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# Deliberate Barriers to User Participation on MetaFilter

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# Deliberate Barriers to User Participation on MetaFilter

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## ABSTRACT

This descriptive study explores deliberate barriers to user participation on the long-lived discussion site Metafilter.com. Metafilter has been in continuous operation since its founding in 1999, and at the time of this writing has around 12,000 active users. While many newer online sites appear eager to eliminate barriers to participation and recruit as many new members as possible, Metafilter charges a \$5 fee to join and has a mandatory one-week waiting period before new users are allowed to post. In this paper, we explore both why these barriers were imposed and why some users choose to surmount the barriers to become members. Our data sources include historical documents posted on the site, interviews with eleven site members, an informal user survey, and an interview with the Matt Haughey, the site's founder and owner. Implications of these design features are discussed.

## Author Keywords

MetaFilter, membership hurdles, community membership, joining reasons

## ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.3 Organizational Impacts: Computer-supported collaborative work

## INTRODUCTION

In a landscape full of *free* online communities that seek to attract users and thus popularity, we present a mixed-methods analysis of MetaFilter.com, a community that requires a \$5 fee to participate. MetaFilter is a site (metafilter.com) that did not originally set out to create an online “community.” It was founded in 1999 by Matt Haughey who stated that he, “never really intended the site to become a bustling community. I just wanted to make something useful that others could enjoy. [?, p. 29]”

Yet ten years after its launch MetaFilter was included in Time Magazine's 50 Best Websites of 2009. This “best of the internet” blog has gained membership over the years, resulting in the development of a vibrant community.

Metafilter.com is self-described as a weblog. According to the MetaFilter ‘About’ page<sup>1</sup> “this website exists to break down the barriers between people, to extend a weblog beyond just one person, and to foster discussion among its members.” It also functions as an online community accord-

ing to the definitions outlined by [?] and [?]. Haughey currently describes the site as a “social network for not-friends.” It is a place for people to come and meet and socialize and then potentially become friends [?]. This represents a cyber-medium for creating a social space [?] or a gathering spot, and has become a “third place” [?] for many.

MetaFilter is similar to previous instantiations of online communities such as the WELL [?] as it is where users go to discuss favorite subjects and its members form friendships and show concern for other members. MetaFilter provides the three kinds of collective goods its members can only gain by banding together as described in [?]: 1) social network capital, 2) knowledge capital, and 3) communion among members [?].

In its infancy, MetaFilter was only a front page where posts and subsequent comments would appear in chronological order with newest posts at the top. According to founder Haughey, MetaFilter was one of the first blogs to allow commenting [Haughey, personal communication]. Beyond the front page, the MetaTalk section was the only other section available to users for participation. Haughey wanted to allow users to ask for additional feature requests or etiquette questions. Consequently in 2003, a separate section, AskMetaFilter (or AskMe for short), was added to allow members to get advice from other members. The site has continued to expand and now includes profile pages, project pages, job listings, a music section, and an “In Real Life” (IRL) section. The three main sections of the site are often referred to by members by the color of the background of the main page: blue for the MetaFilter front page (Figure 1), green for AskMetaFilter, and grey for MetaTalk (discussing MetaFilter).

MetaFilter contains many components of typical online communities: moderators, chances to meet up in real life, discussion threads – all of which are documented facets of an online community [?, ?, ?]. However one unusual aspect of MetaFilter are the hurdles placed before casual Internet lurkers before they can become actively engaged members, particularly the one-time \$5 joining fee. We set out to explore why members would pay \$5 to participate in this online community when other similar online communities exist where participation is free (e.g., StumbleUpon, Digg, Fark, and Slashdot).

<sup>1</sup> metafilter.com/about.mefi

## Research Questions

In this paper we address the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Why do people pay \$5 to join MetaFilter?

What reasons do members give for paying to join this online community?

**RQ2:** How has the monetary barrier to site participation affected the MetaFilter community?

Using both site log data and a series of interviews with MetaFilter “elders”, moderators, and the site’s founder, we address each of these questions in the hopes of synthesizing a case study for use by the community.

