Online Communities:  
Interactions and Place-Making  
in a Virtual Environment

By: Tyler Gorski, AJ Rohn, Morgan Ripp, and Brandon Kutsch
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Abstract

We are studying place-making online and how and why people participate in these communities. In our literature review we focus on the unique aspects of virtual space such as the varying degrees of anonymity, the disjoint between body and mind and how these translate to identity formation online, specifically to the online communities of Reddit, Twitter, and Smashboards. In the bulk of this paper we apply Timothy Cresswell’s atomization of place (location, locale, and sense of place) to these three distinct online communities in order to examine the ways that they agree with or deviate from this traditional method of understanding. Through a series of interviews and observations we challenge the conceptions of place and determine if traditional definitions should be reinterpreted to accommodate both physical and virtual places. Finally, we synthesize these results in a spatialized graphic that represents the iterative nature of the components of place.

Introduction

As online communities continue to attract more and more people, it is vital to understand why virtual forms of interaction have become successful. They hold many similarities to ‘brick and mortar’ interactions but hold unique characteristics in their community structure. In this essay we debate why the interactions that are made online contribute to place-making and why this should be incorporated into the existing definition of place. As researchers we are curious to obtain information about how younger generations have made a place in a non-physical space with strangers with whom they have had no prior engagements. With an in depth analysis of place, community, and identity this essay will determine the aspects that are critical to defining the study of online communities.

In the last decade, internet access has become practically ubiquitous. That is, 42% of the worlds population has access to the internet, with North America having the highest amount of internet users at 87% (Internet World Stats, 2014). This huge increase in internet connectivity has meant that online communities have continued to attract more and more people, and as they
have grown internet culture has become normalized. Internet memes have even started showing up in advertisements and pop culture, so while everyone may not be a part of internet culture it is likely that the majority of young people would still recognize the memes and ideas that much of it is based on.

Many of our sources discussed the effects that rapidly changing technology has had on society in the past, through the lens of printing and television (Tredinnick 2008; Graham 2008). These technologies had a profound impact on society but none of these had made such a large impact in a such a short amount of time. The perpetual evolution of online communities gives purpose to our study and makes previous research largely outdated. The widespread proliferation of the internet has changed the environment of community interactions, and the implications and possibilities that online communities have to offer must be acknowledged. In this way the internet is a medium through which we can engage with one another in new ways and a platform on which community formation and placemaking can be investigated. We hope to inform those who are unaware of online community culture and all it encompasses.

**Site Setting**

The site setting of our study is the internet and the websites that encourage online community through browsing and interaction of ideas and communications. An online community is a globalized networking system that is designed for exploration of information that builds new and deeper user relationships through the use of posted messages, images or videos. Each online community contains its own structure and functions that affect the types of interactions that occur. For the purpose of this study the focus will be on web-based message boards that provide opportunity for users to exchange ideas by posting original content and
discussion. These websites temporarily archive and graphically organize topics into sections to keep interests categorized (Seo, 2009). The online community network is diverse and each individual community contains unique characteristics, so an in-depth analysis of different online settings is necessary to understand different interactions. For our case studies we will focus on three of these communities: the Major League Soccer subreddit on Reddit, Smashboards, and the Emoprog Army on Twitter.

Reddit calls itself the “front page of the internet” and rightfully so. It is one of the largest and most popular online communities in the world, recently ranked as the 34th most popular website internationally and 9th most popular in the United States (Alexa rankings, December 14, 2014). The site consists entirely of user-submitted content, which is then up-voted or down-voted by other users. “Karma” is the total score (or number of upvotes) of all of a user’s comments or submissions. There are currently over 500,000 subreddits, or sub-categories within Reddit that are based on an interest, hobby, or idea (stylized with a preceding “r/” so the subreddit for golf is r/golf). Most are relatively normal and to be expected, like r/cats or r/funny, whereas others can be very unique or shocking, such as r/AnimalsBeingJerks and r/PicsOfIanSleeping. Subreddits act as their own communities within the larger Reddit community, and many have their own rules and in-jokes. Any redditor can create a subreddit and most can be freely joined by any user, making Reddit a prime place to meet other people with similar interests, even if they are highly bizarre. The front page, Reddit’s homepage, features the 25 most popular posts from any subreddit, meaning at any given time you can see content from r/technology mixed in with r/boobs. This wide variety of content is what garnered the nickname of the front page of the internet; if it is upvoted enough, it will end up on the front
page, regardless of what subreddit its part of.

The specific subreddit we chose to examine is r/MLS, the subreddit committed to Major League Soccer. We selected this community for a variety of reasons. Firstly, with about 30,000 subscribers, it is large enough to adequately represent users from all over the country, with varying viewpoints and opinions. It is also small enough that the userbase still feels close-knit and unintimidating. The subreddit r/MLS also offers a variety of interactions to examine, from user-submitted articles and videos, to open-ended discussions of the league, as well as up-to-date match threads and lighthearted trash talk threads. Finally, we have significant experience participating in this community, and are already familiar with much of the culture and interactions that are prominent.

Our next case studies will concentrate on Smashboards, an interest specific discussion forum focusing on all iterations of the video game series Super Smash Bros. This evaluation will be focusing on a smaller pseudonymous community where communication is mostly done between small groups of people, contrasting the massive user base of a site such as Reddit. In this environment posters are able to recognize almost everyone taking part in the discussion, even though the community itself is large with over 160,000 fans from around the world and more than 15 million posts.

The fact that threads on Smashboards can last an infinite amount of time as long as people are posting on them means that they are better at facilitating discussion than threads on Reddit that are very specific. In this way individual threads in Smashboards can be static centers of community and can feel like places themselves (a point that is qualified later on). For example, a single thread could discuss competitive Smash tactics and videos, as well as serving
as a center for social discussion and tournament results. Finally, Smashboards is unique when compared to our other case studies because the community that can be found there is tied heavily to the real world as a sizeable portion of Smashboards posters end up going to real life tournaments.

Lastly Twitter has community formation among both accounts tied to the users’ real names and pseudonymous accounts. The case study on Twitter will deal with a community of journalists, activists, and trolls called the Emoprog Army who exist among a wider community of jokesters referred to as Weird Twitter. The ability to collaborate online allows networking that would not be possible in a physical community. When an Emoprog community member publishes a paper, the group can discuss its implications and themes online the same day. Also, Twitter enables users to give support or criticism to political writers who maintain their own accounts and who would not be accessible in real space.

In order to differentiate the multitude of online communities we will research the structure and place identifiers in these three communities. Once we research each website we will categorize their functions into the definition of place, as well as adding insights from these websites that may not be mentioned elsewhere in our paper at this time.

**Literature Review**

Definitions of place and community are outlined to provide a basis for the following research. Topics from the literature review concerning community formation build a framework for how online communities have barriers to entry, online interaction, identity and the website structure.
Community Formation

The definition of community needs to be established before expanding the idea to a virtual setting. Community is a construct or a model that is created from a set of interactions and human behavior that gives it meaning. Traditionally, community was the place you lived but its definition has evolved to include a community of like interests. It acts as a gathering place with shared expectations, values, beliefs and meanings between individuals. (Bartle, 2011).

There are two parts to a community model: the individuals and the community itself. The idea is that the individuals are the component parts of the community and the community is based on the creation of connections or overlaps between the individuals (Shift & Share, 2014). The community has an identity that is created from the shared perspectives of the individuals that are involved. This created culture brings people together but is dynamic so participants come to understand the common values and beliefs the more they are involved. Often communities have boundaries and reinforce them through a social hierarchy, norms, and expectations. Boundaries are difficult to draw out because communities have many different scales and sometimes overlap. There are smaller communities within communities. You can imagine that New York is a large community while Manhattan — and even smaller neighborhoods within — are also communities. Likewise, online the website as a whole is a community with interest specific forums and threads being smaller communities within.

With the nature of the internet having a large user base there is a stronger sense of truth and trust within the community. There is a higher degree of uncertainty to whom you are
interacting with and this needs to be acknowledged as one of the differences between traditional communities and online communities.

**Virtual Communities as a Place**

The driving force in our research is the assertion that the internet has challenged traditional conceptions of place and community. In order to make this argument, however, we must first discuss the ways that place and community have been understood up to this point. It should be obvious that such a core geographic concept is never fully conceptualized and is always up for critique, but for our purposes we’ve chosen to use an interpretation of place given by Tim Cresswell in 2009:

“Place is a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place. Location refers to an absolute point in space with a specific set of coordinates and measurable distances from other locations. Location refers to the ‘where’ of place. Locale refers to the material setting for social relations – the way a place looks. Locale includes the buildings, streets, parks, and other visible and tangible aspects of a place. Sense of place refers to the more nebulous meanings associated with a place: the feelings and emotions a place evokes.”

-Cresswell, 2009

This succinct atomization of place serves as a strong basis on which we can develop and challenge these ideas that are derived from the experience of traditional brick and mortar places. We do feel, however, that it is missing an important component of place: the activities of each individual that collectively affect the form of that place. Both Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan emphasize the importance of this inclusion in understanding place as a realm of meaning that holds particular emotions or experiences. Including actions into Cresswell’s definition provides us with a robust break down of place that will be useful in comparing our three case studies.
The breakdown of place has long been hypothesized, or even predicted, by geographic scholars. Relph’s idea of placelessness, alongside Marc Augé’s non-place, show different ways through which place can be destroyed. To some, online interactions are placeless and the Internet and other changes that accompany post-modernism are forces that threaten place. To Relph, places must be experienced authentically. The erosion of place “for both individuals and cultures, and the casual replacement of the diverse and significant places of the world with anonymous spaces and exchangeable environments” is due to the conformity and inauthenticity of landscapes and senses of place that comes with increasingly industrial societies (Relph 1976, 143; Preface). Augé, on the other hand, thought that excess mobility and “supermodernity produces non-places” (Augé 1995, 78). These non-places are produced by “solitary individuality… the fleeting, the temporary, and ephemeral” (Augé 1995, 78). It seems in some ways to be contradictory for placelessness to be the result of conformity while non-places are produced by individuality. If you sit alone in your room posting to an online community - feeling emotional ties and a sense of belonging - is it still “solitary individuality”? Does authenticity enable online places, or can only non-places be produced? In our research, we are tasked with determining which of these ideas is most pertinent and whether the Internet and all of its implications challenge the existence of place or rather add a new and exciting dimension.

**Time-Space Compression**

“Where there was distance we witness time-space compression; where there were boundaries we perceive transparency; where there was confidentiality we find information flows.” -Judith Squires
For most of history human interaction has been both spatially and temporally confined but since online communication has been developed a new sense of place has been established. Though it may be difficult to conceptualize online communities as a place because they are not grounded in a physical location, doing so is far from impossible. We have already experienced examples of location-less place, the most obvious being television. In television-based communities, however, it is purely a one-way interaction: viewers watching the program. The internet can equally be seen as a gathering place, but perhaps even more so, since participation is multi-dimensional and dialectical (Adams 1992, 127). When users interact with each other they are forming relationships and creating community. Place-making entails the construction of boundaries, sets of rules and a sense of belonging, or in other words the production of a space that is “associated with presence” (Saunders et al. 2011). These place-making aspects form the backbone to online communities and affect the relationships that are established. Online communities are understood differently by everyone so it is important to understand how the connections they formed online help to establish their sense of place. Spatio-temporal boundaries are negotiation on the internet because it is the way in which people perceive and mentally reconstruct or eliminate such boundaries. The user has the potential not only to re-conceptualize but also to re-shape the time and space boundaries that matter for their communication (Tsatsou, 2009). This intrinsic character of a place that people attach meaning and value to helps to assign it as “home”. It is place that has a permanent position in both the social and topographical sense, that gives it the identity (Buntin, 2009). People that have long lasting relationships online will have a stronger sense of place than those who only visit once in a while so the greatest argument
for the understanding of online communities as place, perhaps, is the feeling of nostalgia that participants feel for these sites.

Time-space compression helps to depict the increased diffusion of information over space as distance becomes less important to movements of information. We can make the observation of the overall trend toward more rapid long-distance communication with the adoption of the internet (Adams 2005, 14). The globalization of information has connected people across nations and has encouraged transglobal social relationships. Unlike brick and mortar places, the old content of online places can be revisited and previous forms can be referenced. It has allowed users to engage with information in real-time or have the option to review older forums that have already run its course. This suggest that the discussion of time and space is a meaningless dimension of reality that are defined and constructed by the user. Online communities have reconstructed the historic concepts and experiences of time and space and have allowed us to connect beyond the traditional boundaries.

Barriers to Entry

In this section we will attempt to explain the barriers to participation in online communities such as basic skills, technical issues, and socio-cultural barriers in order to access the implications this has on adopting this form of communication. Communities cannot exist without barriers. To put it another way, as soon as barriers are created, a community is created along with them, whether it was intended or not.

