ones that we live out here.

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