The remainder of the paper consists of a brief history of the MetaFilter site, presentation of the research methods used, and results. We conclude with a discussion about the implications that the success of the barriers within MetaFilter could have for other digitally hosted communities.

## BACKGROUND

### Online Community Membership Barriers

Kim defines the membership life cycle for an online community [?]. In it she defines a “membership ritual” by asking, “What does one have to do / give / make / wait before being considered a ‘Regular’?” Powazek defines membership barriers which are the schemes that keep people in or out of an online community [?]. He further categorizes them into three types: 1) informal barriers to entry, 2) formal barriers to entry, and 3) extreme barriers to entry.

Most sites use *interest* as an informal barrier to entry, meaning that if the user is not interested in the content, discussion, or activities occurring on a site, they will not join. Another type of informal barrier is design: site architecture and design choices can strategically target an audience [?].

Formal barriers can consist of registration, a specific skill or knowledge, age requirement, or even payment. Formal hurdles are explicit and require more effort on the user’s part to overcome. With formal barriers, the community must have a mechanism in place to enforce the barrier. For example, the first online community to institute a fee was *Community Memory - Berkeley*. In the mid 1970s they instituted a token fee of 25 cents to post an opinion and a dollar to start a new forum [?, ?].

Extreme barriers occur when the online community is guarded by those with a vested interest in safeguarding the constituency of the community. Much like you only send party invitations to friends whom you trust and know would treat your house with respect, links and invitations to these online communities are given only to those who will behave within the community and not pass along the secret [?]. If the community grows too large or too many unwanted members join, the community can be killed off and started again at another site, with the new link passed on only to those ‘worthy’ of joining the new community. Powazek gives an example of this extreme measure that occurred with Dreamless.org [?].

Preece and Shneiderman introduce a framework describing the successive levels of social participation within an online community: reading, contributing, collaborating, and leading [?]. They describe some of the reasons why a participant may move from one stage to another. In the discussion section of this influential paper, they indicate that the “triggers for changes from reader to contributor...are little understood” [?, p. 25]. Studying the membership fee of MetaFilter allows us to explore the motivations behind when a reader, or peripheral participant, becomes an active contributor.

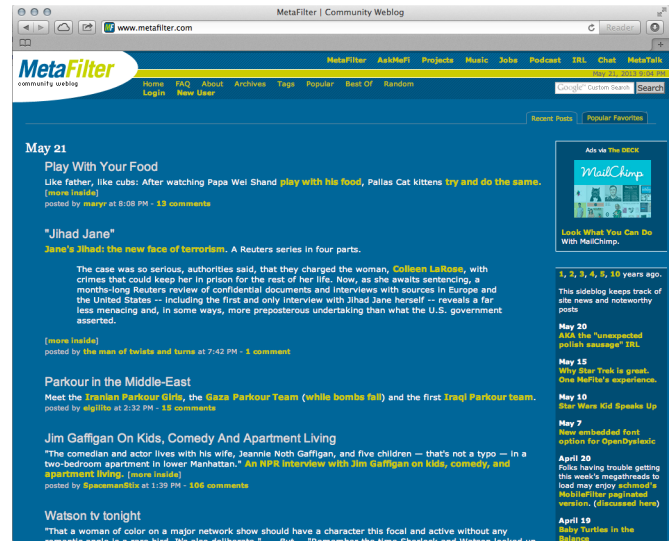


Figure 1: A capture of the front (“Blue”) page of MetaFilter.

### MetaFilter Membership Barriers

Visitors are free to explore the MetaFilter site and view all threads and comments. They are restricted from commenting or starting new threads. Many current members admit to visiting or “lurking” [?, ?, ?] before joining. Currently there are approximately 12,000 active, registered users on the site, with many more visitors and lurkers [?]. An estimate of users who have participated over the years on MetaFilter is approximately 65,000, with only 12,000 being currently active. Haughey believes that MetaFilter follows the standard community contribution ratio seen on many sites, where there are 90 lurkers for every 9 members and only one of those is an active contributor. He estimates that approximately 1 in 10 members were active within the past month [Haughey, personal communication].

