Starting (and running) online communities

Cosmo and Seadragom
(Virtual) ConFuzzled 2020

Who the heck are these guys?

- Hi, I'm Cosmo!
  - Twitter/Telegram: @CosmoSnowmew
  - FA/Weasyl: SuburbanFox
  - WWW: www.philpem.me.uk / www.sneptech.io
- Youtube video series "Furtronics"
  - www.youtube.com/philpem
- Fursuiter, prop builder, panelist Ham radio, electronics, software, retrocomputing/retro games.
- Furry for nearly ten years.
- Telegram chat admin since 2015
  - Hamfurs (ham radio, ~2015+)
  - Cute & Fluffy (fursuiting, ~2016)
  - Furcation Attendee Chat (2019+)
  - Past experience on IRC, ~2005
    /mode #sneps -v TuftyLynx
- (You might say I'm a glutton for punishment)

- Hi, I'm Seadragom!
  - Twitter/TG/everywhere really
  - @seadragom
- Trains
- Fursuiter
- Furry for 3 years
- Been running online communities since 2007
  - UKDragons, several kink chats, former moderator for /r/furry_irl Discord of 3k+ users

Why would you Do this?

Why you shouldn't run an online community

- It's a lot of work.
- You have to keep the peace.
  - Without being overbearing
  - Or letting Bad Things™ slide
- People sometimes aren't very nice.
  - That's an understatement by the way. (it depends on the community)
  - People are often angry when banned, muted or de-voiced
  - Even if they are absolutely 100,000% in the wrong.
    And they don't have a leg to stand on.
      (Or, for that matter, any ground)
- Did I mention this is a lot of work?
  - And that you don't get paid?

AGAIN.

WHY?!?!

There must be some reason why people do this?!

- We're social creatures.
  - This goes double for furries.
  - A "friendly hello" is a big hug.
    - *(Except with COVID-19 about -Ed)*
    - *(Shut up about the crows, Ed. You're obsessed with crows.)*

- It can be very rewarding and a lot of fun
  - Good encounters vastly outweigh the bad ones
  - "I met my partner in your chat, we're married now!"

- It helps people meet other like-minded people
  - And maybe even make a few new friends!

Why you might want to start an online community

- There isn't one already.
  - Or there is one, but it's unfriendly/unmoderated/dead/…

- People are interested in the topic.
  - … Enough people to sustain the group
  - … And there's enough breadth in the topic to talk about.

- You're enthusiastic about it
  - And other people are too

Getting started

What you need to do

- Pick a platform.
- Create a group (server, channel, circle, wombat, quagga…)
- Set some ground rules.
- Tell people about it.
- Serve the community's trust, uphold the law.
- Join in with the discussion
    (you're a member of the community too, after all)
- Repeat.

Selecting a platform

- Your audience uses it.
  - Also called "Network effects"

- It has good moderation tools.
  - Death of many a group: bad actors mods can do nothing about.
  - Reduces you to "MINO" - moderators in name only

- You know how to use those tools.
  - You know the difference between "de-voice", "kick" and "ban".
  - And when you might use one over the other.
  - If your platform allows granular permissions (Telegram!), you know how to use that too.

Keeping the peace

Keeping the peace

- In society, people are bound by the rules (whether they like it or not).

- In an online community, if people don't like something, they can and will leave.

- Any community naturally decides what it considers acceptable, and upholds that standard.

Keeping the peace – policing by consent

- Remember: **you're policing by consent.**
  - That means your authority <u>comes from the community's consent</u>
  - To put it another way:

Good moderation is the substitute for force	Your power derives from the community's acceptance	Securing their acceptance is securing their **help**
If they're on your side, your job is a whole lot easier	Be impartial and consistent	Speak softly and carry a big stick
You are a member of the community too!	Don't hold vendettas or make decisions personally	Your measure is a harmonious community, not an overmoderated one

  - See: "Peel's Nine Principles of Policing"
    - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/policing-by-consent/definition-of-policing-by-consent

Keeping the peace - Picking your staff

- Good staff solve problems.
- Look for the following characteristics
  - Sensible, level-headed
  - Well-liked within the community
  - Actively contribute to the community
  - Able to demonstrate restraint
  - Familiarity with tools

- To paraphrase Groucho Marx:
  - "Never give the position to the type of person who would want it"
  - That is to say, if somebody desperately wants to moderate your chat, **think very carefully before letting them**.