A number of barriers arise from technical issues that are encompassed by the available hardware and software that support online communities. Often termed the digital divide, certain groups of people may have unequal access to the internet depending on socioeconomic status.
(Levine, 2004). There is a widening gap that gives wealthy nations and individuals higher amounts of connectivity to the internet. This digital divide has now expanded to include unequal access to online social communities which reflects inequalities in the offline world (Zhao, 2007, 11). We must also consider the quality of access. While it may seem like the majority of people in a marginalized black community have been able to achieve equal internet access since they all have Facebook accounts, this does not consider the possibility that many may be accessing the internet from shared public computers. This is likely to have an effect on the types of virtual spaces that those individuals are able to interact with and reflects the distinction that different spaces on the internet can be classed as public or private (Valovic, 2000; Sithigh, 2012).

There are multiple barriers that users encounter on online communities that make it difficult to join. Right from the beginning a small requirements to sign in or make a username can deter people from joining communities of this sort. Another barrier is created from a steep learning curve. When people don’t have high amounts of internet access or have not kept up with the changing technology it can be overwhelming to join a community. New users have a steep learning curve when joining an online communities because they do not know how to navigate the site or interpret the information. Many online communities contain compounding information that builds upon previously posted material. If users don’t regularly consume the information and stay up to date on news they will be unable to follow along.

Everyone who frequents Reddit is a “redditor,” yet individual subreddits divide the community even more. Many of the subreddits have their own rules, posting guidelines, and inside jokes, creating greater distance between themselves and the other subreddits. A new user, visiting a subreddit for the first time, may feel overwhelmed or lost among all the experienced
posters who are already fluent in the language of the community. This separation enforces the sense of place within the community: people who understand the inside jokes relish in the sense of superiority over their un-aware peers who don’t even see the jokes flying over their heads.

In many communities, users who have been active for longer see new-comers as not conforming to expected behaviors and really do imagine themselves as superior; it is not uncommon to see new users insulted, belittled, and driven away from the community (Silva, Goel, and Mousavidin, 2008). However, the old users were subject to the same treatment when they first arrived and feel that these entrance barriers and rituals are important hazing events that create cohesion in the community. This is particularly true on 4chan, but some of the grittier subreddits may have similar rites of passage. On 4chan, new users are often told to “get off my chan” or “my /b/” (a board within 4chan) — usually accompanied by a racial or sexual slur. Harsh as this may seem, it is important to note that 4chan lacks traditional barriers to entry like usernames, so they seem to make up for it with “cryptic and crude language to regulate who can and cannot participate. On the surface this may seem offensive, but it’s often meant to do little more than keep newcomers on their toes and encourage they lurk and learn the house rules before participating” (Poole, 2014). Conversely, we found that some subreddits actively seek out new users through advertisements on the site, while others have weekly “Newcomer’s Guide” threads to help these users quickly catch on to the workings of the sub. Regardless of the levels of admittance, barriers are a constant presence and an integral part of any online community, though they can make it difficult for users to feel included in the community.

The multitude of barriers that exist within online communities is starkly contrasted by a lack of exit barriers. What implications does this have on the formation and maintenance of
these communities? Firstly, this freedom facilitates participation across many online communities, especially in an anonymous/pseudonymous environment where no one knows exactly what communities someone is a part of. The lack of exit boundaries also allows users to disengage when they are uncomfortable or simply want to look for something better. Some sources have argued, however, that the freedom to disengage whenever we see fit results in thin social bonds because online communities “lack the means to compel people to serve one another, to deliberate about a common good, or to make sacrifices for that good.” (Levine 2004, 87; Valovic, 2000). What remains to be seen is how the barriers in place on the internet will play out when compared to those in brick and mortar space. Does the internet facilitate the leveling of class and race barriers or does it bring about stratification and stagnation, creating highly specialized communities that contain only like-minded people? (Galston et al., 2004).

**Community Structure**

Each website has structural limits which gives users different means to interact with each other. Depending on the functional design there are perceptual and cognitive limits to the average online user. Not everyone who enters the website will pick up on cues and utilize every function of the website. The users experience, and familiarity of the website has large effect to their the interaction efficiency. Those who spend large amounts of time on the website gain a self proclaimed understanding of the interface with have an easier time accessing information (Roth 2013, 75). A general understanding of how like ideas are located in a coherent place help to organize information online. Following the first law of geography, Adams proclaims how people that are alike or have similar interests come together in one place (Adams 1997, 164). There are specific pages that are designed for ideas such as travel, sports or entertainment which
draws people in when searching. Searching for ideas on online communities can be quite poor because the retrieval techniques are not accurately annotated. Generally a forum has several sub-forums covering high-level topic categories. Within this each sub-forum has many threads is focused on a subject and allows for reply posts. Because reply-posts can reply to any preceding post, a unique tree-shaped structure with many branches ends up forming (Seo, 2009). The combination of multiple thread content helps to achieve easier retrieval effectiveness compared to single posts and reduce barriers to entry.

This hierarchical structure of online websites have inherited structural components from city structure which make it easier to navigate. By looking at both historical cities like the Greek polis and the Roman civis and modern conceptions of the city and the suburbs, we can see how online communities fit amongst these models and actually rise above them. These communities are typically malleable and shaped by the participation of their members. They are inclusive and the barriers to entrance are easily overcome with a little courage to join the conversation. There are no geographical restrictions to membership and few expectations or responsibilities of their users. In fact, the vast majority of those using Reddit, 4chan, and many other communities do not contribute content nor engage in conversation but rather passively browse. These qualities make online communities more similar to the Roman civis — shaped by its members — than the Greek polis, which had an identity of its own that shaped its citizens (Doueihi 2011, 64). However, the relationship between users and online communities is dialogical, as one is shaped by the other and vice-versa. 4chan most easily exemplifies a community with its own identity that makes demands of its users.
Citizens of the Greek *polis* had certain responsibilities, and their citizenship was dependent on associations with certain city-states or social classes and a “function of a set of variables” (Doueihì 2011, 64). 4chan users must abide by community expectations and membership in other large-scale communities like Reddit, and even more so the website 9gag, is frowned upon. A Milesian philosopher may enter the Athenian agora for lengthy discussions, but he would never be considered Athenian himself. Though Reddit follows the Roman city model more closely than the Greek, this is complicated by the notion that online communities may in fact be more like the suburbs than a city (Crang 2001, 80-82). It is expected that most Redditors are affluent, or at least not in poverty. Like a suburban mall, these websites are used most often by the young and bored, and can be filled with images of consumerism. Negative views on Internet usage may suggest that it is used as an escape from harsher realities of post-modernism, or to separate oneself from the external world. In this respect online communities do fit the model of suburbia: fleeing the city and its problems rather than working to fix them.

**Interactions**

The different interactions that take place online establish the information that is passed on from individuals. Many of the interactions that take place have similarities that are rooted in brick and mortar social interactions. There are rules and social norms that are established and enforced by the public. There is a differentiation between contribution of content sharing and simply observing through the term lurking. Lurking is often necessary when users need to learn the new information posted on the site. A type of interaction that is discouraged is known as the
trolling. To troll is when interactions are started with arguments or upsetting each other. The interactions that take place on online communities will be discussed in whole.

Rules and social norms

Despite the free-flowing and pseudonymous nature of many of these sites, rules still exist. On Reddit, “Reddiquette” is offered as a list of both suggestions for behavior and enforced rules. Some are enforced by moderators in positions of some power over the subreddits they represent, but the community also has the power to regulate conduct. On 4chan (and sometimes elsewhere), the “Rules of the Internet” apply. They relate both to what users must expect on a site with such a strange dynamic of interactions, but also contain Fight Club’s first two rules of secrecy (#1. You do not talk about 4chan. #2. You do not talk about 4chan). In addition, other rules exist that are as diverse as Rule 17: “Every win fails eventually”, and Rule 39: “CAPS LOCK IS CRUISE CONTROL FOR COOL” (Internet Archive). The level of moderation varies with the community, and even more so between various subreddits, with common punishments being account banishment or suspension. One obvious difference between virtual and real-world communities is the fact that if you’re punished online, you can immediately create a new account and continue posting. It’s akin to getting arrested and jailed, but having the option to instantly get bailed out and return to whatever criminal act you were committing. On 4chan, since there is no username to attribute the act to, the ban is based on the violator's IP address, which is more severe yet can also be overcome with relative ease. As the rules, authority, and punishment vary between 4chan and Reddit, so does the level of validation given to users and their posts, due to the presence of karma on Reddit, or a user’s score. Users’ ideas are very rarely validated or
given positive reinforcement on 4chan, where anonymity allows them to value only their own productions. Criticism on 4chan is often irrelevant or insensitive, but can be constructive and at least forces users to think about what they are posting. On most of Reddit, the mood is more lighthearted and positive and the same ideas rise to the top again and again, creating an atmosphere that can be free of constructive criticism and overly validatory. This can be seen when the same unimaginative puns are posted in different threads and are always upvoted into popularity.

Trolling, while not necessarily a bannable offense, is still heavily discouraged on most online communities. In pseudonymous sites with voting systems such as Reddit, trolling posts are often “buried,” or downvoted to the bottom of the thread. This type of participant moderation is useful for keeping discussions on point, but can also be surprisingly suppressive when an unpopular idea is presented. Even if a legitimate, relevant comment is posted, other users can bury it if they do not like it. Certain users can garner reputations as deliberate trolls, meaning that even when they post helpful or relevant content, it is still met with skepticism and downvotes. As in real life a user’s reputation can precede them, further defining future interactions. This challenges the notions of older sources such as Galston and Valovic that feared that “internet communities do not promote the development of a voice, do not acknowledge the need for authority, do not foster mutual obligation or lay the basis for sacrifice and may push us even further towards a polarized civic society” through this sort of “self-moderation” (Galston 2004, 72).

Lurking and Participation
Because of the potential for anonymity provided by the Internet, people can choose to exclusively observe an online community instead of directly participating in it. This is called “lurking” because the user absorbs the content without giving anything in return. In large communities, lurkers make up the majority of the user body. Many studies have examined the role that lurkers play in the community and whether or not they are actually participants. Some say that lurkers are only important when they become active members of a community and are otherwise just free-riding. If this is true, there is a cost to the community with their non-involvement because it detracts from or dissipates the well-being of the community. If a person only reads and never posts then they do not contribute to the community and build new ideas (Steinmetz 2012, 32). Most online communities operates based on posted material so when people do not post there is less information being shared. However, lurkers might discuss ideas or content they view online when they are offline, taking the conversation beyond the Internet. On a more literal level, lurkers can bring advertisement revenue to websites and it is not uncommon for a lurker to donate to sites seeking funds.

One study found that there are differences in the attitudes users have about community formation dependent on their level of participation. Though they could not discern differences in why lurkers and active posters first join a community, they found that lurkers are less likely to feel that communities offer real benefits or address their needs and that lurkers often do not feel that they are members of the community (Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews, 2004). Furthermore they found that actively posting users do not get much respect from lurkers, but those active members feel that lurkers are part of the community.
On Reddit posts are evaluated by the community through a system of upvotes and downvotes which, as you may be able to guess, are options given to the user to either support or devalue the content of a thread. Meant to filter out posts that are not valued by the community, many people have argued that the system of upvotes and downvotes takes away from freedom of speech by rewarding certain posts and sentiments behind posts. It contributes to hivemind and can shackle genuineness in discussion, as users will just pander to popular opinions (Zhou 2011, 8). An interesting quantitative study examines the voting dynamics of Reddit by analyzing the pattern of upvotes and downvotes on almost two million Reddit stories, ultimately showing that while we may expect that more upvotes would mean less downvotes, posts with a large amount of upvotes actually received a large amount of downvotes as well (Miegham 2011, 1405). While this may seem to contradict our assertion that this voting system leads to hivemind, we maintain that this power relationship of upvotes and downvotes is a result of the simple fact that more upvotes means more attention and thus more potential for a negative response. In some way this negative attitude shows a resistance to hive mind and the dominant power structures of the community.

Trolling

Trolling is a common interaction used to instigate certain responses from other users. Familiarity with community norms is enough to recognize trolling and combat it, but inexperienced users will not understand these dynamics and are the most common targets. Trolling has become inescapable online, particularly on communities like 4chan and Twitter. According to Heather Marsh, a central figure in the activism and social media presence of the
group Anonymous, it can be used to “assess expertise” and “block participation in conversations of elite knowledge” (Marsh 2013, 40). She goes on to explain that the victims of trolling are often shunned and driven out of online communities. In this way, trolling is an effective means of enforcing barriers. It can also be used for the purpose of community cohesion, where one person is targeted for a certain reason and everyone bands together to inform them of collective disapproval. This is in direct opposition with the meaning of trolling given in a 2008 New York Times article which claims that it is used to divide online communities (NYT, 2008). More often, trolling is simply a means of light-hearted entertainment but it can be quite cruel. It is sometimes hard to tell who is in the wrong: the troll who promotes discord or the trolled, who overreacts. These overreactions are used to justify trolling, but trying to consider the morality of trolls opens a can of worms of circular reasoning.