There are three main membership barriers to MetaFilter: 1) registration, 2) payment of the one-time \$5 membership fee, and 3) waiting period. All three would be classified as formal barrier’s under Powazek’s classification scheme [?]. Each formal barrier serves a purpose in the overall functioning of the site.

Registration for an online community can take many forms, from using an existing ID with another site to providing detailed personal information in order to be able to contribute. Registration means providing the online community with information that will allow you to be tracked, posts to

be attributed to you, and additional features to become activated. Without registering, you are simply a visitor to the site. MetaFilter takes a middle of the road approach to registration, requiring you to select a unique user name, password, and provide a valid email address. Any additional personal information is optional. Many users choose to protect their true identities while others select their actual name to be their user name.

In order to post comments in ongoing threads or to post a new thread on MetaFilter, a user must be a registered member of the site. To become a registered member, the user must pay a one-time membership fee of \$5 through PayPal. After registration, in addition to the ability to comment on the site, members have the ability to customize the MetaFilter interface and to “favorite” posts. Members have access to MeMail (an in-community email system). The display of advertisements are reduced for members.

After signing up to join and paying the one-time fee, the final membership barrier is a one week waiting period prior to being able to post to the main page or ask a question on AskMe. During this waiting period users are encouraged to browse the site and add comments. In addition to the waiting period, new members are required to comment at least 3 times before adding a post to the main page (a FPP - Front Page Post). Even after becoming a “full” member (payment, one week waiting period, and 3 comments), members are restricted on how often they can post another new thread in certain areas of the site. For the main page and the Music subsite, a member may only post a new thread every 24 hours. For the MetaTalk and AskMe subsites, a user must wait one week before posting a new thread or question. And for the MetaProject section, users must wait one month before posting a new project. These wait periods prevent individual users from dominating a specific portion of the site as a poster, but members are always welcome to add comments.

The institution of a single \$5 fee is unusual in the realm of general interest online communities. SomethingAwful.com is another popular online community that charges members a fee for joining. They have additional charges for other member privileges, that are beyond the scope of what MetaFilter does. Other online community sites have monthly fees for premium access or additional content (Reddit Gold). Pinboard also charges a one time joining fee, but that fee increments a fraction of a cent for every user who joins. The current fee is above \$10.00. In an effort to determine why users move from visitors to active members through paying a fee and enduring a waiting period, we researched the MetaFilter community.

## RESEARCH METHOD

To study MetaFilter, we used four sources of data: 1) interviews with members of the site, 2) responses to a question posted directly on the site, 3) postings on the site, all of which are archived, and 4) an analytic tool called Info-Dumpster which provides statistical information about the site. The authors became contributing members of the site. We joined by registering and paying the one-time joining

fee. We participated in the site by commenting on threads and eventually posting. To further understand the mindset of the community, we interviewed 11 current members of MetaFilter.

## Interviews

Initial interviewees were identified as authors of interesting comment threads or controversial postings in that they generated a long thread of responses. In addition, one researcher had personal contact with a regular MetaFilter user who was referred to another member of the research team in order to limit potential bias and the perils of easy access [?]. Thus we began with purposeful sampling based on a user’s posts, but gathered the remainder of the interview participants through snowball sampling [?]. We encountered no gatekeepers in our recruiting efforts [?].

Two interviews were conducted via phone and then manually transcribed. The remaining interviews were conducted via instant message. An initial protocol of twelve questions was developed to guide each researcher in an interview. These questions were developed through discovery of the site and the portions the researchers found interesting or thought might lead to unexpected answers. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format allowing each interviewer to ask follow-up questions as dictated by participant responses, following the interview technique described in [?].

## Informal Site Survey



The image shows a screenshot of a forum post on the MetaTalk page. The post is titled "What made you pay?" and was posted by user "newuser" on April 11, 2012, at 10:04 AM. The post content asks for reasons why members joined after the \$5 fee was implemented. The post has 144 comments and includes a "Subscribe" button. The forum interface shows navigation links like Home, FAQ, Archives, and a search bar. The MetaTalk logo and date/time are visible at the top of the post area.