Keeping the peace - conflicts of interest

- Example scenario:
  - Your friend breaks the rules.
  - You have to take action.
  - *But they're your friend.*

- This is a good reason why you should have several admins.

  Delegate to someone else.

  Remove yourself from the conflict!

Ground rules! (1)

- Every group needs rules.
  - Every social group decides what it deems acceptable, and in what context.
    - e.g. Pubs and coffee shops have very different rules
  - For small groups of friends, they're largely *implicit* and come from your existing relationships.
  - For larger groups, you <u>need</u> to set the ground rules <u>from day one</u>.

- Be concise.
  - Avoid "Too long, didn't read" syndrome.
  - Nobody reads a 5,000 word rulebook when they join a chat.
  - Keep it to a dozen one or two-sentence rules (if possible).

Ground rules! (2)

- Be reasonable and <u>consistent</u> in applying the rules
  - "Zero tolerance" doesn't work for minor offences.
  - Remember what I said about *policing by consent*?
- Cover most of your bases
  - 9/10ths of your moderation work will be minor things.
- Have an emergency card.
  - "In the event of a member's actions causing serious disruption to the running of the group, the Admins may choose to take action, even when no specific rule applies."
  - <u>This is a last resort, not a free pass!</u>
  - If you have to use this: you'll want to add a new rule after.
    - <u>Do it with the consent and understanding of the community</u>

Ground rules! (3)

- Progressive escalation
  - For very minor things (sticker spam and GIFs), stop at 'removal of the ability to send GIFs'.
  - For exceptionally serious things (threats, *-ism, abusive behaviour), you may choose to skip a 'step'.

- Forgive and forget
  - After a period of good behaviour, progressive escalation resets.
  - Generally, minor offenses only.
  - This allows us some degree of forgiveness for one-off mistakes.

- Leave leeway to count multiple minor faux-pas as one

Promotion

Spreading the word!

- Tell your friends.
- Tell them to tell their friends.
- Give people a reason to join
  - A shared interest, a common feature, something they can't get elsewhere
- Don't spam.
  - Ask other groups' admins before posting about your group in their chat.
  - Even if their rules don't say it's necessary.
  - Because it's just polite, that's why.
    - You're showing respect for the admin(s) and their community.

Tangent: Turning a Group around

Case study...

- 2019: Furry convention Telegram group
  - Prior moderation team were seen by the community as overbearing, unapproachable and likely to overreact.
    - Case in point: heavy-handed action taken for stickerspam

  - Several bans were being routinely raised as unjust in chat.

  - There was a parody sticker pack.

  - And a bit of drama.

OH, THE DRAMA

Master, I have a cunning plan!

- Admins decided to step down
  - Lack of motivation to continue with the group.

- Plan was to leave the group running, unofficial and (effectively) unmoderated.

- This turned out to be a massively unpopular move.
  - Community felt that loss of moderation would make the group even worse than it already was.
  - Access to staff and information was seen as a key benefit.
  - One of only two known event-moderated real-time chat rooms.

WELL.
THAT COULD HAVE
GONE BETTER.

Time for a new plan.

What's the problem? Failure analysis time!

- 1. Overbearing mod team.
  - Some bans were seen as heavy-handed, e.g. "Banned for sticker-spam"

- 2. Rules were a bit wooly and… crap.
  - Five-page PDF document. A few thousand words. In Courier New.

- 3. Several bad-actors who knew how to abuse the rules.
  - "I think I will cause problems on purpose"

- 4. Community had largely lost confidence in the mod team.
  - There goes Policing By Consent...

Master, I have an <u>even more</u> cunning plan!

- Hired a new moderation team from the community.
  - We were surprised: <u>people wanted to help us</u>! (they even volunteered!)
  - (Furries, never change. You're awesome.)
  - Set up a private chat to coordinate (consistency!)
- Ripped up the rulebook.
  - Five page PDF reduced to ten core rules.
- Cleared all bans issued for "sticker spam" alone.
- Reviewed all the remaining bans.
  - Surprise! Most of them (>80%) were for valid reasons.
- Deal with the bad actors.
  - Surprise! We're enforcing the rules now!
  - Three strikes and… permaban. Sorry mate. (Not sorry)

What happened after?