People act differently online and offline. For a variety of reasons, people feel more comfortable expressing themselves online. Psychologist John Suler studied this effect and found that there are certain factors that create this disinhibition, and two types. Benign disinhibition refers to a relaxation — letting one’s guard down — when interacting online. Talking about highly personal subjects, such as relationship advice or mental health guidance, anonymity on sites such as 4chan provide an opportunity to explore these topics free from judgement (Bernstein et al, 2011). Toxic disinhibition, however, is shown in “rude language, harsh criticisms… [and] violence” expressed toward strangers online (Suler, 2004). Severe enforcement of community barriers can be understood as toxic disinhibition, and Suler also uses the example of pornography and criminal behaviors conducted online when the same people would never be caught in those scenarios offline.
Suler offers certain factors that explain these behavioral transformations online. The first are anonymity and invisibility, through which users are disconnected from their actions. Next is the asynchronous nature of online interactions which allows users to post and immediately remove themselves from the conversation. It is easier to be honest or make personal posts when you can sign off and ignore any responses. Lastly are the sense of escapism created online and the lack of authority figures — as the greatest punishment is to be banned from conversation — and the separation of online status from any form of status that exists offline. Taken together, these factors create an environment in which users are liberated from greater norms and expectations and able to express themselves however they wish.

Identity

Through interactions that take place an identity of the individual is formed. Because of the nature of being online To begin our discussion of identity we must first introduce anonymity and pseudonymity, two of the most prominent structures of online communities that bring the topic of identity to the forefront.

Online, there are three basic types of user identification: the extremes of anonymity and identification by real names, and pseudonymity, “anonymity that hides a person behind an online persona via a username” (Grohol 2008). In recent years, truly anonymous sites (those that require no login, no username, and display every post as an unidentifiable “anonymous” contribution) are becoming increasingly rare. One of the last remaining anonymous sites is the infamously heinous image board 4chan.org, where “posts are disconnected from any identity. There are no accounts; all information is entered on a per-post-basis” (Bernstein et al 2011, 52).
Because of this anonymous nature and almost nonexistent moderation, 4chan is perhaps best known for its vile content and cruel userbase. Despite this, the site has long been on the leading-edge of internet culture and has created some of the most recognizable memes and jokes that are still prominent on the web today. One example is Rick Rolling, which is tricking someone into clicking a link to the music video for 80’s one-hit-wonder Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up” when they expect to be taken to another webpage. This became hugely popular, and the official music video now has over 94 million views on YouTube. Advice Animals are another example, a collection of meme templates which continue to evolve on Reddit and other sites into countless forms, though they were first created on 4chan years ago.

To the untrained eye, 4chan could be used as an example of why anonymity online doesn’t work. The userbase is often needlessly vulgar and blatantly racist, thriving in their role as “the site your mother warned you about” and advertising this statement in the banner atop the site. When users are free to say anything, hidden behind their masks of anonymity, these kinds of results are to be expected. There are no consequences for posting graphic images of sex and violence, no retribution for calling other users alarmingly derogatory slurs, and, most importantly, no hesitations in exposing the most intimate thoughts. The average time a thread is “alive” or visible to others is less than four minutes, after which they are “pruned,” meaning 4chan users can confide their deepest secrets or post their newest original content, knowing that however it will be received it will be permanently deleted just as quickly (Bernstein et al, 2011, 50). This allows an unparalleled amount of creativity and encourages the exploration of new content, knowing that all of your contributions are incongruous with your real-life persona.

Christopher Poole, also known by his online alias m00t, created 4chan in 2004 and the site has
remained largely untouched from its original design (another rarity in the online world). Poole admits he was surprised by the popularity of 4chan, but goes on to explain why he thinks the site is so appealing to so many people:

“The combination of anonymity and ephemerality has fostered experimentation and creativity rarely seen elsewhere. It’s incredible what people can make when they’re able to fail publicly without fear, since not only will those failures not be attributed to them, but they’ll be washed away by a waterfall of new content. Only ideas that resonate with the broader community persist, creating the most ideal conditions for the production of viral content, which established 4chan as one of the Web’s earliest ‘meme factories’”

-Poole, 2004

Reddit operates a little differently, using pseudonymous identification. Usernames are fast, free, and easy, and owning multiple accounts is commonplace. User action is still not attached to their offline identities, so redditors can feel similar levels of freedom to express themselves. However, everything they post is still attached to their usernames, allowing another user to know that the person they are currently discussing politics with also frequents r/MyLittlePony, or has a history of posts arguing on r/DebateReligion. On the other hand, the application of usernames can help reinforce the sense of belonging found in these communities, as it allows for the recognition of familiar users and can even facilitate bonds between fellow members. Furthermore, having comments linked to an account discourages poor posts, as well enables reputations to be formed, both good and bad (Grohol, 2008). These types of interactions cannot exist on username-less anonymous communities like 4chan, but you also do not see them often on places like Facebook.

Popular social media sites such as Facebook and Google+ are the beacons for real-name communities. Facebook, in its policies, defines itself as “a community where people use their
authentic identities” in order to “keep [the] community safe” (Facebook Help Center). They go as far as to define identity as corresponding to “government-issued ID” or others such as credit cards and bank statements. While anonymous and pseudonymous communities allow for identity construction and exploration, Facebook’s policy has recently resulted in the banning or forced identification of transgender people and others who had been using an alias (CNN, 2014).

For the purpose of clarity, we must distinguish between two closely-related concepts that are made possible by the anonymity or pseudonymity of online communities, and the differentiation of the self you present to others in real life and the self you present online. The first, identity exploration or identity play, occurs when you stray from the greater identity you typically present to others. Through identity exploration “the determinants of status and popularity are… less tangible” and individuals have freedom to present themselves however they wish (Bromberg, 1996). An introverted person can act as if they were extroverted, and different genders can even be assumed. Identity construction, on the other hand, is a term used to describe something more definitive and concrete. It is facilitated by Internet interactions, and is the process by which a person really does assume a new persona. This can transcend into real space interactions and is best exemplified by a person overcoming their inhibitions once they have made meaningful connections with others online. Though identity exploration may be used to connect a person with how they truly perceive themselves, it can also be used simply for amusement. In this respect, an identity can be constructed through exploration — and it must — but exploration does not always lead to the construction of a single identity that a person assumes in all aspects of life. Indeed, this “constructed” identity is not something that is finished or even asserted at any one moment; it is always in the making and constantly being refocused.
The point that is most pertinent to our research is the assertion that virtual space, particularly specific community *places* on the internet allow for a much more fluid means of changing this representation of identity. The reason for this is the multi-modal format that can be found in many virtual communities. While it is most common for virtual world subjectivities to interact through the use of text, there is the opportunity for confident individuals to forego the boon of anonymity and to engage with others in a far more personal way, through the use of audio and video communication. Individuals who have asserted themselves into a position of confidence that pertains to both their virtual and real world subjectivity are able to become visible and engage with others who are also ready to believe in the health of their own subjectivity. Those subjectivities that are not ready to enter the public sphere, however, are not required to do so. Furthermore, these more timid cases are still able to engage with those in the public sphere, both through listening and through text communication, constructing a one-sided mirror of sorts.

We must also recognize the danger that although an individual’s physical body is not absorbed into virtual space, it does not cease to exist in the real world and is still subject to the social relations that exist around it. In other words, even if an individual is able to escape these oppressive relations through a dedication to building their virtual subjectivity, life in the real world will never cease to move on. While this individual is developing their own subjectivity and exploring new ways of knowing and understanding virtual space, their physical body is stagnant. It is not given the opportunity to develop, even as the virtual self is liberated. This disparity has legitimate consequences for a subjectivity who, as much as they might wish to exist within virtual space, are still bound to their physical self. Returning to this self, the real world can be
intimidating. The space around them is not easily wieldable, as it is in many online communities. Instead it is massive, rigid and dominant. The people who populate this space have not seen the virtual transitions that this subjectivity has made, indeed all they have seen is a stagnant body doing precisely nothing. Douglas Rushkoff poignantly describes this phenomenon:

“Our digital selves exist in a time unhinged from that of our bodies. Eventually the two realities conflict, leading to present shock. If tribal humans lived in the total time of the rotating Earth, digital humans attempt to live in the ‘no time’ of the computer. We can’t succeed at it if we bring our bodies along for the ride. Yet when we try to leave them behind both nature and time come back to reassert their authority over us.”

-Rushkoff, 2013 p.32

Truth/Trust

Online interactions provide a greater degree of uncertainty of truth and trust as context is spread further into space. Because of the nature of internet actions, the distance between users makes it difficult to indicate who you are actually communicating with. Most users post messages under the veil of pseudonymity, so it’s often-times impossible to accurately verify content. Without posting any actual proof of expertise, a user can give out advice which forces people to trust them based on their word. This represents an important change in society, since before the internet sources of knowledge were highly verified. If your main source of information was from books, even if you did not agree with the literature you would at least know that that information has gone through multiple people as it was written, edited and published. On the internet, however, information is often straight from the source so those who encounter it are forced to evaluate whether or not it is valid (Valovic, 2000). This also introduces a concept called second-order literacy which Tredinnick describes as “not a matter of reading,
but of creating meaning out of texts or cultural objects within the whole social context” (Tredinnick 2008, 114). This gets at the idea that the internet has changed both the way we obtain information, as well as the way we evaluate information.

More often, trust is developed as people become more familiar with one another and how the website works as a whole. Individuals who spend more time on chat rooms are less likely to engage in identity play and are genuine in presentation (Steinmetz, 2012, 31). Just as in brick and mortar communities there is a growing ease and comfort level when you are well aware of the types of people you are interacting with, even as you may be aware that the identities you are communicating with are possibly a unique diversion from their “true” identity.

**Methodologies**

The methods driving this research are derived heavily from Lukermann’s perspective that “knowledge of place is a simple fact of experience” (Lukermann 1964, p.168). In this way we emphasize the importance of narrative, through our own observations as members of these communities and by interviewing other members that are knowledgeable through their own experience. These findings have been worked into our conceptions of “place” and “place-making” using the work of both Cresswell and Relph. Using this humanistic expression of place, we’ve determined that our original plan to use general surveys did not offer enough insight into the experience of community membership. Because the surveys were not personal enough and the use of statistical analysis could not address these concepts, we are now using only the interviews and our observations to explore what place-making really entails online and
to address the criticisms and questions of placelessness, or non-place. We think that this is more relevant, and also adequate.

As we’ve alluded to in earlier sections, we are already active members in these communities and hence understand the customs and cultures that exist within them. This is helpful for both observing and interviewing, since as Ian Cook noted in 2005, being a familiar face can garner greater insights during interviews (Cook, 2005, 175). We have already earned the trust of these communities, so the observations we note and the interviews we conduct will be sincere and truthful.

Our major form of data analysis has been collected in the form of interviews from members of our three case studies. Our interview questions are specific and personal in the hopes of establishing a narrative, as our sources have repeatedly emphasized the validity of using narratives in academic research. We will analyze these users’ experiences to develop what these communities mean to them and why they continue to participate online. Questions have been asked to prominent members of these groups who contribute enough to be easily recognized by other users and have a reputation on the site. The nature of the questions have been dependent on the user and community as well as the interviewee’s previous responses, but they all address place-making in one way or another. Most of our respondents are students, as they comprise the largest portion of the virtual community user-base. However, we have been careful to include people of all ages and backgrounds, since young members may be more likely to be swayed by the pressures of the hivemind online (Zhou, 2011, 20).

On Twitter, three interviews have been conducted (with plans to grind through as many more as possible), some users’ Tweets have been categorized to quantify the number of tweets
which are trolling, communicating with other community members, posting links to articles, telling jokes, etc. Additionally, of course, hours upon hours (perhaps too many hours) of observation have also occurred. The interview subjects vary in location (USA, Canada, Turkey), gender, and their contributions to the community. While one member is known mostly for his jokes, 104 of the 150 tweets I read (69.3%) were addressed at other community members and I categorized 62 (41.3%) as jokes. Typically, a joke created discussion with community members that built upon the joke. As another user said in an interview, “when everyone is ‘riffing’ on a particular joke or troll, trying to one-up the other person - it can get really funny sometimes”, and that he is mostly “just chatting with friends about different subjects though, which I guess is an intended use.” Those 150 tweets were sent in the span of one day, during which the user also linked to two news articles and celebrated when he was blocked by a popular rock band’s singer who was trolled by the community for his tweets about the Middle East. From an interview: “it feels cool because you know you punctured their bubble at least a little bit [and they block you in response]. Just the fact that you caused an Iraq War architect [here, supporter] to know that someone thinks they're human garbage is satisfying. I do set out to be blocked by accounts from time to time when I notice them.” Often, when one user is blocked by a certain account, others from the community chime in to be blocked themselves. This solidarity contributes to community belonging and comfort.