Figure 2: Question posted on Talk page, 144 comments.

We found several of our interviewees had become members prior to the implementation of the \$5 joining fee, but most had joined afterwards. We wondered why members would

pay to join this blogging site rather than just reading the information, which is available to non-members, or participating in a free blogging site. To obtain a sample of answers, we posted the following question (Figure 2) to the MetaTalk portion of the website, a subsection of the website where users discuss the site:

*For MeFis that joined after Nov. 17, 2004: what convinced you to pay the \$5 upfront fee? Needed for a research project, details inside. If you joined MetaFilter after Matt implemented the \$5 charge, what prompted you to pay?*<sup>2</sup>

By posting a question to the site, we understand that those who responded represent a sample that is self-selected and not representative of all members. We do believe, however, they offer insight into many of the various possible reasons that exist for prompting a peripheral user to become more active within the online community.

We obtained 144 responses in one week. Of those responses, 21 were non-responsive (they were commenting on another user’s response, or asking questions related to the research project). We then classified the responses as to the motivation behind joining. The unit of analysis was the motivation that prompted them to join the site which was given in the answer. We allowed for the possibility of multiple motivations within a single response. Each motivation identified was classified according to distinct phrases or sentences within the text of their answer. Phrases that appeared to be similar were grouped together for each respondent. Two researchers independently coded the data. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

### Posting and Analytics

In addition to analyzing the interview data and responses to the post on the site, we also searched through past archived postings on the site to look for references of members joining the site to add to the raw data. The final source of information on MetaFilter is an analytical tool entitled InfoDumpster<sup>3</sup>. While not officially affiliated with MetaFilter, it provides statistical information on the MetaFilter site and its subsections. We used InfoDumpster to provide information about user growth on the site over time.

### Participant Anonymity

All of the names of the participants have been changed with the exception of those who granted permission to use their first name. Both their names and their MetaFilter handles have been changed to protect their identity. This represents a light disguise [?] as the topics discussed are not controversial and discovery of identity poses no harm to the participants. Direct quotes from the participants are used but no direct quotes from their posts to the site are used [?].

### HISTORY OF METAFILTER MEMBERSHIP BARRIERS

At its earliest instantiation MetaFilter required user registration in order to track members and their contributions. Early

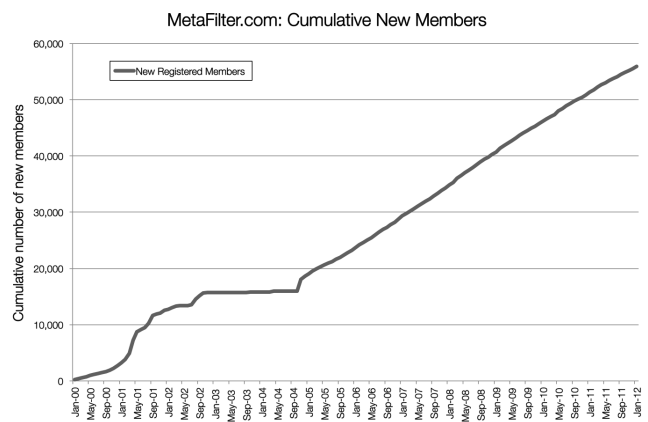


Figure 3: MetaFilter User Growth.

in MetaFilter’s history, founder Haughey instituted the first membership barrier beyond simple registration. He instituted controls on new members that required them to wait 24 hours and comment at least 3 times before introducing a new post [?]. This was done to ensure that members would “get a feel for how people interacted on the site, and what kinds of topics started good threads, and how people acted in those threads [?, p. 33].” Haughey also felt this was an effective way to keep spammers off the site. The current wait periods exist to prevent a single member from dominating any one section of the site [Haughey, personal communication].

