

Halls, Taverns, and Gardens

By Max Heald

It's an open secret that most online "communities" aren't really about community at all. If you've spent time in Discord, Telegram, Slack, Signal, Reddit, or Twitter lately you know how conversations in these places get liveliest when they're around asset prices, hacks to get ahead of the crowd, or trials on someone else's behavior. Even my *family's* group chat perks up when we're dunking on some political gaffe or our Helium miner is offline. Yet I'm convinced this slant toward profit and punishment isn't some tribal inevitability of all human organization, but rather a function of the way we structure it; how we *resort to* individual pleasures when there's no obvious way to construct things together.

This is partly a function of legibility— the extent to which paths to contribution in a community are clear— and partly one of *responsibility*— the extent to which a community's center of power is willing to charge its "outer" participants with meaningful opportunities to contribute at all. The sins of bureaucracies, the technology most communities use to organize progress today, are well-known: how as permissioners of both what work gets done and who gets to do it, they're incentivized to fund projects which [entrench the status quo rather than challenge it](#) and create [coordination headwinds](#) via webs of red tape which jam any project that lacks the proper approvals.

But as we gain the tools to organize ourselves online and independently— whether as fans, userbases, and citizens winning representation in the ecosystems we support, or crypto-networks of interdependence funding and governing public goods— it's on us to make sure these new institutions don't mirror the sins of their predecessors and wall off access to meaningful work. There are some exciting experiments out there already, many well-funded and serious about giving responsibility to their outer crowds. But even these remain unnavigable, struggling to galvanize thousands of supporters who are nominally down for the cause. So what gives?

What I'd like to offer here is a vision of a *Minimum Viable Community*, one which could serve any group looking to make an open, productive, and sustainable effort toward its goals. I'll use the high-ish fantasy metaphors of *Halls, Taverns, and Gardens* to do it, and you'll see they're pretty straightforward ones. That's because, beyond a set of shared interests, any community really just needs three things: a way to push progress forward, a way to turn newcomers into public contributors, and a way to sustain the energy for both without grinding the life out of everyone involved.

SUMMARY

Halls are the joint where the community-at-large intersects with the governing body of the whole realm, and where formal proposals for funding and resources are made.

Taverns are where community members of all specializations go to hang out, plan missions, and form teams before marching up to the Hall to propose their work.

Gardens are where new members go to learn community norms and processes, as well as train up with existing community members on their way to becoming independent contributors themselves.

More specifically...

HALLS:

If good communities are responsible for things, the Hall exists to make the process of proposing and receiving that responsibility clear. This is where conversations about a community's broad objectives and philosophy are held, and where its big open questions and unmet goals– as well as which teams are working on each, and with what approaches and assumptions– are maintained for the whole community to see. As the joint where the “outer” unstructured community meets the “inner” governance mechanism, whether that government is a council, a core startup team, or a direct democracy, goals formed in the Hall serve as a source of truth for the whole realm. When teams are meeting in the Tavern, plotting their next adventure, the conversations held here are on their minds.

(A side note: I've let the specifics of governance mechanisms here remain gooey intentionally– there are plenty of arguments as to *how* communities should be governed, eg where capital should flow, how voting should be weighted and who should vote at all– but we're leaving that hanging for now in favor of a question worth nailing first: how to create open, sustainable processes for *any* member of *any* community to train up, find partners, and fairly bid for support for their work, thus constructing a viable road from the very outskirts of a community to its center of power, centers which as of this moment are mostly clouded.)

TAVERNS:

When we strip the rituals and processes away, any community is really just a loose crowd of people with overlapping interests– and that crowd needs a way to convert the potential energy of all those peoples' interests, ideas, and complementary skill sets into missions to push the group forward. The Tavern is a venue for exactly this purpose: community members of all specialties and interests go here to mingle, discuss, debate, and recruit for potential projects or just hang out. Team formation happens here, as does shooting the shit.

In order to gel effectively, a Tavern needs to answer a few key questions: Who's around? What skills do they have? What are they interested in working on? The platforms we've been using as de-facto Taverns don't handle these responsibilities very well. Think of Discord and Twitter, where most of this bumping around currently takes place: memes are next to requests for help are next to proposed ideas are next to shared articles. Everything is lined up by when it was posted, not what it's relevant to. Keeping conversations alive, let alone finding the

right people to have them with, is pretty much impossible unless you brute-force it. And so that's exactly what happens: someone makes a Herculean effort to fight through the human miasma and corral a team, before jetting as quickly as possible to a Figma file, Zoom, shared Google Drive or their own Discord, where the knowledge sits privately until it returns to the community in the form of a completed thing. Keeping these conversations in-house would benefit everyone; ideas would stick around and gestate in ways that produce more interesting ideas and missions, and the center of the community would become an exciting place where things happen, and ideas are battle tested, rather than a maze where nothing gets accomplished. Creating connective tissue in this way would give communities memory; we'd start to see them less as the sum of star-crossed snippets of conversation and more like muscles doing their job. It might even make our participation *feel* like something, too, since we could see them working over time.