Another user is known for his trolling, and is seen as a leader of one faction within the community (Trolling, pg.18). To examine this user we tracked 150 of his tweets, which spanned a three-day stretch during which he was suspended and did not tweet for a long time. Then different categories were assigned to each tweet that the user posted such as trolling as well as
community interaction. For example, tweets that mentioned other community members were merely conversation and not jokes or trolling. Of the 150, I considered 97 tweets (64.6%) to be trolling. I’ve defined trolling here as aiming for a response of anger or confusion, corrupting something pure, or offering faux support or feigned interest when the community to which the user belongs knows this is not genuine. In one case, I considered a tweet to be a troll when it was a legitimate response to a NYT contributor to make them uncomfortable. Within that broad category, 25 tweets were trolling celebrities, 19 were responses to unknown accounts who targeted him (often in response to a previous troll), 26 were trolling or laughing at a particular account or community without actually mentioning them or making them aware, and the final 27 were trolling popular hashtags and trending topics on Twitter (notably, Kim Kardashian’s butt). Celebrity is defined loosely as someone recognizable, or someone with many followers or “verified” by Twitter. Included are editors and writers to news sources, one US Senator, comedians and TV personalities, and two billionaires. In addition to the aim of “punctur[ing] their bubble” as I’ve written above, trolling offers a sense of belonging, “camaraderie”, and “fighting together”. Twitter is a unique place online because it offers a chance for regular people to disrupt a “high profile” person’s “echo chambers where they are likely never challenged”.

On Smashboards the interviews that we have gathered so far build further upon the questions asked to Twitter and Reddit users. One of the users that was interviewed, Dark.Pch, joined the site in 2006 and is very well known to this day even as the total number of members has risen to 163,000. As of this moment he has 16,615 posts. An analysis of his 150 most recent posts, similar to the one done for the different Twitter users, revealed that 73% of his posts were some sort of competitive discussion of the video game itself. 15% of his posts were in a
character specific social thread, 10% were in general social threads and the remaining 2% were in tournament threads. This participation regime is very different from another user of Smashboards that was interviewed, Airgemini, whose last 150 posts were 18% competitive discussion, 29% character specific social discussion, 18% general social discussion, 10% messages sent to a specific user, and 25% moderator duties. Examining the contrast between these two users is a step towards refuting Norberg-Schulz’s assertion that modern places are “lacking intentional depth and providing possibilities only for a commonplace and mediocre experience (Norberg-Schulz, 1969, 79).”

These interviews have reaffirmed a similarity between Smashboards and /r/MLS. That is that users are connected from the very start by a specific real life interest that subsequently spurs their participation in the online fora. In his interview Dark.Pch tells the story of how he discovered Smashboards after he had already decided that he wanted to take playing this video game seriously. The interviews of Twitter users, in contrast, show that most of these people seemed to end up at Twitter, having tried out life in other communities. These differences in origin relate to Relph’s different descriptions of insideness and outsideness. For example, Dark.Pch exhibits existential insideness by showing that “this place is where [he] belongs” (Relph 1977, 55) while some Twitter interviewees show empathetic insideness as they recognize their community’s place in relation to other Twitter users who have very different beliefs but occupy overlapping spaces.

The Major League Soccer subreddit, our third and final case study, fits in nicely as an amalgamation of our previous two studies. Like twitter, the specific community we are focusing on is part of a much larger place: everyone who visits /r/MLS is a redditor, but not every
redditor visits /r/MLS. As such, we are seeing the opinions of a very small sample size of Reddit’s influence, but I think enough generalizations can be made that this should not be a problem. Like Smashboards, interviewees were connected through a very particular interest or hobby, instead of a rather broadly defined goal of “social good” which can be seen on twitter.

In order to learn more about how and why people use /r/MLS, interview questions were sent to prominent members of the community. Questions were targeted at people from a variety of backgrounds and geographic locations to gain insight into the high degree of variability online. There was not a need to receive information about the users race, gender, or where they’re from, because demographics was not pertinent information in why place-making occurs online. While most of the answers show similarity they still offered insights into why /r/MLS is successful in forming place (Appendix, Interviews #1-4). Particularly, the responses to “sense of belonging” in place-making, is directly related to this idea and voiced feelings of companionship amongst other users. The Major League Soccer Subreddit may even feel this comradery more so than other similarly-themed sports subreddits, due to the “niche” feeling of soccer in the United States; i.e., since they’re are a lot less fans, the fans tend to stick together with an “us-vs-them” mentality.

Along with the interviews that were submitted online, a face-to-face interview was administered with a redditor who had strong opinions. The interviewee was not a member of the Major League Soccer subreddit, so their answers deal with Reddit as a whole, especially regarding topics such as online identity and pseudonymity (Appendix, Interview #1).

**Analysis**
The data collection from all three case studies have shown that virtual places offer just as much, if not more, as their offline counterparts. By melding together data from multiple sources, a mosaic of experiences have the capability to demonstrate the place-making that occurs online, without drawing too much from any one community. We realize we are only scratching the surface of online community formation, yet we hope to show that our findings are in no way anomalous. The following examples provide a way to show how each online community fit into the definition of a place including location, locale and sense of place.

Location

The first and probably simplest aspect of place is location, or where the interaction happens. In real-world communities, location fits into a pre existing framework such as a street address or set of coordinates specific to one point on earth. Likewise, online communities have a specific location that is distinguished by a URL that exists on the web. This web address gives the user the capability to access the online community from anywhere that has access to the internet, allowing for a greater geographic range of people than you could ever encounter in a brick-and-mortar environment. Each of our case studies have their own unique locations to make it possible to navigate to the community.

Compared to traditional places, online locations are not nearly as binding or permanent. It is much simpler to enter an online place, since all that is required is the click of a mouse or a few strokes of the keyboard. It’s not uncommon for someone to be active in multiple communities at once, with one page open to Twitter and another logged on to Reddit. Leaving these places is also very simple, with a single click to close the screen. In real-world places, all these tasks are more difficult or altogether impossible. You need to physically travel to the
location, then travel somewhere else if you wish to leave. Being part of multiple offline communities at once presents another obstacle, since you can only physically be in one place at a time.

With all this in mind, it may seem that location online is less important than it is to offline places. UW-Madison’s location, based around Lake Mendota, Picnic Point, and Bascom Hill, obviously plays a huge role in people’s perceptions of the campus. Reddit’s location, www.reddit.com, is more of a place-holder, or a gathering point for users to meet. If the website was called www.redddddedit.com, the community probably wouldn’t be affected at all. Online locations don’t really depend on their URL addresses to attract and maintain a userbase. Instead, they try to accomplish these things through their locale.

Locale

The next aspect of place is the locale, or the “material setting for social relations.” Traditionally this describes the way a place looks, but we have modified this definition of locale to include the activities and functions of a place. Our virtual places are not defined by the same type of features: the buildings, parks and other visible tangible aspects of place that constitute traditional places. Our interviews show, however, that there is an entirely different set of characteristics and functions: the links, threads, posts and discussions that give these places a cohesive locale.

The online community Reddit is built around user-submitted content and discussion. They require a topic for each thread, and all comments must stay relevant to the topic or risk being deleted by the moderators (Figure 1). For a sports subreddit like /r/MLS, this format is perfect, as it allows users to submit articles or analysis, then direct all pertinent discussion to this
An active participant known as fuzzayd in /r/MLS explains why he likes the Major League Soccer subreddit more than other alternative sites, saying “...[Reddit’s] structure allows for a more flowing discussion than message boards like BigSoccer or comments sections on websites” (Appendix, Interview #4). Furthermore, redditor Zurangatang had a similar opinion, adding “I feel like discussions work better on websites that are designed for discussions. The website mlsoccer.com or YouTube are sites designed around articles and videos respectively and as such the sense of community that exists within /r/MLS doesn't carryover to [them]” (Appendix, Interview #2).

Comparing these responses to those from the Smashboards users serves to highlight the differences that can exist between different virtual locales. A Smashboards user, Airgemini said that “Since posts on Smashboards last forever we made all sorts of archive threads. There was one for everyone’s videos, one for frame data that we had collected, a detailed guide on all of Peach’s moves, one for tournament results etc (Appendix, Interview #8).” In other words, the timeless nature of threads on Smashboards as well as the specificity of its subforums resulted in a different set of interactions than those that exist on /r/MLS. Figure 1 and 2 are screenshots of two threads on /r/MLS and Smashboards, respectively, that exemplify how apparent differences in locale can look even just from viewing a thread from the outside. Most notably among them are the inclusion of a rating or score on Reddit, the inclusion of the thread’s most recent poster on Smashboards, and the obvious difference in duration between the two of them (one thread is eight hours old, the other is five years old).

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**Figure 1:** A post on r/MLS shows the system of upvoting and commenting
This distinction is even more obvious when you compare Smashboards and Reddit to Twitter, where users follow one another and are able to spread ideas and create discussion not only by replying to each other but by retweeting and favoriting tweets that they like. Following an account creates a connection between the two users and is a subscription to everything that they post. Retweeting spreads a tweet to a wider audience, while favoriting is often a show of support for a tweet but can be used to save a tweet regardless of what feelings a user has towards it. Twitter trolls use retweets both to show their buddies tweets that they find hilarious but also to send an additional reminder to the person on the other end of that troll. Favoriting these tweets shows that another person supports the troll and makes it stronger. Twitter also has a limit of 140 characters per tweet, which has a great impact on how interactions occur. One Twitter user pointed out that “I prefer the jokes on Twitter [to those on Reddit or 4chan], they have to be concise and 140 characters or less so people need to be really clever” (Appendix, Interview #12).

Furthermore, the users themselves contribute to the locale of an online place. Each user can customize their profile as they like, and for the vast majority of times that one person follows another they have already visited that profile to scroll through their tweets and make sure they are worth following. Twitter also enables interactions with high profile people like journalists and politicians. One interviewee thought that the site “democratize[s]... criticism” of these people who “live in echo chambers where they are likely never challenged” (Appendix, Interview #10). To the trolls of the Emoprog Army, the chance for their messages to be read by
people whose work they detest and who are never held accountable is one of the most important parts of their community. Another user said that “critiquing journalism is a central activity… because journalism plays such a crucial role in politics” (Appendix, Interview #11). The locale, with both the way that it functions and the uses that it enables, is a significant part of an online place. So just as we can observe the difference between Chicago, which thrives on its elevated tram system, and Madison, which offers a useful bus system, we can see the ways that differences in functions of our virtual places affect the experience and actions of their users.

Sense of Place

The last part of Cresswell’s definition of place is “sense of place” which refers to the nebulous meaning associated with a place or the feelings and emotions a place evokes. It is the main component that creates community, belonging, humanism and comfort. Community is formed by a shared sense of belonging or attachment, and these shared feelings also contribute to the sense of place in an online community.

The sense of place can perhaps be best exemplified by the Major League Soccer subreddit. A lot of this camaraderie has to do with the fact that compared to other major American sports, MLS is still relatively small. This may seem detrimental to a community based around user-submissions, but a lot of redditors argue that this is precisely what makes /r/MLS special: “MLS being an underdog in the US sports scene and the world soccer community in general heavily attribute to it [a sense of belonging]. The small size of the sub, compared to other sports subreddits, also helps contribute to it” (/u/Zurangatang). Or, as another user
explained, “No one gets excited when they’re in San Francisco and see a person in a 49ers jersey, but Earthquakes [San Jose’s MLS team] fans get excited to see someone repping their local team, let alone another MLS club” (/u/fuzzayd).

Smash is both a competitive and cooperative game at its core, and it is these factors that not only draw users to Smashboards, but also create meaning in the place itself. First of all, people want to get better at the game, otherwise they would remain casual and uninterested in this place. This desire manifests itself in a variety of interactions, which then create unique types of relationships. Some threads may produce rivalries, further enticing each player to improve themselves in order to maintain relevance or assert dominance. Other threads may produce teams of people dedicated to the same cause of sharing knowledge and discovering new ways to improve. Some discussions may serve exclusively to entertain, subsequently spawning threads based on jokes or personal connections to other users. In other words, each user exists in this place with a different set of emotions and intentions, and the different meanings that each person brings to the table have a tangible effect on the landscape of the site.

Many feelings are shared in the Emoprog Army. Our interviews revealed feelings of “comfort”, “value[d]” and “real” relationships, “attachment”, and “feel[ing] connected” (Appendix Interviews #9-12). The strongest of all might be an interest in ironic humor, but what separates them from a wider group of ironic Twitter accounts is their appreciation for Twitter activism and support of social change. In fact, their irony is on display in their own name; they “jokingly adopted the derisive name ‘Emoprogs’” which had been used to describe liberals who are unsupportive of the mainstream Left (Appendix Interview #9). While many users call
themselves “radical leftists”, others support their work but find greater a connection to the community through its jokes - “community members just have to be entertaining enough that the other members enjoy reading their tweets” (Appendix Interview #11; #9).