One of the original goals for the site was to find a “sweet spot” for membership: a following not too large that it had no feeling of intimacy, but not so small that it could not generate ad revenue to support itself. Haughey wanted members to feel there were people behind the screen names. The membership of the site has grown slowly over the years (see Figure 3). Often membership rates were limited to a set number per day, 20. Many sites employ membership scarcity, limiting the number of new members, both to help the user base scale gracefully and to leverage a feeling of exclusivity to try to create an aura of desirability. In this early example, Haughey simply couldn’t handle the workload of managing a site that was growing so fast. At one point invitations to the site were turned off (due to the inability for Haughey to moderate such a large site himself) which resulted in a black market for user accounts on eBay. Haughey saw someone sell their membership invitation for \$100, and he found himself bothered by these actions. He decided to compromise and open up account registration, but with an attached \$5 dollar one-time fee. Haughey’s comment at the time was, “I killed the black market [?].” The introduction of the fee allowed the community to continue to grow. Another reason for instituting the fee was the current process of allowing 20 users a day to sign up was not working. There was more demand than supply. Haughey sought a fair way to manage the allocation of new memberships.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> metatalk.metafilter.com/21624/What-made-you-pay

<sup>3</sup> infodumpster.org/

<sup>4</sup> metatalk.metafilter.com/2415/Announcement-new-user-signups-are-back-on-20-people-a-day

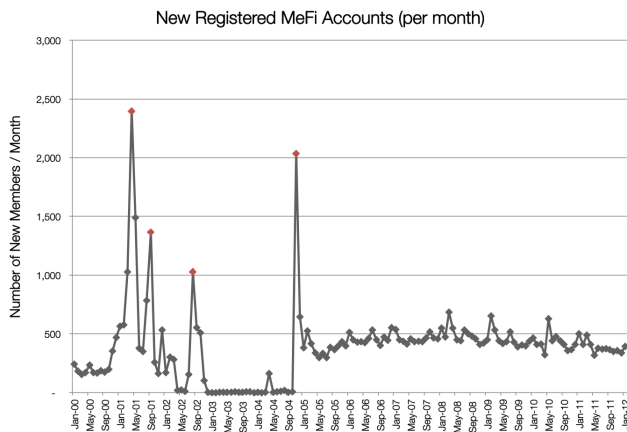


Figure 4: The number of new MetaFilter user registrations, by month. The red points indicate major growth spikes in member registrations.

On November 18, 2004 Haughey instituted the \$5 fee to join. The open ability to join resulted in a large spike in membership (see Figure 4). In Figure 4 the first large spike (chronologically) in membership came in April of 2001. During this time there was a membership tie-in to a website/contest called The 5K (people trying to accomplish something with a very small amount of code). People who signed up for The 5K were also signing up for a Metafilter account whether they knew it or not, which resulted in the big spike of new members in April 2001 [cortex (site moderator), personal communication]. The next chronological spike occurred in September of 2001 and was due to the 9/11 tragedy. There are numerous threads concerning the events of September 2001 and the community grew as a result. The July 2002 spike is a result of opening signups again to 20 people per day<sup>5</sup>. The final chronological spike in November of 2004 is the result of opening membership with the \$5 initiation fee, which resulted in the largest number of users joining in a single month.

There are two important things to note about the institution of the membership fee: 1) the number of users that joined the day the fee was instituted was enough to pay for server space for MetaFilter for the following year<sup>6</sup> and 2) before the fee was instituted, the members discussed the prospect<sup>7</sup>. However using the membership money to help finance the site was never part of the business model. In our interview with Haughey, he shared, “the \$5 fee is mostly a disincentive for spammers and jerks of the internet. It isn’t there to pay the bills, but instead to keep casual trolling to a minimum.”

### RQ1: WHY JOIN?

First we share the data collected to address the first research question addressing why people said they paid to join this

<sup>5</sup>metatalk.metafilter.com/2415/Announcement-new-user-signups-are-back-on-20-people-a-day

<sup>6</sup>metatalk.metafilter.com/8473/Thanks-from-Mathowie

<sup>7</sup>metatalk.metafilter.com/8468/5-same-as-in-town-perks-for-signing-up

online community. When the MetaFilter community was asked why they paid the \$5 fee, 123 valid responses in 7 days were classified into the groups shown in Figure 5.

