# Commonspace - Chapter One

*Commonspace* is a book about the people power of the Internet. It shows that the Internet isn't about dot coms, online malls or customizable coupons. It's about us. The *collective* us. The book was written by Mark and Darren at The Commons Group and most of it is available for free here on our site.

Note: The text in these chapters is taken from a pre-publication draft and does not include graphics and some final edits.

Chapter One

## Seize the Power of the Collective

By Mark Surman Apr 16 2004 The Internet isn't about dot coms, online malls or customizable coupons. It's not about routers, servers, browsers, or any of the other fascinating widgets and gadgets. It's not about the business hype or the eye candy. It's not about the toys. Nope. In fact, the Internet isn't even about technology.

It's about us. The *collective* us.

The real power of the Internet lies in *the collective* - the vital, thrilling interconnection of people and ideas that happens online. The juice that makes the Internet hum is the direct result of people talking, sharing, collaborating, aggregating, and playing. It's the electric flow between five programmers on five different continents working together to track down the same elusive idea and hack it into an elegant and useful algorithm. It's the snapshot of what we're all thinking at any given instant: *This Sucks. This Rules*. It's the sparks that fly when a million great ideas collide in one place. People. Connected. *Commonspace.*

Think for a second about some of the things that are happening right now:

**Open source software,** invented, constructed and maintained by loosely connected communities of programmers, is changing our whole notion of authorship and value. New companies are sprouting up out of nowhere, creating successful businesses by giving their software away - for free.

**Business-to-business marketplaces** are bringing together entire industries to help speed up the supply chain and make transactions more efficient - through collaboration. Companies that were formerly bitter rivals are banding together to create marketplaces that they hope will make their industry better for everyone involved.

**Grassroots activists** are organizing themselves in ways that were previously impossible - over the Internet. From Seattle to Prague, they're creating a global equality movement that goes beyond tired ideas of right and left.

What do open source, B2B markets and online activism have in common? They certainly don't have the same goals, and they don't even use the same types of technology. The open source world uses its own powerful hand-built tools. B2B marketplaces use complex custom software packages written by the giants of the software industry. Activists use tiny, unsophisticated Web sites and e-mail lists to take on big companies and big governments. But the scale of the technology and the price tags attached to it aren't what drive the success or failure of any of these ventures. The common thread - the compelling, exciting, factor that ties these phenomena together - is that people, connected online, produce interesting and unprecedented results.

Maybe this is obvious. But if it is, we as a society have developed a real knack for ignoring the obvious. Most discussion about the Internet lives in the past: it's tied up with old-fashioned business ideas and breathless gushing over 'way cool' technology. It entirely misses the real story: communities and other types of human connections. If these are mentioned at all, they are merely sprinkled on top of such discussions as a pretty afterthought.

A consultant friend of ours was called in to assess an 'amazing offer' that one of his business clients was considering. The company in question was a global market leader in its niche, well-organized and well-known. It had recently had a conversation with a big software company that went something like this:

> Big Software Company: Why don't we help you build a huge B2B marketplace so you can dominate your niche?

> Global Market Leader: Sure, why not? Sounds great!

> Big Software Company: Okay, we'll be over with the software and the routers next week. Make sure you have a cheque for $10 million ready when we get there.

What's wrong with this picture? It should be obvious. There are no people in the equation, just wires. What are the people going to do once the wires are in place? Where's the community? For that matter, what are the products? What are the services? Unfortunately, such thinking is very common in the brave new economy. It's like thinking you can build a $10 million aquarium and then throw in a $1.95 packet of Sea Monkeys to make it come to life. Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Put down your copy of [Wired](#), stop spouting meaningless phrases like 'e-commerce solutions', and lose the Sea Monkeys. It's time to start thinking about the collective.

## Commonspace is Everywhere

This book is about one thing: commonspace. The power of the digital collective.

Why? Because commonspace is what makes the Internet different than other type of media . It's driving massive changes in work, home and play in our culture. The collective power of the Internet is morphing our tired assumptions about business and markets into something new and compelling. Fresh methods of interconnecting people online are transforming our notions of what constitutes a community.