GARDENS

If Taverns convert the potential energy of community members' shared interests, values, and skills into opinionated adventures, Gardens prepare new members to take part in that process by getting them familiar with the community's way of doing things.

There are two primary functions to the garden: the gate, and the grounds. First, the gate might be a short syllabi, a series of lectures, a simple test, and, in addition to helping new members transition smoothly to being functioning community members, doubles as a means of getting their buy-in. Whatever the gate's curriculum is, it should be free, open, and accessible to anyone with an internet connection; rather than lock people out who might not appear to be cultural fits, the gate's syllabi should give anyone interested in buying into the community's culture the chance to commit to doing so at only the cost of their time.¹ This is a slightly unusual conception of gatekeeping: not, as it's often used, as a means of keeping others out to elevate the status of those inside, but rather to ensure that anyone who chooses to enter the community begins with a good faith effort. That this process of getting cultural buy-in happens up front is crucial, so the work of ensuring norms doesn't continually fall to existing community members (as it often does now), and they can focus on their own adventures.

The grounds, however, *are* where existing members come together with new ones: they're a space where volunteer contributors can teach skills and lessons relevant to functioning in the community. This might look like livestreaming their work and answering questions, doing pair programming sessions, giving lectures, running workshops, or anything else which conveys skills relevant to the community. In addition, just as the Hall maintains a set of the community's open questions and existing explorations, it might make sense for the grounds to have a directory of adventures new members can apply to join as apprentices in useful but non-critical roles. By joining these, new members could get close to the leading edge of the community's

¹ To me, this is a great way to think about inclusivity— not expanding a community's definitions so others can fit inside (and thus anyone is free to come in and skim off the top), but having a diverse set of opinionated communities, free to access but not automatic to join.

production and get both cultural and functional knowledge before they eventually take on their own adventures.

One last thing on Gardens: whenever a community onboards others to their set of cultural norms, there's a chance for things to get hairy. So it's critical to understand the difference between bringing new members into a rigid community versus a *pluralistic* one. Rigid communities are obsessed with culture– “we have a certain way of doing things, and we expect you to follow or else ex-why-zee” – whereas a pluralistic community would take the same set of goals, but encourage a multitude of approaches. While the community might have a rigid base set of opinions, values, or objectives (since there has to be *some* backbone they're built around), pluralistic communities encourage their members to think for themselves about how to best accomplish those objectives, and support a multitude of approaches toward doing so, knowing many competing, antithetical or even heretical attempts, and a willingness to see what goes surprisingly well, will breed the best outcomes in the long run. But for it to stick, pluralism has to be baked in from the Hall down– a community's official pursuits should reflect a wide range of experiments and styles, and a willingness to see what goes surprisingly well.

WRAPPING UP

Profit and punishment don't have to be our default interests. We can get real satisfaction from building things, even if small, even if only useful to a few, when we make the possibility of constructing those things feel obvious to us.

While history has taught us that hierarchies are how humans move fastest to get things done– after all, our best film sets, labs, and startups are the result of giving visionaries room to roam– we're now feeling en masse how having one isolated hierarchy to manage the rest alienates pretty much everyone else. Putting everything to a public vote, as many experiments in decentralized organization have tried, probably isn't the right adjustment; that's a recipe for slowing governance down and passing lowest common denominator proposals. Instead, if we come to think of communities as *portfolios of opinionated hierarchies*, each a mission given freedom to run down its vision, we can give make room for community members as *maintainers* of those portfolios– making sure they're pushing forward in enough interesting directions, and building up rainy-day supplies– while offering clear paths for motivated people to win support for their best ideas.

This type of responsibility breeds communities people actually want to care for, because they understand and feel a stake in them. And it makes the default of letting someone else run things– and focusing on getting your money, your spouse, your house, and getting out– far less attractive a proposition. Our curiosities and goals fill the space given to them; a life where anyone can pull together a shared mission or exploration, and trust it will be taken seriously, is a life with permission to dream and do on behalf of the things we love. To pull it off, we'll need structures which both require us and give us space.