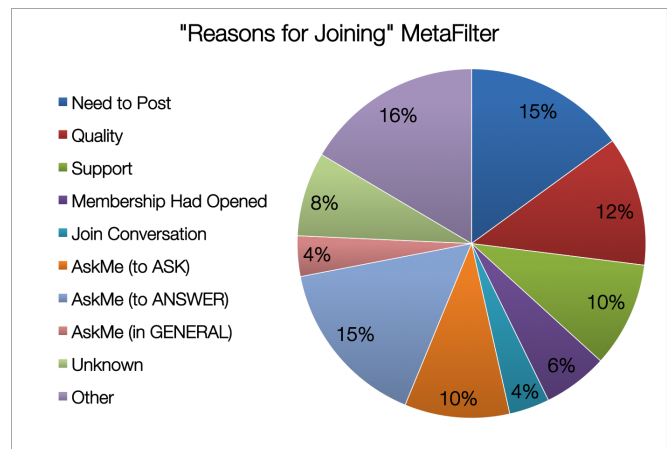


Figure 5: Reasons our sample provided for why they joined MetaFilter.

The largest percentage of users wanted to participate in the AskMe section of the site. This was further broken down into three categories of 1) ask—the member wanted to ask a question on AskMe, 2) answer—the member wanted to answer a question on AskMe, and 3) general—a category where the member indicated they “liked the green.” An example of this third kind of “AskMe” reasoning is the following: “*It wasn’t because I had an answer to share, but rather that I wanted to support the great idea that is AskMeFi. It seemed so diverse in its question base that I knew I’d find lots of opportunities to be helpful in some small way.*”

The second most common reason given by our sample cited the quality of discourse on the site: “*I thought the site was neat, and I went to register, but then I balked at the \$5 entry fee. “The internet is free!” I thought. But I kept lurking for a while, and realized that this was a smart part of the internet, and that the \$5 was totally worth it.*”

Another member commented, “*After lurking for some months, I donated \$5 in support of the generally high-quality discussion and all the work that goes into fostering it. That just so happened to get me a username.*”

Interestingly, the third most popular reason to join was the “need to post.” This occurred because of a post someone saw that required comment: “*I had lurked for a few years but never bothered to sign up until I saw something so horrible that I had to make my disgust known.*”

There was also the sentiment of “*I needed to correct someone about something geeky.*” This echoes a common site phrase, “*You’re wrong!*” This phrase usually results in a long thread of responses where member discuss the merits of each side of the argument.

Another member commented, “*I had been a lurker for years, but I found one particular post so fantastic I just had to reg-*

ister to say how much I loved it.”

Becoming part of the community was another identified reason to join. One member commented, *“I can’t remember what prompted me to to pay actual monies and join when I did—I apparently lurked for another 6 months after joining before adding my voice to the fray. Like [user1] and [user2], I probably felt like I’d gotten \$5 worth of entertainment from the site. It’s also just kind of nice to “be someone” within a community, even if you’re just lurking.”* Another member summed it up this way, *“I’d lurked here for years and years and wanted to feel slightly less like a free rider.”*

Another common reason given by MetaFilter users was to join to support the site. One user commented, *“I had been reading for some time, thought I’d throw down the fiver to support the site (I did not have any pressing need to comment at the time, nor do I generally).”* Another member compared joining the MetaFilter community to contributing to listener supported radio. Another self-identified lurker states, *“I have a strong lurker streak, but eventually I decided I’d gotten well more than \$5 worth of information and entertainment from this place, so joining felt like the right thing to do.”* This member stated, *“Shame. I had lurked for years and felt badly that I wasn’t giving anything back to a community from which I derived a lot of enjoyment and edification. Perhaps not so much ‘giving back’ as I’m still terrible at unliking and participating, but at the least contributing to the financials of the organisation was important to me.”*

Some members specifically joined for access to member-only functionality. *“I lurked for a year or two but signed up the moment I figured out that having a user account would allow me to change the page background color to white.”* Other members indicated it was not the need to respond to a specific post, but to join in the conversation. *“Listening in from across the room was great for a few years. But eventually I wanted to join in on the conversation. Even if it’s more often just to make bad jokes.”* One member compared be non-member lurker to *“it’s like being at a party behind glass.”*

It is clear that these MetaFilter community members made a conscious decision to go through the membership ritual of registering, paying the initiation fee, and enduring the waiting period if necessary, to become a part of the community known as MetaFilter.