When asked which activities create the greatest community connection there was some consensus: jokes and trolling. For jokes, one community member who was interviewed said that “when everyone is ‘riffing’ on a particular joke… trying to one-up the other person, it can get really funny sometimes” (Appendix, Interview #10). The same interviewee said that collaborating with others for trolling “feels like you’re ‘fighting together’... [and creates a] feeling of camaraderie”. Trolling is typically viewed negatively, or even as being a destructive behavior (pg 20; NYT 2008). From our interviews, we see that a community of trolls is still a community and the feelings they attach to the virtual space that they occupy transforms that space into a place. However, when asked about community problems or factors dividing the community, some users did point to trolling. “Most disagreements” among community members “are over trolling… it causes friction” (Appendix, Interview #10). “Trolling leads to some disagreement” when certain users “act like dicks sometimes” and others have “a moral issue” with the extent to which a troll may go (Appendix Interview #9).

**Graphic**

The graphic is an attempt at visualizing the information we have collected from our interviews and observations in order to show how place-making occurs online. It displays place as the center focus with the three defining factors of place radiating outwards. The location of the website may not be as influential in creating place in a community but it helps to establish the
basis in which locale and sense of place forms. To better understand how each online community differs this graphic has separated the online communities and the functionality that is present. Each online community is represented uniquely through different colors but also share common characteristics represented in white. All these topics have been previously discussed throughout the paper but have been created into this graphic to better visualize the unity.

Visualizing place poses challenges because all of these parts are interrelated and iterative. In the words of Relph “it constitute a series of dialectics that form one common structure” (Relph 1976, 48). While each of these topics are placed in one of the three categories of place it is important to note that they can fall under multiple foci. Through this graphic we tried to show this by leaving the circles open because concepts such as interaction can fall under both locale and sense of place. Also, sense of place can change depending on the users involvement of the online community. In general this graphic is a basis for the formation of place online but it can be expanded to incorporate more online communities and users experiences.
Discussion

Discussing the similarities between online and offline places is necessary for generating a relatable view of these communities and how they fit into place-making ideas. Discussing the ways in which they are different can be equally telling, for it is these differences that make online places unique.
The most obvious difference is probably immediately evident: the interactions that occur online are almost never face to face. All communication is done through text, although in some cases (Reddit and 4chan especially) users can post reactionary images, videos, or animated GIFs to get their points across. You will almost never see the person you are talking to, meaning you will almost never see someone’s actual reaction to a post. They may respond with an “LOL!” or a babylaughing.gif, but whether or not this is their sincere feelings is unknown.

Still, never seeing your online peers can be perceived as a positive for many people. Internet communities have long been safe-havens for socially awkward or inept individuals, who thrive in places where communication is broken down to such basic levels. At the same time, issues with race, gender, and ethnicity are much less common: you can’t judge a book by its cover if all you can see is its content.

As online communities continue to grow in popularity, questions have been raised regarding how their prominence will affect offline places. Notably, Yi-Fu Tuan worries that as more people go to find place online, the powers of traditional places will be diminished. This is a pertinent thought, and one that can only be truly answered many years down the line, when entire generations have experienced both options. However, we feel that online communities will always be seen as a supplement to offline places more than they are seen as a replacement. Even with so much interaction happening in these places, the value of meeting in person, offline is not lost on most users. Offline meetings occur for all three of our case studies, and depend on geographic proximity. Tournaments for members of Smashboards have been common for years and are used for community bonding. One contributor to r/MLS said he even goes to games with fellow fans that he met entirely through Reddit (Appendix, Interview #3). Likewise, an
Emoprog Army member said that “anytime we in the group meet up [in real life] it’s a cause for celebration since we are all pretty far-flung as far as location” (Appendix, Interview #9). Users can still appreciate physical connectivity and relationships while being part of a place that itself lacks such interactions.

Another notable difference between online and offline places also deals with interactions. Online, interactions are affected by both the locale and sense of place. The interactions themselves, i.e. the specific conversations you are having, will be unique to the community and may contain words or phrases that are only understood by individuals in the group. This creates the sense of place required for place-making, but how these interactions are performed can also fit into an online place’s locale. On Twitter, for example, every comment is limited to 140 characters. This produces an environment that is unique to Twitter and also plays a vital role in the site’s functionality and mechanics.

Offline, interactions are much less varied. The topics of discussion are undoubtedly different (again, affecting the sense of place of a community) but they’re almost entirely conducted through normal conversations. The method of communication is rarely questioned and seldom what makes a offline place unique, but in online communities they play a much larger role in the built environment.

As geographers we understand the hesitation of challenging traditional definitions of place and the fears of placelessness and non-places. We find that online interactions are not “solitary” as Augé suggested in his concept of non-places, and that virtual spaces do not necessitate this isolation. Even when physically alone, community members felt emotional ties to communities and we feel that in their totality they fit Cresswell’s place more appropriately
than Augé’s non-place. When Relph warns against the replacement of “diverse and significant places” with “anonymous spaces”, he refers to post-industrial landscapes (Relph 1976, 143). However, we must still affirm that the Internet is capable of producing places of significance, even when communities are formed by pseudonymous users. Sense of place and locale are so important to online places, and the sense of belonging and experiences of users are proof of their significance.

**Conclusion**

We found that online places closely follow Cresswell’s conception of place. Atomizing place, we found certain differences between how place is made online and offline by examining virtual instances of location, locale, and sense of place. Our research proves that through slight reinterpretation of these components, place can be experienced and produced in virtual settings. Simultaneously, we realize that the inherent nature of the internet is to continually create new interactions, communities, and places and as such it is difficult if not impossible to fully understand “place” as it exists on the internet. Therefore, researching additional and varied online communities and implementing different conceptions of place is likely to offer important insights to future attempts at understanding place making online. We have only scratched the surface, and these communities, like their user base, will continue to grow and evolve, further necessitating re-evaluation of traditional geographic thought.
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**Appendix**

**Interview #1: Reddit**
User: Half-Black_Ceasar

**How long have you been going on Reddit?**
About a year in a half, i used to be on reddit without an account for about a half of year. but i had an account for a year

**What do you typically do, how often do you participate**
I am more active now. At first I was a lot more lurking cause that the redditors that mean from the community, i have no idea what is going on and I am too afraid to ask. In that is kinda of like about certain points, because I posted maybe one or two things and it was kinda interesting to see. I definitely upvote and downvote things. I definitely comment now. I sometimes comment in political discussions. The place I feel most comfortable commenting is the NBA one just because that is something that I know pretty well and I feel like I understand that community and their norms. Each subreddit has its different norms

**What other subreddit do you participate in?**
Participate really, I guess it goes up toward whatever I can see. I go to the soccer one to go see goal gifs.

**You say you visit those one but you don’t participate?**
The one that I really participate in is NBA 1 and I am happy i finally figured out to get my team flare so for a while I looked like a weirdo without a team affiliation. THe political one and news, pretty much anything that comes up, like with geopolitics, international relations, oral news, international news subreddits. If something seems interesting I look
into it. The beauty of reddit is that half of it is just links, and hearing what other people have to say. Like last night I saw somebody talk about what happened to the guy who is against Joseph Koney, Koney 2012 guy who was a ……It was interesting because I had a huge visceral reaction to when I first saw koney. Look at all those college kids, they think they are smart because they just found out about child soldiers in AFrica but it has been happening for 30 years. It turns out that this guy was a real person. It wasn’t a government conspiracy, or he was trying to make money off of people that died. He was a real person and that reddit community made me realize it. That he was a close family friend that lost his mind for a day.

Democrats has failed on this and this. So it is interesting to see. It is rare that I go into those.

Do you go on any other online communities?

Facebook. I used to mess with Twitter but I have a love hate relationship with Twitter because I believe that Twitter can be used for social good but I don’t like the concept of me putting everything out there. There are things I would say in person to somebody but I would not the majority of people to hear, either out of context or they don’t know me. You could say one bad thing on the internet and it could come back to get you. On facebook too if there was a better way to communicate with a large amount of people in a small amount of time I would delete my facebook. I hate what it does to how I view the internet. But I can get so much relevant information, I can contact so many different people, it is great for setting up events and that is the crux of the issue I guess

A lot of people use twitter now and create a pseudonymous account and they use it for the social good and stuff. Do you think if your twitter account wasn’t attached to your name you would use it differently?

I have two twitter accounts, one that is Jonathan Goodall and I have a pseudonymous one. I started off originally with my name and I know if I has taken Jonathan Goodall twitter that the second would have come up because there is a link to my email. I have a pseudonymous name, like charlie's best friend and my handle is a BS handel but it is still linked to your email. You have people at the NSA and companies hire people to find dirt on you no matter what. They can see that your email is linked to this one, it is not hard to do that. Even though I have pseudonymous account both on Reddit and on everything that my name is not attached too I still know that people can track that back. Same thing on Reddit people have found me, they used little things. People are smart and they can find shit on you. The best way is not to say shit that on a place that is easy to find it.

I know that you were talking last wednesday that you were talking about reveals about how you're not white. Half black Caesar.

How does that name affect things

For the most part I have had no problems whatsoever. One time that someone questioned I was black when I explicitly said that” as a black man I say” X. I remember saying this a year ago, it was one of those videos about young black teenagers that would videotaping each other smacking people and running off. As a black person this is bad. So I got into a weird flame where this person was like I don't think you're even black, you might be a white person from Idaho posing as a black person because apparently that happens a lot of Reddit. And half way through I thought this is stupid, this person is anonymous and I will never meet this person.

Are there offensive Subreddits?

Definitely, if you go on r/niggars I mean that shit is weird. It is interesting because that is why Reddit gets a bad rep. There are some great subreddits like political discussions that are very well monitored, conspiracy is worth a look at. But then if you go at other ones like the red pill or MRA. I have looked at MRA and I can see where they are coming from but other days I am like NO NO. THat is where Reddit gets a bad rep because people like to focus on the extremes. But I also think that Reddit is good for other things. There is a sub called WOW where you can say whatever, so there is incredible stuff that I would never would have think of. There is a subreddit for a season for each TV show. There is layers upon layers. Once you get to one subreddit than it takes you even deeper.
Do you think your online identity is different?
Yes, I am definitely much more measured on what I say. I don’t curse online. This is definitely differently than the 17 year old me on facebook saying fuck and niggar. I know that anyone can see that. That is the thing I am worried about because I am not going back in my facebook history and delete it. If it is brought up then I delete it. I try to show a mature person because you never know who is watching. It is interesting that as I have gotten older and more mature I think you the fuck really cares about what I am doing. My whole thing is that, On twitter you see people that post about something they are eating, literally it is nothing substantial. If they say something that is profound I get that that is why I find it useful but I don’t think it should be used for talking about the most mundane things about all time.

Do you think you are more timid?
If you have seen me in any social interaction I am not a timid person, but this may be kind of weird where its like you wouldn’t do anything that would be recorded, but it is also that people have a better understanding and of who I am and where I am coming from when I am looking you in the eyes talking to you. It is not in between two screens. It has also gotten to a point where I am considered about what I post as a link. I was about to post on my friend's bday..”happy birthday bitch”. But then I thought I might want to work for the government agency and I thought would i hire me if I posted like this on people walls regularly. Sometimes I think I am too worried about getting a job but that is how I think.

Karama, would Reddit be better without karam or an incentive?
You have karma whores obviously, but any social space online or offline you are going to have people that crave attention. I am one of those people that crave attention in public places, and I realize this. You see the same thing is Facebook too, like how I got a job. So if you start thinking that way that is why I have x amount of like or followers. People do stuff in order to get validation. Reddit not having karmar would rectify the problem because you would still have people reacting to attention and being more vocal or passive aggressive about it, but overall people want that (attention) so I don’t think getting rid of karam would do anything.

People saying a short little joke, and people recognize it get a lot more likes. The voting system is broken.
Its true but I don’t think it is a problem. What is nice about Reddit is that you have people that are bold and they have a great well thought out post but when I am trying to get a good understanding I look at the long post. I like the short little jokes, it is great. I like the gold system to so I know it is somewhere I should look at. It is not a fault in the voting system, it is really just one person, one vote so it is a democratization of the internet. Sometimes good things get buried and some things that aren’t the best get upvotes. But other people call each other out so I don’t understand why they are being downvoted and then you back up that person's voice or statement.

Do you often recognize other people's usernames?
I know one person but she isn’t in any of my subreddits. I don’t really look that much at the names. Maybe one of the mods in r/NBA because I am on it twice a day.

Do you ever use res the downloadable thing. I have that so everytime you DV someone you get a score. It keeps track of how you interact with people.
Apple is all about conformity.