- From ~150 members to <u>379</u> in less than a year.

- Significant increase in positive activity
  - Lots of *hype* and friendly discussion about the con.

- Some staff manned the chat during the con (on an "as available, no guarantees" basis).
  - Attendees appreciated the point of contact.
  - Attendees would often chip in and help:
      "Have you talked to ConOps? I had that problem and they fixed it right away!"
  - There is no greater compliment than seeing your customers *do your marketing for you*

- Overwhelmingly positive feedback from the community.

Tips from the trenches

Things I wish I'd known years ago.

- The best groups start as a small group of friends and grow from there.
  - HamFurs started out with a handful of people.
  - Now: 425 members, 4 moderators

- Don't try to grow too fast
  - 100:1 members-to-admins is a good rule of thumb
    - Hamfurs has four admins.
    - Cute & Fluffy has one (hi!)
  - Some types of group need more, some need less.
    - A busy group will need more moderators.

Things I wish I'd known years ago.

- Any mod action will make you feel like you've failed.
  - The feeling passes.
  - If the community still supports you, you're doing a good job.

- People will use you as a target for their frustration.
  - <u>Try not to take it personally</u>.
    - This takes practice. (I'm still working on it)
  - Think:
    - Maybe they had a bad day?
  - Don't think:
    - Christ, what a Karen (or Colin). I hate them. They're terrible.
  - Definitely don't:
    - Call them out publicly. (You're just going to make it worse)

Things I wish I'd known years ago.

- There are still bad actors.
  - It's your job to maintain order, not to work miracles.

- Manage expectations
  - Your moderation powers only cover your chat.
  - Make sure your community knows and accepts this.
  - This is <u>especially</u> important for multi-platform communities
    e.g. a Telegram 'social' chat for a weekly Zoom meeting.

- Take care of yourself.
  - Moderating and managing online communities can take a very

Dealing with bad actors

- Verification bots
  - Generally only work against automated abuse (e.g. spam bots)

- Pre-registration
  - "You must pre-register before the event." (just like a con!)
  - Makes it harder for "on the spot" trolls using multiple accounts
    - Those accounts would have to be created and registered ahead of time.
  - Catch: interested people have to wait for the next event.
    - Only a minority will mind if they understand why the rule exists (and it's seen as a net benefit for the community)

- "Queue rooms" (Lobbies)
  - An admin or bot periodically brings people into the main room.
  - Allows the flow to be controlled, people to be vetted – whatever's needed

A good basic rule set (you will need to adapt these!)

- ✔️ Please be polite, civil and respectful.

- ℹ️ Use GIFs and stickers in moderation
     (if all you can see are GIFs and stickers - stop!)
- ℹ️ If you're talking a lot about something off topic,
     please consider taking it to PM.
- ℹ️ Ask an admin or moderator before posting adverts.
     There is a limit of one per week.

- 🚫 If a moderator or admin ask you to stop doing something, <u>stop</u>.
- 🚫 Don't start drama, and don't drag your drama into the chat.
- 🚫 Abusive, derogatory, or deliberately offensive language will not be tolerated.
- 🚫 No pornography, nudes, lewds or other NSFW content. This is a safe-for-work group.
     If you wouldn't show it to your grandparents, don't post it here!

Useful resources

- Mental health support
  - Moderating or administering a chat can be hard work (mentally).
  - **Take care of yourself and your mental health.**

  - https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/helplines-listening-services/
  - https://www.samaritans.org/
  - https://www.thecalmzone.net/

Useful resources

- Safety online (general)
  - https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/cyberaware/home
  - https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/types-bullying/bullying-social-media/
  - https://staysafeonline.org/stay-safe-online/

- Reporting breach of platform terms/conditions
  - Use your platform's reporting features!

- Reporting crime
  - www.crimestoppers-uk.org -- always anonymous
  - Non-emergency: call **101**
  - If it's a life-or-death emergency: call **999**

Final point

It's not easy.
But it can be fun.
And it's pretty rewarding.

Above all:

Stay safe and have fun!

Thanks!

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t.me/cosmosnowmew
youtube.com/philpem
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