In short, we are creating a digital gestalt - a new, more complex version of ourselves. We are growing a collective mind between the bits. And that is changing everything.

So far, the people who have understood this process of change the best are those who have built or participated in online communities. They should know, because they've been benefiting for years from the many-to-many people connections of the Internet world. Unlike television or print, anyone can talk on the Internet: anyone can be on stage. This not only makes the Internet incredibly powerful tool, but it also makes it a fun tool:

We learn new things: '*Don't buy Product X from ACME Accessories, Inc. I have one and it has this annoying habit of giving you a mild electrical shock every time someone in the neighbourhood uses a garage door opener.*'

We make new friends: '*Wow, I had no idea there were any other people out their who posted photos of their [handcuff collections](#) online!*'

We collaborate: '*The latest draft of the story line for the new video game really smokes, but it's still lacking something. It's time to implement the [Secret Cow Level](#).*'

And it's a blast.

But commonspace is a broader concept than 'online community'. Traditionally, online communities bring people together in the form of discussions. Pick up any classic book about the Internet - say, *The Virtual Community,* [Howard Rheingold](#)'s groundbreaking study of the WELL, or an *uber*-capitalist tome like John Hagel III and Arthur G. Armstrong's [*net gain*](#) or the Faith Popcorn-style futurist punditry of [Esther Dyson](#)'s *Release 2.1*. You'll find that most people's definitions of online community focus on three factors: membership, niche and conversation. While there are some disagreements about the precise details, these core components sum up what most people mean by the phrase 'virtual community'.

Today's world of many-to-many interaction is much, much broader than this narrow definition. [Epinions](#) and [eBay](#), [Napster](#), the [Hotline](#) and [Gnutella](#), [Ultima Online](#), [QuakeWorld](#) and [Battle.Net](#) - none of these are communities in the narrow sense, but all of them are built on the same principles as virtual community and are key examples of the evolving digital collective. To really understand the glorious mess called the Internet, we need to think in broader terms.

We are doing more with our online many-to-many relationships than talking. We are playing games, sharing data, doing research, fighting, falling in love (or at least in lust), booking tickets, buying and selling - in other words, we are conducting our lives online. And what's more, we don't always hang with people that think or act in exactly the same ways that we do. (How boring would *that* be?) It is this wider spectrum of collective activity that makes up commonspace: ommonspace is the collective, many-to-many world that we live in online.

The metaphor that we've been using for years (along with many others) to get closer to the idea of commonspace is the **town commons**. As the public square at the centre of the action, the commons brings together the market stalls and the offices, the public lectern and the village green, the games in the park, the punks on the skateboards and the buskers on the sidewalks. At its very core, the commons blends commercial life, civic life and leisure. It is the epitome of the connected diversity that defines community. It reminds us that the social and commercial space that makes up our world is something that we all share. It is common space.

And so it is the Internet. We are drawn by the social collectivity, and the connections to many, many, many others. We are drawn by commonspace.

## An Armchair Tour of Commonspace

### *a. conversation*

Online communities are where many of us first caught the commonspace bug in the 1980s. Glowing green text appeared slowly (slooooooowwwwwly) at 2400 baud, crawling across the black surface of the monitor:

>Hi.

[Pause]

>It's me :-)

[Pause]

>And me 8-P

[Long pause]

>And me ;-)

Speed wasn't the issue (a good thing, too). The glowing green letters on the screen weren't just empty pixels: they were other people.

Reaching out across the planet with tentacles of text, we have built entirely new social worlds. What's astounding is that we've been able to build these worlds so quickly. Almost overnight and in a completely organic manner, we've figured out the subtleties of community-building such as how membership works, how to create niches, and how to fuel and manage collective online conversations. (Okay, we admit that there were decades of community organizing theory that could have helped us. But most of us didn't know about any of it when we first started building online communities.)

