Collaboration & Brainstorming Tools

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In many ways, digital collaboration and brainstorming tools are a natural evolution for humanity, a reflection of the development of the species. Collaboration is so intrinsic to being human that it is theorized that it may be a major contributing factor in humanity’s “success as a species”(BSG). With collaboration playing such a huge role in human history, it is understandable that it would therefore would play such a major role in the internet, which serves as a reflection of humanity. Internet collaboration and brainstorming tools allow people to work together to achieve a common goal, just as they have in the past. However, these new tools offer advantages over traditional face-to-face collaboration. Now people can collaborate remotely and on entirely different schedules. These internet tools give the freedom to work on projects together, efficiently divide tasks, comment on a collaborator’s work, and access the sum total of knowledge and abilities of the collaborators to innovate and find new solutions. They can also reduce redundant work as everyone can see what is already finished.

The internet could be said to have been developed with an ethos of collaboration. The United States government agency ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency) is considered to be responsible for the creation of the internet. ARPA was the beginning of networked computers, and used a packet system to send data in parts to be reassembled at the destination. The military could use the system to ensure a decentralized communication structure that would make them less vulnerable to attack (Green, 21-26).

Businesses and universities also played a major role in the development of ARPANET. Because standardization did not yet really exist in computers, it was difficult for them to communicate with each other. This was solved by the use of Interface Message Processors (IMP), computers that “operated like modern day routers” by only looking at information relevant to sending a packet along (Green, 28). One graduate student put out a “request for comment” which fostered a “collaborative consultation process” in the design of the system (Green, 29).

Internet collaboration tools were also made possible due to the creation of the World Wide Web, or WWW, by Tim Berners-Lee. Berners-Lee envisioned the web as something all networked computers would have access to. This democratization of access and content forms a strong basis for the collaborative spirit of the internet. (Green 32-34) Now there are a multitude of different kinds of collaborative and brainstorming software, built upon the decades of history of collaboration between the military, industry, individuals, and more.

Wikipedia is a prominent example of what can be accomplished with a collaboration tool, specifically that of a wiki. Wikis allow users to edit the content of the site. Wikipedia is a non-profit website that functions as a massive encyclopedia. Despite allowing anyone to edit the site, Wikipedia maintains a certain level of credibility by implementing specific standards regarding what can be edited and how. Contentious or high-profile entries may be locked to all but registered or special users.

Wikipedia is extremely popular. It is one of the most visited websites on the internet. This huge influx of users allow the site to become the incredible repository of knowledge that it is today, with millions of articles in hundreds of languages. New articles are constantly being added and old ones are revised (Anders).

This enormous undertaking offers no real incentive to its contributors beyond its own creation and seems fairly susceptible to those with malicious intentions. However, Wikipedia is mostly a very successful website with an enormous amount of well-sourced, high quality information. It is a testament to the power of collaborative tools.

Another tool for collaboration is Google Docs. This online service is a freely accessible word processing software, similar to Microsoft Word. Docs allows people to collaborate on documents in real time. Users can see as other people, indicated by colored cursors, edit sentences and make comments on paragraphs. Outside of a digital setting, this sort of collaboration would require passing a piece of paper back and forth. Google Docs offers much greater clarity and efficiency.

Docs also allows users to view the edit history of a document and see which changes were made by whom and when. This feature is useful for tracking the contributions of collaborators and comparing versions of a document.

Sharing documents is easy within the service as there are options to send it via email or copy a link. Collaboration is further simplified by the software’s compatibility with Microsoft Word documents.

Another kind of online collaboration takes place in virtual worlds. One such world is that of *Eve Online*. This massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) takes place in space, the basis of the game’s notorious size and scope. *Eve*’s over half a million players explore the universe, engage in battles, and keep the game’s large virtual economy running.

What makes the game especially collaborative is that it lacks concrete goals and narrative. It is the community of players that create alliances and make their own stories. One of the game’s most powerful players does not even play himself, instead directing his team on forums outside the game (Parkin).

One notable event within the game was the The Battle of B-R5RB. The battle included thousands of players, cost an estimated $300,000 of real money, and lasted for nearly an entire day. The attackers were attempting to gain control of a space station. The whole event required careful planning and a great deal of collaboration (Moore).

As indicated in the examples, online collaborative tools can be used for things as varied as growing a knowledge base, personal projects, and even leisure. It is clear these tools can be extremely effective. They have resulted in feats as large as the massive repository of knowledge that is Wikipedia to smaller accomplishments such as allowing two people to collaborate on a novel in Google Docs. The applications are myriad and often easily accessible to all.

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