## **RQ2: MONETARY FEE SHAPING COMMUNITY**

In our data we found support for the fact that the \$5 fee affects both the composition and behavior of the MetaFilter community. The \$5 registration fee is seen as a positive membership hurdle by many members. One interview participant, Doug, told us he, “also thinks [the fee] is a reasonable, low barrier to entry that keeps out some of the more opportunistic trolls on the net.”

Other users share similar views on the fee. Paul (another interviewee) believes that it is a “small enough fee that it isn’t too terribly burdensome. But it seems quite effective at pre-

venting spambots and trolls just out for some trouble.” Doug brought up a possible issue that “there is a danger that there are people who cannot join because they cannot afford it.” However Haughey clarified the concern when questioned: “We are happy to waive the \$5 for anyone involved in a post (if they are the author of a book being discussed, etc.), and I have given free accounts to people I’ve met at conferences and meetups.” [Haughey, personal communication].

Based on the quality of content on the website today, the \$5 fee appears to have been successful in expanding the community while keeping unwanted individuals away. As a result, moderation of tens of thousands of users is not as daunting of a task for the human staff.

The payment barrier serves several purposes for the functioning of the site. First, it discourages spammers or those not committed to the site. It also serves as a means to controlling the number of users registered for the site as it discourages those that would just sign up to try the site if it were free. Finally, it does also provide modest income for the maintenance of the site.

However, perhaps the greatest effect of the membership fee is to raise the level of discourse on the site. As one member stated, *“Personally I think that what makes Metafilter such a fantastic read - for all the daft bickering, in jokes and show offs - is the sheer quality of the discussion around the posts. Many’s the time I open the discussion thread first, before actually looking at the links relating to the post. And it’s always seemed to me like the \$5 – albeit such a nominally tiny amount – is just enough to filter out the reddit /Youtube style puerile /offensive /inane commenters, and filter in those with something interesting to say.”*

## **DISCUSSION**

Designers of online communities can benefit from thinking specifically about the membership barriers for their site. Registration has clear benefits, such as the ability to track users. However designers should consider if visitors must register before viewing any content for the site. MetaFilter allows visitors to read all the content of the site, including the archives. Many of the user comments in our results indicate they had been visiting and reading contents on the site for a considerable length of time before joining. By allowing this peripheral participation, users may become familiar and comfortable with the site before joining. This may be seen as legitimate peripheral participation [?].

Implementing a membership fee is another purposeful formal membership barrier. As we have seen, if the quality of the online community discourse is high and users respect its content, users are willing to jump this hurdle and pay a nominal fee for the benefits of membership. The quality of the discourse within the community was the most cited reason for members to join MetaFilter. As mentioned previously, Berkeley’s Community Memory[?] was the first case of a fee for online community participation. The institution of the token fees was found to have significantly raised the level of discourse, eliminating many trivial or rude messages [?].

To encourage users to move from visitor to member through registration and payment (the membership ritual [?]), the users must see a clear benefit. The ability to 'join the conversation' and the community must be seen as desirable, as shown by our results. Reminding visitors to join to support the site financially may also prompt users to join. Delineating the additional features available to members that are not available to visitors may also encourage users to join the site. While the reason visitors pay to join MetaFilter are varied, most expressed some desire to be a contributing member of the site, either through comments and posts, or at least financially.