None of this is to say that online communities are one endless virtual picnic. Some online communities are certainly more redeeming than others. People go online to talk about everything from cleaning up the local river to improving their investment strategies to pretending that they're furry anthropomorphic cartoon mammals who like to shag each other. And as in the real world, there are annoying neighbours and fights between friends. In fact, flame wars - vitriolic online word battles - became an online hot-button pretty early on. It's no wonder, really. Flame wars smart like a paper cut full of salt. The current practitioners of the flame-as-art-form still hang out on the alt.flame newsgroup and its various offshoots, but you don't really want to go there unless you thrive on abuse. The first entry from the alt.flame FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) reads as follows.

1. Fuck off for starters.

   Go away, newbie. Nobody wants you here.

Like the newsgroup itself, the alt.flame FAQ becomes more hostile and offensive from there. But for a certain kind of personality - one of the kinds that thrives online - the alt.flame FAQ is like a dropped gauntlet, an invitation to jump in and get dirty.

Online communities aren't really about people being nice to each other: they're about experimenting, creating new worlds with new social mores and new standards of behaviour. What matters is the fact that the worlds we're creating are ours.

### b. business

Despite the fact that most online communities started as forms of recreation, business has been quick to pick up on the power of the collective. Just think for a moment about what eBay has done for small business. Or, for that matter, think about what USENET has done to big business, or what day-trading has done to the stock market. As the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* state so aptly, markets have once again become conversations .

For the most part, the business world has been living outside the commons for the last hundred years. Businesses had moved physically and psychologically to the suburbs, disconnecting themselves from anything remotely resembling communities of impassioned, invested individuals. Corporations were content to be vast, mysterious entities that towered over the faceless consumers that bought their wares. But as online communities started taking off, some businesses started realizing that it was time to voluntarily reconnect with their customers - because the Internet was going to make it happen whether they liked it or not.

Ten years ago, the word 'business' and 'community' would rarely have been uttered in the same sentence (unless the speaker was droning on about the 'business community' at a Rotary Club rubber-chicken dinner). Now no one even blinks when titles like *Communities of Commerce* appear on the shelves at the airport bookstore. People are starting to remember that businesses are us, and they should be a part of our communities - online and off.

### c. open source

Community and business aren't the whole story. Commonspace has produced wild emergent behaviour and incredible outputs that we couldn't have predicted even a decade ago.

Think about open source for a moment: free software that's better than most of the stuff you can buy, a thriving community that will appreciate anything you contribute back to it, and a strategy for making a comfortable living from giving things away. Open source is the digital collective on mental steroids, commonspace refined to its purest, most powerful form. Sure, the software always begins in the hands of one person or a small group. But from there, it grows strong on the fertile ground of the Internet collective mind.

The idea of open source has spread farther and faster than anyone could have imagined. With a little nudging from the likes of Eric Raymond and mouthy Linux start-up CEOs, even the most conservative business types have sat up and paid attention. There is a genuine acknowledgement that there is a business case - both social and economic - for open source. When IBM executives say things like "I am increasingly coming to the conclusion that the Internet and open-source initiatives are the free marketplace way of dealing with the extremely complex software issues we are facing," something interesting is going on. Why are business bigwigs paying attention to open source? Well, some of them have probably asked the geeks down in their Internet service divisions about what software their servers were running, and have been more than a little surprised by the answer.

Maybe the success of open source in the business world is just a sign of co-optation, of 'selling out'. But it doesn't look that way when you examine the situation closely. Some people with real clout behind have seen the open source light, such as CEOs, public intellectuals and venture capitalists. At least in the world of bits, we are no longer in an economy based on scarcity. And there is no way to go back. You can't control prices by locking software (or films, or music, or books) in the warehouse, because someone already has a copy. Zap: now there are a million copies. The economy of abundance is here. This changes the rules for economics and business dramatically, and entire industries are running scared. Like the pirate captain said when the Spanish armada came over the horizon, bring me my brown pants.

Commonspace changes everything. Communities. Markets. Work. Intranets, Web forums, peer-to-peer networks and e-mail smash hierarchies flat, rendering entire layers of management obsolete. The collective has also ingrained itself in the world of play. From networked games to [The Blair Witch Project](#), entertainment is becoming more about connection than about one-way spectacle. Even the world of government and politics has not been spared. As grassroots organizers clue in to the power of the Internet, politicians are forced to dip their toes into the pool of commonspace and to once again show their faces in the publicsquare. Commonspace is everywhere, and it's getting more everywhere all the time.

