

What Would Jane Austen Do: Opportunities for Intentional Social Norms in Digital Spaces

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“It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing were made the order of the day.”

“Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say, but it would not be near so much like a ball.”

~ Pride and Prejudice

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1 Motivation

Detailed social norms governed Regency era parties in England during the 19th century. As they do today, social norms in the Regency era guided how party guests and hosts interacted with one another [4]. Unlike today, social conventions were deeply nuanced and homogenous throughout a social network. Shared boundaries, conventions, and expectations contributed to the success of large social events by allowing individuals to autonomously craft personally meaningful experiences while still contributing to the overall pleasant, social atmosphere. Nowhere can these dynamics be observed more clearly than in Jane Austen’s novels. Regency era balls are a common setting in Jane Austen’s writing, providing a dramatic, socially complex backdrop against which characters pursue individual objectives while adhering to the overarching spirit of engagement and camaraderie expected at balls. For instance, a character may converse with a new acquaintance (individual objective) while participating in a group dance (social objective). This multitasking was made possible through shared social conventions.

In contrast, virtual social spaces are faced with an almost complete lack of communal social conventions. Social norms and rules have evolved in various digital spaces, similar to in person spaces. Norms of physical body language have been found to be mirrored in virtual spaces like Second Life [7] and chat rooms with clear rules can lead to more meaningful and valued discussion than rooms without rules [3]. With virtual spaces being the overwhelming medium for socialization over the past two years, a large variety of tools have been introduced. Many of these are built on metaphors of in person interaction, such as each attendee controlling an avatar that moves through a virtual room in Gather.Town and others explore digital-based alternatives to in person settings. However, these tools remain inadequate for virtual socialization that is engaging on a personal and group level. What we see as lacking across these novel digital spaces, causing barriers to online socialization, are design choices that promote a communal understanding of social norms.

To inspire the design of virtual tools intended for socialization (e.g. Gather.Town, Zoom social hangouts), we identify relevant metaphors from the past that made large social events successful on a personal and community level. People attend social events for individual objectives like networking, but can feel inhibited when they don’t understand the rules and expectations of the wider social space (e.g. how do you approach someone you don’t know?). Using familiar metaphors in digital spaces has long been used to familiarize users with new settings, and can reveal new opportunities [2]. In this position paper, we discuss three social norms in Regency balls, and discuss how these metaphors can be leveraged to design social engaging virtual spaces.

2 Regency-Era Opportunities for Digital Social Norms

In this section we identify three important features of regency era balls (the host, dance cards, and unspoken social cues), explain why these promoted successful socialization, and discuss how these elements can be used as design metaphors for virtual social spaces.

2.1 The Role of Host

In Regency era balls, the host (or the master of ceremonies in some settings) served a critical role in managing events and engaging attendees, including greeting guests and ensuring different types of rooms were available [4]. Modern virtual hosts have some overlap in abilities, such as admitting attendees and creating breakout rooms. However, the virtual role focuses on the difference in digital permissions between host and attendee (that is, an attendee cannot enter before the host admits them), but the Regency host was expected to greet attendees, not simply open the door for them (Figure 1). The digital host’s role is not currently a social one. For example, breakout rooms can be used to let smaller groups of people converse as part of a larger call, but often these groups will not begin to

socialize until an organizer joins the room and sets the expectations of what conversation might be or simply gets the ball rolling. Similarly, joining a meeting from the virtual waiting room with no introduction or moment with the host is abrupt and does not allow for gracefully joining social spaces. Attendees who do not know other people in the meeting room can find it a challenge to engage fully in the meeting [5].

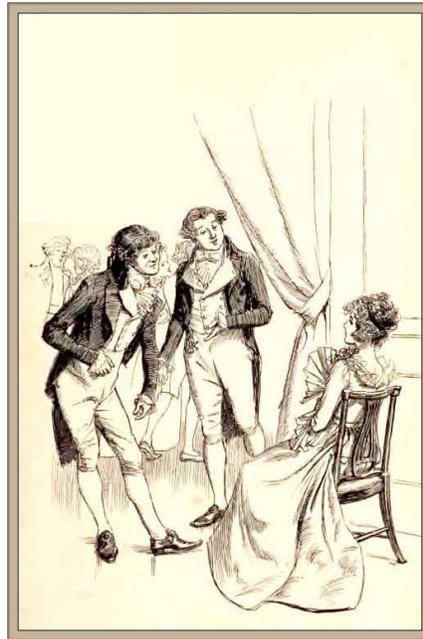


Figure 1. “Mr. Dashwood Introduced Him”, illustration from *Sense and Sensibility* [1].

Digital spaces need to explore designs for the social role of hosting - host activities that engage with people and connect people, compared to the largely restrictive work of the zoom host, for example. Creating opportunities for the host to personally greet attendees as they join and introduce them to the full meeting or a relevant group of people would provide a clear sense of social connection as well as a consensus of social greetings and niceties that are unclear in current digital spaces. An additional step between waiting rooms and meeting spaces could let hosts socially greet attendees and introduce them to others in a smaller setting. Identifying shared interests or talking points with even one other attendee could promote engagement and discussion in the larger meeting space [5].

2.2 Dance Cards for Social Presence

Dancing at balls provided the chance for a pair of people to connect while remaining present in the larger social space. The dance card listed the schedule of dances with space for guests to write in the names of their partners (Figure 2). This ensured that different pairs of people had the opportunity to connect over the course of a ball, with rules like no one should dance more than two dances with the same person. The card was also a tangible reminder of the social engagements of the evening. One-on-one conversations were expected to happen in these moments and a single dance could be as long as 15 to 30 minutes. Throughout that time, their social presence is maintained in the larger space. Unlike a breakout room where attendees are completely absent from the main space, a couple remains physically present in the dance hall and though their conversation is largely private, their body language keeps them socially connected with the larger group.

Many digital social spaces incorporate physical distance and presence, for example Gather.Town which uses avatars to let attendees “walk up” to a person or group to start a conversation. This allows for continued social presence across groups in a virtual “room”, but the lack of structure leaves too much up to attendees who wander around virtual spaces unsure of how to join in. It is difficult to tell if someone standing by themselves or in a small group is looking for conversation or has walked away from their computer. Explicit invitations to socialize, on publicly visible virtual dance cards could provide a structure around socialization that encourages different people to talk at different scales (e.g., in groups and one-on-one) and encourages people to talk with more people than perhaps just the few they know well. This visible expression of social intent and explicit invitation to plan to connect with

- [6] unknown. 2009. *English: Dance engagements card for 11 January 1887*. Retrieved May 2, 2022 from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dance_card00.jpg
- [7] Nick Yee, Jeremy N. Bailenson, Mark Urbanek, Francis Chang, and Dan Merget. 2007. The Unbearable Likeness of Being Digital: The Persistence of Nonverbal Social Norms in Online Virtual Environments. <http://www.liebertpub.com/cpb>. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2006.9984>