You don’t realize how often you interact with the same people?
I put our Qualtrics on Madison, Wis subreddit. It was cool being able to see that I put my geography 370 map on football nationalities on r/soccer and it was interesting because people got really mad at me. Yes, we are from the colonies but we are still French. It is interesting to see their reaction and they wanted to see what my data was. What I thought was a really good map, they had a lot of problems with how you dictate this and that. Reddit is basically a good
place that you can get more or less intelligent conversation. It is bias towards slightly liberal much more educated crowd. People who have internet, so that means something. Reddit definitely has its biases but i would post more on Reddit to see what people think more than on FB because they autofilter.

**Interview #2: Reddit**

**User: Zurangatang**

Is /r/MLS the only online soccer community you participate in? If so, what is it about /r/MLS that attracted you? If it is not the only community you participate in, what drew you to these other communities?

I've made jerseys for the EPL and posted them to /r/soccer before but I wouldn't say that I really participate in it. /r/MLS is one of the few soccer oriented places online that focuses on MLS and North American soccer. Also when I started posted my jerseys I got tons of positive feedback which is always nice.

How do you feel the pseudonymous (username-based) nature of reddit affects your interactions here? For example, in the comment section of mlssoccer.com, most people seems to use the “sign in with facebook” option and use their real names. Do you think discussions would be as successful if reddit operated in a similar way?

For me at least being a well known member of the /r/MLS community almost removes the pseudonymous nature of reddit. Especially since I started a tshirt company because of the popularity of my jersey designs. I feel like discussions work better on websites that are designed for discussions. mlssoccer.com or youtube are sites designed around articles and videos respectively and as such the sense of community that exists within /r/MLS doesn't carryover to mlssoccer.com.

Do you frequently recognize other users on /r/MLS?

Yes. The people who post a lot I definitely notice and have more of a relationship with.

Do you feel a sense of togetherness or belonging to /r/MLS? If so, what do you think contributes to these feelings of community?

Yes. MLS being an underdog in the US sports scene and the world soccer community in general heavily attribute to it. The small size of the sub, compared to other sports subreddits, also helps contribute to it.

**Interview#3: Reddit**

**User: DoctorDank**

Is /r/MLS the only online soccer community you participate in? If so, what is it about /r/MLS that attracted you? If it is not the only community you participate in, what drew you to these other communities?

/r/MLS is the only online soccer community I participate in. What attracted me about /r/MLS was the quality content that I find here, along with a rather knowledgeable fan-base. Although that has been somewhat diluted by the World Cup surge, I am confident the new people will get up to speed quickly. At least, the active ones.

How do you feel the pseudonymous (username-based) nature of reddit affects your interactions here? For example, in the comment section of mlssoccer.com, most people seems to use the “sign in with facebook” option and use their real names. Do you think discussions would be as successful if reddit operated in a similar way?

I think the pseudonymous nature of reddit can sometimes lead to trolls. However, the important counter-balance to that is the up/downvote system inherent to Reddit. Obvious trolls are quickly downvoted, and if they become a problem, they are banned. The mods are very active on /r/MLS and I think they do a great job, and I agree with their decisions far more often than I disagree with them.

As to your mentioning the comments on MLSSoccer.com, oh my god have you read the discussions there? They're absolutely horrible. Loads of idiots spouting off, inflammatory, incorrect opinions being "liked" to the top, etc etc etc. I think the fundamental flaw with the Facebook Forum Login system is that there is no way to downvote, and it's entirely
too easy for any schmo to comment or like. So that's why you see a lot of idiotic stuff at the top of the comments there. I don't even bother reading the discussions there anymore; they all too often seem to just degenerate into flame wars. Ergo, I do not think discussions on Reddit would be as successful if operated in a similar way, haha.

Do you frequently recognize other users on /r/MLS?
Yea I probably know around 2 dozen people here. I have most of them friended. And not just RSL fans but people from all the teams. Most of them were active users when I joined, around 3 years ago. We only had a couple thousand users then. Oh how we've grown! But people like /u/SomeCruzDude, /u/WhiteCapsFan2010, /u/IronDeepBicycle, /u/alexoobers (just off the top of my head, for example), I know about those guys. I know where they live, and what they do for a living or where they're studying, and when we see each other in other subreddits we tend to say hi to each other. If I see them in a match thread I'll usually greet them or vice versa. Hell I even made a real life friend off /r/ReALSaltLake, /u/ballzoo. Sometimes I go to games with him.

Do you feel a sense of togetherness or belonging to /r/MLS? If so, what do you think contributes to these feelings of community?
Yea I think everybody on the sub feels like we're together, even if we support different teams. There's sort of an atmosphere that we're all about growing the league, and supporting the league as a whole first (even if we may disagree with the league FO sometimes) before devolving into rivalry between clubs. We realize we're all fans of the game, and with soccer's position and potential for growth on the national stage, I think we feel a responsibility to stick together and help grow the game, together. I do not feel that sort of responsibility and companionship from some of the other RSL fans I know IRL. Sometimes they don't seem to care about the league, and they absolutely, rabidly hate our rivals. I dislike our rivals but (in the case of LA or Seattle, for example) I also respect them, and the fans of theirs I meet on Reddit.
I hope that is good, and not too windy for you. If you'd like any clarification on any of that, please feel free to ask me, I am bored as hell today and more than happy to help. Thanks and good luck on your project!

Interview #4: Reddit
User: fuzzayd

Is /r/MLS the only online soccer community you participate in? If so, what is it about /r/MLS that attracted you? If it is not the only community you participate in, what drew you to these other communities?
/r/MLS is the main community I participate in, though I also participate in two MLS team-specific subreddits. I find Reddit's structure allows for a more flowing discussion than message boards like BigSoccer or comments sections on websites. There's a certain anonymity when the only identifying feature on a post is the username and crest, as opposed to forum signatures and icons and the lot. I'm drawn to /r/MLS for the mostly polite community and again, Reddit's structure of a stream of content in easily-digestible bites.

How do you feel the pseudonymous (username-based) nature of Reddit affects your interactions here? For example, in the comment section of mlssoccer.com, most people seem to use the “sign in with facebook” option and use their real names. Do you think discussions would be as successful if Reddit operated in a similar way?
As I alluded to in the first response, I think /r/MLS' strength in its pseudonymous nature. I think my online persona when attached to my name is more reserved, while on Reddit I can get more emotional and try the stupid jokes. Most of all, until I recently changed my twitter handle to match my Reddit name, the username had no connection to anything else in my personal/social media life. I won't post as much on MLSSoccer.com because I don't want someone with a grudge tracking me down via my real name. On Reddit, I'd imagine a simple downvote solves most disagreements.

Do you frequently recognize other users on /r/MLS?
I do, but mainly if they have the same team crest on display. I can only think of a few names that aren't also fans of either the Fire or Quakes (since I also participate in those subreddits). When the community was smaller back in 2010 I think I recognized nearly all the names, but most of those folks have either moved on or get lost in the masses.
Do you feel a sense of togetherness or belonging to /r/MLS? If so, what do you think contributes to these feelings of community?
I do feel a sense of community, but that's likely partially from the victim complex most MLS fans seem to have. It's nice to have a place on the internet where everyone knows defenses are suspect but don't need to make it the focal part of a conversation. MLS still feels like it's up and coming, and it's rare to find finds randomly on the street. No one gets excited when they're in San Francisco and see a person in a 49ers jersey, but Earthquakes fans get excited to see someone repping their local team, let alone another MLS club. The unique way that some people are fans of the league, too, makes the community seem more cohesive.

Interview #5: Reddit
User: RemyDWD

Is /r/MLS the only online soccer community you participate in? If so, what is it about /r/MLS that attracted you? If it is not the only community you participate in, what drew you to these other communities?
No, Reddit is not the sole soccer community that I participate in. I am also extremely active on Twitter specifically relating to soccer, and have a small number of other boards and Facebook groups that I read regularly. /r/MLS attracted me because the community at the point I had joined it (late 2010) had a good blend of links and information about all MLS teams. I participate on Twitter as part of being a soccer journalist/pundit/whatever I should be called. The Facebook groups relate specific to the Red Bulls and NYCFC, both of which I cover.

How do you feel the pseudonymous (username-based) nature of reddit affects your interactions here? For example, in the comment section of mlssoccer.com, most people seems to use the “sign in with facebook” option and use their real names. Do you think discussions would be as successful if reddit operated in a similar way?
I don't think /r/MLS is one of those spaces on Reddit where anonymity is critical to the success of the community, and in fact, the low barrier to entry tends to not hurt our traffic. (I also personally exist in a grey area on this because a number of the /r/MLS community are aware of who I am; I don't hide behind a pseudonym the way others might.) That said, I don't think discussions would be as successful on Reddit if a Facebook login was required, as it would raise the barrier of entry without a clear benefit.

Do you frequently recognize other users on /r/MLS?
I do, but keep in mind I'm a moderator of the subreddit. It's my job to pay attention to those sorts of things.

Do you feel a sense of togetherness or belonging to /r/MLS? If so, what do you think contributes to these feelings of community?
There is; we've worked hard to maintain a welcoming community where fans of all teams can gather and chat about the league. There is minimal "banter" that would drive people away, and the community tends to be fairly level headed.

Interview #6: Reddit
User: MLS_Analyst (Matt Doyle, media editor at MLSSoccer.com)

Is /r/MLS the only online soccer community you participate in? If so, what is it about /r/MLS that attracted you? If it is not the only community you participate in, what drew you to these other communities?
I'm still active on BigSoccer, and obviously the Twitter community (which is a different kind of thing). I like /r/MLS because it's a different demographic - younger, less sophisticated fans who are less jaded and more enthusiastic. It keeps me fresh and reminds me that there are different perspectives out there.

How do you feel the pseudonymous (username-based) nature of reddit affects your interactions here? For example, in the comment section of mlssoccer.com, most people seems to use the “sign in with facebook” option and use their real names. Do you think discussions would be as successful if reddit operated in a similar way?
I think the best communities are ones that have both options. Everybody knows who I am, who Devin is, who Dan D is, etc. But then there are people who are almost completely anonymous. It's everybody's individual choice, and given the competency of the moderators, that works well.
Do you frequently recognize other users on /r/MLS?
Yes, all the time. I also tag people using RES, which is helpful for remembering who to just completely avoid.

Do you feel a sense of togetherness or belonging to /r/MLS? If so, what do you think contributes to these feelings of community?
There's less togetherness than there was 2 years ago, and there'll be less still 2 years from now. It'll never go away completely, but MLS isn't tiny anymore, and neither is /r/MLS. That's just the way it goes - until some other forum becomes the go-to place and Reddit starts its inevitable decline.

Interview #7: Smashboards
User: Dark.Pch

How did you get introduced to Smashboards?
Around my last year of high school, I started going to nintendo world. Which is a famous nintendo store in NYC. This was in 2006. They had game cube stations with super smash bros. melee. After school I would go there and play there, making some new friends. At one point me and my friends got good at the store and we usually beat everyone else that came out to play. One day a melee Player named DJ Nintendo came into the store and beat us all. He then show us techs about the game like wave dashing and L canceling. From here I would go home and practice this hard core and thought it was really cool. Later on he told us about a competitive scene for the game with no use of items. me and a friend of mind I met at nintendo world went to our first tournament in harlem and teamed. We got destroyed. But loved seeing a new world to a game we enjoyed playing. So decided to start playing the game competitive and join the smash scene. Found out about smashboards, made an account and here I am.

Have online interactions played a part in shaping who you are?
Yea. Back then I was a dpered teen. I meet many people who went the extra for me in the community. But my depressing was so strong this only made it vanaish for a while. With all those that I met, it made me wanna keep trying after I decided to just quit. It seriously killed me inside to just quit something I like to do and get good at. While I barely got the results I got, it still made me just quit, then pick myself back up and try yet again. I slowly grow more endurance and mental power to keep going no matter what. It has also made me a lil more lively over the years then what I use to be in person. As of now in late 2014, I'm much more stronger then ever. Willing to learn, take advice and move on. Helping out a scene/community I have been with for 8 years. I'm now seen by many all over the world as an inspiration and a big help to the community. I have people coming to me alot or sending messages with all the talk about all the helpful things I have been doing to better the community. more wanna talk to me, get to know me, hang out with me. I have become a strong person who as come along way. And still much more to do. And this has also lead to being a better person in general out of the scence and actually enjoying life as it is. Doing what I have to do to make it more enjoyable then ever before.

Has the pseudonymous nature of Smashboards (that you don't have to use your real name) affected the way you post or talk to people?
I believe so. If you noticed something about me, I usually don't use emotes when I post. I use to alot of you go through my early years on smashboards. I was a very depressed person coming into smash. I use to love posting and talking to people. I seemed quite lively. After some time, I ran into alot of stupid people on there, and as time past, my emotions online tend to die. To a point I don't use emotes. So sometimes it's hard for someone to suspect how I am feeling unless I tell them straight up online. But it also gave me the chance to meet some amazing people. And those willing to help bring me back to that 18 year old boy I once came into the scene as.