Instituting a waiting period between joining MetaFilter and starting a new thread, along with the requirement that the new member comment at least 3 times, provides a mechanism that require new members to explore the site before opening a conversation. Instead of having uninvited strangers walk into your party and behave in a way that was disruptive or unexpected, you require them to observe the party for a minimal length of time before integrating themselves. And their initial forays into the party would be on the outskirts of conversation rather than making an announcement in the center of the room. This specific membership barrier has perhaps resulted in a more civilized online community and can be seen as an example of moving from peripheral participation to a more central role [?].

An additional possible benefit of establishing membership barriers is to produce more loyalty and commitment among the community members. Cognitive dissonance theory from social psychology explains changes in people's attitudes or beliefs as the result of an attempt to reduce the discrepancy between contradicting ideas or cognitions. This theory lead directly to effort justification as a way to explain why people feel better about outcomes to which they have contributed [?]. Generally, those who invest more into the group, such as through monetary payment, are more committed to the outcome of the group. Added to this is the fact that the current members of MetaFilter discussed and actually helped establish the monetary barrier. Because the members of MetaFilter community helped to determine the amount and frequency of the monetary barrier, it may be seen as more acceptable by future members. It is not seen as an insurmountable barrier but as a minimal hurdle to overcome for membership and acceptance into the community, for an invitation into the conversation.

## CONCLUSION

In 2000, Amy Jo Kim laid out a spectrum of decisions designers of online sites must make [?]. In many ways, both researchers in the social computing field and practitioners designing online sites have yet to fully characterize this design space and understand the implications of all the choices a designer makes. Preece and Shneiderman proposed a framework to explain what motivates technology-mediated social participation within an online community [?]. This research presents some of the triggers that moved MetaFilter visitors to participate in the membership ritual (as Kim describes) and move from reader to possible contributor (in Preece and

Shneidermans framework). Because of the specific membership barriers in MetaFilter, we were able to elicit member responses explaining their motivation for jumping the membership hurdle.

The top reasons for joining (participation in the AskMe section and quality of discourse) given by our participants represent the three kinds of collective goods gained by online community members [?]: 1) social network capital, 2) knowledge capital, and 3) communion among members. Knowledge capital is directly represented in MetaFilter in both the front page content and especially in the AskMe section of the site. Our sample of members indicated the most common reason for joining MetaFilter was to participate in the member-to-member advice section of the site. Whether this represents an altruistic motive (the need to answer others' questions) or a need to seek advice from other members, this was the most popular answer among our sample. The communion among members can be seen in many of the responses given by our participants. Many joined because of the quality of the discourse on the site and because they wanted to "be a part of the conversation." Social network capital is seen in the recognition of "elders" (as defined by Kim) among the site. Several interview participants referenced other members they held in esteem for the quality of their postings or their ability to quell disagreements.

While many sites are designed by teams of people, MetaFilter was designed primarily by one person, and we have an unusual degree of access to his intentions both in his archived comments and his current reflections. Haughey states that he intended the barriers to entry to keep growth manageable, and to help keep out disruptive users and maintain a high quality of discourse. According to MetaFilter users, the barriers succeeded in meeting Haugheys goals.

In an online community the deliberate membership barriers put into place affect both the constituency of the community and possibly the behavior of members. To move lurkers (or readers) to undergo the membership ritual, the benefits must outweigh the costs in the perception of the user. MetaFilter has accomplished this feat fairly well, as can be seen by its continued growth in membership. By providing collective goods seen as desirable by future members they are willing to negotiate the formal membership barriers. Those formal membership barriers control both who joins (spammers and trolls are usually unwilling to pay) and the behavior of the members (the waiting period ensures that immediate inflammatory posts never occur). The careful construction of the membership barriers of MetaFilter have yielded a well respected, long surviving, and thriving online community.

Understanding the motivations for moving users from the periphery into the central online community [?] is valuable for both researchers and designers. Knowing why some users progress in the membership life cycle while others remain as lurkers is beneficial for both existing and future online communities. Only through understanding the possible triggers can we develop further research probes or interventions to explicitly recruit additional members. Using



MetaFilter as a case study provides insight into this complex user phenomenon.

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