Does status exist on Smashboards?
Oh yea man. Lots of people that join the scene wanna be something big. They wanna be known as somebody in the community. And a lot of players in the community who have a high status won't really respect those that don't. So people seek to get to that status to gain said respect. I personally don't like this. This type of thing should be earned. Not wanted/giving. If you have to go through all of this just to get respect, it's not worth it. Think of it as school. If you are not one of the cool kids people won't really talk to you, or wanna get to know you. You are not popular and none really care. This can make a person feel like crap. So people decide to be fake and change who they are just to get noticed. You are not being you. They are not liking you for you. They are liking this fake image you created. I don't think that is how one should live their life.

I always tell people to not let this be a thing to you. Be who you are. Have your reasons for playing and play. And do what you can to help out the community. There are people out there who will like you for who you are. And that's who is worth the attention. I respect all new people or old people in the community regardless of status unless they give me a reason not to. And this is how I want a lot of people to feel when they talk to me. I may be well known player, but that does not mean others under my status can't talk to me nor give advice. I try all the same. A status just lets me know what you have done. That's it.

Interview #8: Smashboards
User: Airgemini

How did you get introduced to Smashboards?
I've been obsessed with the games since the first one came out in '99. I always had lots of friends and family to play with, but it seemed like I cared about the game a lot more than them. When Brawl came out my interest was rekindled, and as I tried to get better and better I stumbled upon Smashboards. I immediately realized how much more there was to the game than I had ever imagined. Before I knew it I had met some people from my area who convinced me to go to tournaments (I was only 16 and needed a ride).

What separates Smashboards from other online communities, particularly Reddit and 4chan?
Maybe it's different on certain subreddits, but I think Smashboards has a much more cohesive community than those other sites. Everyone knows that they are connected through their love of Smash and you can recognize every poster. But it seems like it goes deeper than that. Like there is a certain “prototype” Smashboards user, who probably also loves Pokemon and watching anime. I like Smashboards because it brings together a lot of different but similar interests. I actually wasn't active in the community until I started posting on the PokeCenter sub forum, and then the people I had become friends with there got me more interested in posting on other parts of the site. Ultimately this led to my introduction to the Peach boards, a place that is unlike anything else I have seen on the internet.

What makes the Peach boards so special?
Well, I would say what made them so special. Things are different now and the people who used to post all of the time have become inactive, at least on this part of the website. But back in 2009 and 2010 it was so special just because of how active the members were. There was constant competitive discussion of advanced techniques, matchups and tier discussions. But there was also the social threads that held every kind of discussion you could imagine. There was a joke made by the first Smash celebrity Ken back in 2005 that said that “All Peach mains are fat, black or gay.” The funny part is that it’s true. It was the first time in my life that I was able to introduce myself to strangers as being gay, and even more importantly a place where I could interact with other people who were dealing with similar identity issues as myself. There was a sense of camaraderie that I will never forget. Dark.Pch, one of the main posters at that time and one of the few straight members constantly compiled a list of each user’s sexual orientation (including categories such as “wtf” and “who knows”). But it wasn’t like he was witch hunting, it helped me understand that sexual orientation was a more fluid concept and I was the only one who could tell him where I belonged. I was proud to be on
on that list, being a person who could disrupt the metagame (Peach was considered a poor character choice mechanically, but her tournament results showed otherwise thanks to us) and societal norms at the same time.

So I guess this goes back to the question before, but I really felt like I was part of the community on Smashboards because we were actually creating things. It’s not like on Reddit where stuff from all over the internet comes together and is shared. Since posts on Smashboards last forever we made all sorts of archive threads. There was one for everyone’s videos, one for frame data that we had collected, a detailed guide on all of Peach’s moves, one for tournament results etc. We were all learning as a group, and that was just one character specific sub forum out of 35!

**Do you think being a moderator has changed your perspective of the community?**

Well, I became a mod like 6 years ago so at this point it’s just a part of who I am on the site. I try not to be overzealous (like I probably was when I first started) by going on thread/post deleting rampages. But there are some rules I have to follow. Sometimes I have to catch myself and remember that I’m not the only one whose opinion matters in determining what a “good” post is. So sometimes I want to shutdown random social discussions because they are just wasting space and not actually contributing to the competitive side of the forum, but back in the “glory days” it was those social posts that kept me interested and let me meet all sorts of people. I think more than anything the site/community itself has changed. Like, now the most active sub forum is probably the character specific Project M boards instead of the Brawl ones. I guess you can’t control the direction people’s interests will take. The site also got a visual rework in the last year or so which makes it feel foreign to me. Especially some of the new moderator features that they added. I feel like the NSA.

**Interview #9: Twitter**

**User: @lindsberty**

**Do you feel a sense of belonging to a Twitter community?**

She did more when she was really active, but since college started she hasn’t spent as much time on Twitter and thus doesn’t feel as connected as she once did. However, referred to her closest Twitter friends as family and says that she does value the relationships she has formed and considers them real.

**How long did you participate before you felt that sense of community?**

She participated for a month or two before she felt a sense of belonging; she was a founding member so it didn’t take long once they started noticing each other’s tweets and interacting.

**What do you offer to community? What role do you serve?**

“Hot Takes”; her original role was to set traps – “Honeypot trolling” – to get older, high profile men to flirt with her (18 years old at the time).

**What is necessary to participate in the community? What is expected of community members? Are lurkers part of the community? What role does trolling play in the community? How is the community affected by having both pseudonymous users and those using their own name?**

Before, you simply had to make jokes to be a participant in the community. With the growth of the “Emoprog Army” within Weird Twitter, now many users try to “outleft” other members and even think that this is necessary to prove they are “true to the cause”. There is a sense of being holier than thou, and some users have become competitive. Writers like Sam Knight (@samknight1), Michael Arria (@michaelarria), Jason Leopold (@jasonleopold) and Charles Davis (@charliearchy) are part of the community and their contributions create discussion.
Lurkers are considered part of the community. A larger audience for jokes, and more readers of community writers’ works, are appreciated.

Trolling is very important. Community members have to be funny on some level, and must be thick skinned and able to withstand trolling in return. All in all, community members just have to be entertaining enough that the other members enjoy reading their tweets.

However, trolling leads to some disagreement. Sometimes a user has moral issue with some of the trolling, and some members “act like dicks sometimes”. The community members know that this is not really them, and that they are just putting on a show behind their pseudonymous mask.

It’s easier to be pseudonymous than to use your real name. She uses her real name, which has led to some “stalking by neoreactionaries” in response to her trolling.

How is Twitter conducive to community formation?

It is uncensored and invites people to reveal their true selves. On Twitter, community is formed easily; you simply follow an account to create an immediate connection; the userbase is huge, and includes celebrities and other high profile accounts; Twitter community helped her rise above loneliness and build confidence.

Is Twitter a place where status exists?

She wishes it didn’t but it does. It does play a factor in how you are perceived; for a lot of people, respect and first impressions are based on the ratio of accounts you follow to accounts that follow you.

Does Twitter allow you to express yourself free of inhibitions you have in real life?

She’s not afraid to express herself IRL already, and that’s why she uses real name even when most Weird Twitter accounts do not; however she does act differently offline. Most people lack courage to connect themselves to their Twitter accounts so it does seem that pseudonymity has a disinhibiting effect, as well as community belonging which makes it seem like others have your back and you can express yourself without fear of being bashed.

Tell me about Google Hangouts crew?

There’s not an in-crew in the google hangout group, everyone is invited; even now new people are showing up; some new people show up and are shy and never come back.

There are cliques within the community; you have to dive in and make your voice heard as a new member if you want to gain a reputation.

Interview #10: Twitter
User: @dankmtl

Do you feel a sense of belonging to a Twitter community? For how long did you participate before you felt this? Which community / what name does it go by or do you assign to it?

I do feel I belong to a community, in that there are a group of friends I share similar beliefs/laugh at the same things with, I would say that the current group gelled within the past year and a half. I've been on twitter for 4 years. I guess I would refer to the community as "The Emoprogs" for shorthand but that label may be too restrictive because some people we "hang out" with may not care about politics at all, they're just friends who like jokes or even just the personalities involved.

How do you become part of the community? (Generally, or your personal experience)
There’s no hard and fast “admissions process” haha, I think it’s just the way any group forms, people who have shared interests. Join in on a thread or a troll, get #FF by someone else. As I said at the top, I didn't really "join," I just made friends with people who liked the same stuff and we jokingly adopted the derisive name "Emoprogs."

**What expectations are made of community members? Are lurkers/followers who don't engage "community members"?**
Not to take things too far (threats, IRL stuff), know when to just leave someone alone, no racism/bigotry, don't doxx people, don't send your dick unsolicited, don't be a creep, basic human decency stuff. I would consider lurkers/followers who don't engage part of the community, not everyone wants to talk, maybe they just feel like retweeting or favoring.

**Do certain users have certain roles within the community? Does everyone contribute to challenging the status quo and is this the community’s overall goal**
Somewhat - as in any community, people kind of fall into different roles. On twitter with such a loose association I’d say that it doesn't extend further than certain people who know more about a particular topic/situation and will tell the other group members about it.

**When do you feel greatest connection to the community? During which activities?**
A couple of different ways - for example, we all pitched in to buy a birthday gift for someone. One person was tasked with surreptitiously finding out what they wanted, another collected the money and ordered the gift, etc. Also, when everyone is "riffing" on a particular joke or troll, trying to one-up the other person - it can get really funny sometimes. Of course, anytime we in the group meet up IRL it's a cause for celebration since we are all pretty far-flung as far as location.

**What role does trolling play in your community? Does it create community cohesion? Given the political nature of the community, is trolling necessary to hold people accountable for their BS?**
Trolling plays a big role in the community. I think it does create community cohesion because as lame as it sounds, it feels like you're "fighting together." I think it's impossible to avoid that feeling of camaraderie. I think in this community it's necessary because of the lot of the figures we ridicule live in echo chambers where they are likely never challenged. If the people we're trolling aren't high profile, it's harder to defend in that way, it's more like "this person said something stupid, haha look."

**Is community cohesion also dependent on interactions with news articles - both with good reporting and bad reporting?**
That is a big part of it since a lot of us enjoy taking journalists to task for poor reporting, biases and so on. This goes back to the echo chamber where these guys are not used to being challenged. Twitter seems to democratize this type of criticism.

**Do you use Reddit or 4chan? Why or why not? Why do you use Twitter and what does it offer that other sites lack?**
I'll look at a Reddit link if someone sends it to me but I don't use either site really. I don't really like Reddit's format, find it hard to read. 4chan, every time I've looked at it I've gone an average of 2 minutes before seeing some disgusting
picture so I just avoid it. I like twitter over other sites because it's easy to find like minded people and I can read jokes, talk to my friends, and see breaking news all in one place.

Is Twitter a place where status and social structures exist? On that note, do followers / favorites quantify status?
It definitely is, and followers/favorites do quantify status, but not to the extent in our more "political joke" community that they do in the bigger "joke" community. Aside from a couple of exceptions, most people in the community I interact with most don't have large follower counts. I guess there is the same stratification as in any group with "core members" and so on, but it's more based on how long people have known/talked.

If you met a target of your trolling in a bar how would you react? How do your attitude and behaviors change when you become DANK METAL (as far as random people are concerned) and [sort of] detach from your real name? (I reworded this from how it was framed for another interviewee who doesn't use their first name but with the Dank Metal confusion I included it here anyway.)
It would depend on what I'd said to them! Any number of things could happen, we could hash out what ever we'd disagreed about (maybe the nature of twitter was what caused the disagreement) and become friends, get in an actual fight, etc. For my part I'd try to explain what my problem was with what they said. As far as how attitudes and behaviors change, I think my online persona is pretty similar to my real life one, I've always been a sarcastic person and a class clown type since I was a kid, outspoken about politics etc. I probably tone down the darker humor IRL, at least when I'm around people who I don't know laugh at that sort of thing though.

Is there competition to present yourself as more left­leaning than the average community member? Does this divide the community?
Hmm, good question. Not among our particular community - I'd say it's a bit different because we are criticized by other people on the "twitter left" for being too unserious, concerned with jokes, too sarcastic, and so on. Our particular group doesn't go in for the purity test stuff I would say.

If so, how can this problem be overcome? Does this affect the community’s most prominent members or is it more a problem of those hoping to make a name for themselves?
This (infighting over ideological purity) has been a problem in the left for as long as the left has existed so I don't think it will ever be solved.

What divides community other than the leftist competition?
Our group has actually stayed pretty cohesive. Most disagreements are over trolling - some members like to troll more than others and it causes friction.

How does a typical Twitter user act on Twitter? How does this compare to how you act?
There's a running joke about "normies" who retweet inspirational quotes accounts and posts pictures of their lunch, tweets at celebrities, etc. That's pretty accurate. I guess the difference between that and how I act is that I like using twitter to post jokes and and insult politicians and media figures that I don't like. The bulk of my interactions on twitter are just chatting with friends about different subjects though, which I guess is an intended use.

What is the relationship between different Twitter communities, like the Emoprog Army, Weird Twitter, and the Pig Poop Crew?
There's a lot of overlap between these three groups but they are different things. Weird Twitter was discussed here: http://www.buzzfeed.com/jwherrman/weird-twitter-the-oral-history and there are some accounts who maybe started out as doing this type of "weird" humor who also talk about politics, or have a foot in both worlds so to speak. The Emoprog Army was originally started as an ironic joke, due to it being a derisive term used by mainstream democrats to describe left critics of Obama. As originally used it would describe everyone to the left of Obama, but now it's mainly understood to be the loose confederation of leftist joker types being discussed here. (Ironically, what was once a derisive term from people to the right of us is now also used as a derisive term from people to the left of us also). The Pig Poop Balls Crew was another term that was derisively used to describe a couple people who like to send the famous pig picture to people they dislike. Somebody with very thin skin was angered by it, took it way too seriously, and wrote an entire blog post about same and coined a name for it. There's no real "pig poop crew," people just wanted to run with the hilarious characterization of them by people who who take everything seriously.

How do you feel when you are blocked by a prominent account? How often is this your goal and how often does it come as a surprise?

This is very childish but it feels cool because you know you punctured their bubble at least a little bit. Just the fact that you caused an Iraq War architect to know that someone thinks they're human garbage is satisfying. I do set out to be blocked by accounts from time to time when I notice them. I have a private twitter list of people that I'll periodically check if I feel like being a troll. When they block me, they disappear from the list. I don't think a block from a prominent user has ever been a surprise, if it's someone I disagree with but respect I can engage them without trolling and they won't block me.

Interview #11: Twitter
User: [withheld]

Do you feel a sense of belonging to a Twitter community? For how long did you participate before you felt this? Which community / what name does it go by or do you assign to it?
I guess I'm a part of the emoprogs. That's the label I identify most with, anyway. The only emotion it evokes would be comfort that there are people like you out there. I was on twitter for about a year before I started tweeting along with this group. I participate by tweeting out politics stuff, tweeting weird "jokes," replying to joke threads, and sending grossout images to people who say offensive stuff.

How do you become part of the community? (Generally, or your personal experience)
By tweeting stuff that other emoprogs like/agree with, having them fav/RT you and follow you back

What expectations are made of community members? Are lurkers/followers who don't engage "community members"?
Lurkers are definitely community members, because they play the crucial role of fav'ing and RTing

Do certain users have certain roles within the community? What is the overall goal or purpose of the community?
Some of the more popular accounts play a specific role like tweeting about politics/history/activism. Other accounts are mostly joke accounts that bring attention to the issues by writing satire. I guess the goal is to bring the mainstream left into our line of thinking but I'm not exactly holding my breath.

**When do you feel greatest connection to the community? During which activities?**
When we're all trolling a journalist together

**What role does trolling play in your community? Does it create community cohesion? Given the political nature of the community, is trolling necessary to hold people accountable for their BS?**

Trolling is central to the emoprog movement. It's how we get our message across to unfriendly parties.

**Is community cohesion also dependent on interactions with news articles - both with good reporting and bad reporting?**
Critiquing journalism is a central activity in our community because journalism plays such a crucial role in politics. Good articles are important to keep everyone informed.

**Do you use Reddit or 4chan? Why or why not? Why do you use Twitter and what does it offer that other sites lack?**
There's too much negativity on Reddit and 4chan for me. I like Twitter because there's more humor and it's easier to find people that I see eye-to-eye with.

**Is Twitter a place where status and social structures exist? On that note, do followers / favorites quantify status?**
Yes, some popular accounts are openly disdainful of unpopular accounts which is odd because if it wasn't for all the small accounts following them, they wouldn't be popular...

**If you met a target of your trolling in a bar how would you react?**
If I met Eli Lake in a bar, I'd confront him about his bad politics just like I do on Twitter. However, Twitter does give you more freedom to exercise your political beliefs without fear of being blacklisted in your industry.

**Is there competition to present yourself as more left-leaning than the average community member? Does this divide the community?**
No. The further to the left you are (i.e. Stalinist) the more likely you are to be alienated

**What divides community other than the leftist competition?**
Identity politics causes friction. Some people believe in the democratic process and try to elect Democrats and some people are extremely hostile toward the Democratic party.

**How does a typical Twitter user act on Twitter? How does this compare to how you act?**
There are so many personalities on twitter, it is hard to delineate a "typical" user. A lot of people just write about their day and RT things they like, but I try to be creative with my tweets. I find the whole point of the website to be an exercise in creativity and networking with other creative people who also happen to be radical leftists.

**What is the relationship between different Twitter communities, like the Emoprog Army, Weird Twitter, and the Pig Poop Balls Crew?**

These communities overlap a lot, but not entirely. Weird Twitter is a big sector that includes a lot of people who are not leftists/emoprogs.

**How do you feel when you are blocked by a prominent account? How often is this your goal and how often does it come as a surprise?**

I don't get blocked too often. I try not to get blocked because I'd rather be able to debate people I disagree with. It doesn't bother me when I get blocked.

**Interview #12: Twitter**

**User: [withheld]**

**Do you feel a sense of belonging to a Twitter community? For how long did you participate before you felt this? Which community / what name does it go by or do you assign to it?**

As a lurker, I would say that I feel an attachment to the community more so than I feel that I belong, as I’m not often noticed and don’t really contribute too much. After a few weeks following some of the accounts in the community and laughing at their jokes and their antics, I felt attached – so it didn’t take very long. The community at its largest scale is often called “weird Twitter”, but I have a particular interest in the political group: the Emoprogs.

**How do you become part of the community? (Generally, or your personal experience)**

I guess to really become part of the community you might have to make some jokes and be followed by other accounts in the community. I follow lots of accounts and favorite the Tweets that make me laugh, amuse me, or that I think I might want to see again later. Sometimes the accounts follow me back, so that makes me feel connected to the community too.

**What expectations are made of community members? Are lurkers/followers who don't engage "community members"?**

As a lurker, I do think of myself as a part of the community. I guess members are expected to understand that trolling never starts serious and only becomes serious when people get really mad about it. You’re expected to be able to recognize when an account is trolling, parodying something, or being genuine.
Do certain users have certain roles within the community? Does everyone contribute to challenging the status quo and is this the community’s overall goal?

I think the community’s overall goal is simply to have fun. Challenging the status quo and irritating people in the “system” (or compliant with the system) can definitely be fun, so it happens a lot. I don’t know if users have certain roles, but their personalities make them act in certain ways that might make it seem like that. I wouldn’t say someone has a “role” to make jokes or to troll Congressmen/women but it is a fun way to use Twitter.

When do you feel greatest connection to the community? During which activities?

When everyone gangs up on a powerful person or celebrity. When a celeb denies climate change or evolution, it’s always hilarious to see them bombarded with people letting them know they’re stupid.

What role does trolling play in your community? Does it create community cohesion? Given the political nature of the community, is trolling necessary to hold people accountable for their BS?

Trolling is huge! The community could persist without trolling, because the prominent members are pretty close by now, but for people like me who lurk trolling is what keeps the community alive. It definitely creates cohesion, proven by the fact that it’s the reason I started following and it’s the main reason that I stick around. The non-trolling jokes are fun and I follow a bunch of non-troll/non-political weird Twitter accounts, but the political trolls make me proud to be an Emoprogger.

Is community cohesion also dependent on interactions with news articles - both with good reporting and bad reporting?

I get most of my news from articles linked by community members. Writers who don’t offer much intellectually get trolled and their articles get shared so that we can scoff at them collectively, so that creates community.

Do you use Reddit or 4chan? Why or why not? Why do you use Twitter and what does it offer that other sites lack?

No. Reddit used to be good for news, but now Twitter is sufficient for that. I prefer the jokes on Twitter, they have to be concise and 140 characters or less so people need to be really clever. Reddit is too positive and most of the users seem to have the same opinions on a lot of things. On Twitter, especially with the trolls and politics, you can see different perspectives battling for validity. I don’t use 4chan because it’s just not that entertaining in my opinion.

Is Twitter a place where status and social structures exist? On that note, do followers / favorites quantify status?
I think so. When you get a bunch of followers retweeting and favoriting your tweets you obviously get more attention, recognition, and higher status. I don’t really think too much about status or care about how many followers an account has though, I just follow the good stuff.

**If you met a target of your trolling in a bar how would you react?**

I laugh at a lot of the trolling toward people who wouldn’t be recognized by the average person, but I only really join in against high profile targets or frequently targeted accounts that I think deserve everything that can be thrown against them. So if I saw Pat Sajak or Dianne Feinstein in a bar, or a neoconservative writer or something, I’d totally try to think of a way to troll them or ruin their night in a subtle, not regrettable way that wouldn’t get me arrested.

**How does a typical Twitter user act on Twitter? How does this compare to how you act?**

I think typical users interact with people they already know in real life, and I do that on a smaller scale. I follow and am followed by people I know, but I don’t usually interact too much with them. I follow a lot of organizations and causes that I support, more so than celebrities that I like which seems to be more “normal”. I retweet a lot of news articles so apolitical people are forced to scroll past the headlines, but mostly I just lurk and favorite jokes that make me laugh.
Online Communities: Interactions and Place-Making in a Virtual Environment

By: Tyler Gorski, AJ Rohn, Morgan Ripp, and Brandon Kutsch

Figure 1: Graphic of place in three online communities

The graphic is an attempt at visualizing the information we have collected from our interviews and observations in order to show how place-making occurs online. It displays place
as the center focus with the three defining factors of place radiating outwards. The location of the website may not be as influential in creating place in a community but it helps to establish the basis in which locale and sense of place forms. To better understand how each online community differs this graphic has separated the online communities and the functionality that is present. Each online community is represented uniquely through different colors but also share common characteristics represented in white. All these topics have been previously discussed throughout the paper but have been created into this graphic to better visualize the unity.

Visualizing place poses challenges because all of these parts are interrelated and iterative. In the words of Relph “it constitute a series of dialectics that form one common structure” (Relph 1976, 48). While each of these topics are placed in one of the three categories of place it is important to note that they can fall under multiple foci. Through this graphic we tried to show this by leaving the circles open because concepts such as interaction can fall under both locale and sense of place. Also, sense of place can change depending on the users involvement of the online community. In general this graphic is a basis for the formation of place online but it can be expanded to incorporate more online communities and users experiences.

In order to create this graphic we first collected all of the pertinent information from the literature review and interviews that fall under the place definition. I categorized all the topics into a list shown here.

**Identity**: community member, pseudonymous, anonymous, real name accounts, freedom, multiple accounts, informal, identity exploration, identity formation
Twitter: handle, professional, informal, pseudonymous, anonymous, real name
Reddit: pseudonymous, anonymous, account history
Smashboards: pseudonymous, anonymous, avatar, account page

**Interactions**: collaboration, support, criticism, participation, lurking, learning curve, compounding information, rules, posting guidelines, inside jokes, punishment, activisms, trolling, friendship, advice, user-submitted knowledge
Reddit: reddiquette, upvote, downvote, comment, save, gifs, meme
Twitter: tweet, retweet, favorite, following, lists, podcast
Smashboards: tournament, competitive discussion, ‘liked’ posts, follow, podcast, blogs, videos, social threads
Location: globalized, access, digital divide, url, infinite, unique, local, revist, real, transglobal, time, forum
Reddit: single thread, subreddit, www.reddit.com, r/MLS
Twitter: Emoprog Army, www.twitter.com
Smashboards: www.smashboards.com

Locale: virtual space, network, like interests, gathering place, static, boundaries, barriers to entry, culture, social hierarchy, event, rules, basic structure, basic skill, technical issues, socio-cultural barriers, public, private, stratification, stagnation, specialized, visual cues, visual variables, emoticons, discussions, ways to express yourself
Reddit: soccer knowledge; underdog mentality, niche community, enthusiasm, trashtalking, banter (instead of inside jokes)

Sense of place: community formation, relationships, virtual interactions, time-space-compression, information flows, transparency, emotions, meaning, experiences, realm of activity, attachment, safety, nostalgia, social norms,

After this I created a word cloud and circular diagram to experiment with types of ways to visualize the information that I had. Neither of these visualizations were adequate representations in showing place online. After attending the design lab twice I received enough feedback on how an outside perspective would perceive the information and changed the design drastically.

Figure 2: Word cloud with functionality of three communities
Figure 3: Circle Diagram with main themes of place