But what is it? Can you touch commonspace? Can you buy a kit to create it, or at least control it? Sorry. But you can begin to understand it, and to see how you and your organization can be a part of it.

## What Makes Commonspace?

The Internet is a gooey, bubbly swamp of an ecosystem. It's beautiful, and it's tranquil on the surface, but there's a persistent background stench, and it's a very difficult place to domesticate. The difficulty isn't due to any technological bugbears, though; it's a direct result of the fact that *the Internet is us*.

As each of us constantly contributes our latest two cents, commonspace continuously shifts and evolves. And while we might act with good intentions, our plans don't always work out as we might hope, because someone else has different ideas. This unpredictability is actually a bonus for the Internet, just as it is for any ecosystem. Diversity, the swirling together of millions of ideas, often leads to the creation of weird and wonderful paths.

While no one of us - or even a small band of us - can dictate the laws that control commonspace, we've come up with a few core principles that describe it. Sure, they're rough approximations of convoluted behaviour patterns, but it's always hard to suss out exactly what makes a complex system work. But over the last 10 or 20 years, we've learned enough about how we connect online as a collective to survey a little corner of the terrain.

*Principle #1*
**The collective is the Internet's killer app.**

The real difference between the Internet and all preceding media forms is the role it gives to people. More specifically, millions of people connected in many-to-many relationships make up communities, clans, and information gestalts.

In a many-to-many network, it is easy to form groups quickly and work collectively. The power of online collective work, creativity and thought was originally promoted by the people who homesteaded the first virtual communities. But others have seen it and named it since: connected intelligence, the hive mind, open source. Whatever you call it, the core principle is clear: the Internet lends itself to working and playing collectively. Under the right circumstances, online groups can produce astounding results in record time and make life more pleasant for everyone involved.

*Principle #2*
**Online, we're always bigger than the sum of our parts.**

Commonspace is a direct result of synergy. Whether they're aware of it or not people create something bigger than themselves when they connect with each other. The results can be new ideas, new products, or innovative approaches to old problems: a piece of software, a collectively written book, a pool of aggregated data providing new insights. In other words, by leveraging the 'collective mind' and using collective resources, we can create something that is bigger than the sum of its parts.

*Principle #3*
**In the economy of commonspace, you need to share power to thrive.**

Traditional business logic says 'Consolidate power. Keep competitors and customers weak.' Commonspace business logic says 'Share power with your customers, your partners and sometimes even your competitors, if you want to succeed.' More simply, you need to share power to thrive.

Why share power? Because connectedness makes it possible for you to benefit from and build on the success of your users and partners.

*Principle #4*
**Mutual self-interest builds community ... and beats the corporate drones.**

The best kind of motivation is immediate personal need. But what happens when every time someone does something for themselves, they also happen to help out a hundred, or a thousand, or a million other people? Traditional ideas about value, leadership and money begin to shatter. In a many-to-many network that stresses sharing, everything that you do for yourself can benefit everyone else. Likewise, anything anyone else does can benefit you.

People and businesses that shift into this 'open source' mind-set will grow better, stronger, and faster, just like the six million dollar man. On the flip side, companies that keep their ideas proprietary don't benefit from the ideas and work of others. Everything they do becomes slow and costly.

*Principle #5*
**In commonspace, 15 minutes of fame is better reward than money.**

In many cases, the currency of commonspace is respect, small-time fame and ego-boosting. Especially in technical endeavours, doing something smart and earning the respect of one's peers is of the highest order. As Eric Raymond and others have pointed out, in a digital economy that's based on abundance, ego-boosting is often the best reward .

From games to software development to traditional online communities, ego and pride are major driving factors behind the success of an online endeavour.

***Principle #6***
***Distributed technology thrives. Siloed technology dies.***

While the real power of commonspace comes from people, it can't happen without the right tools. This means having the right tools for the job, (For example, you can't run eBay in a newsreader. We've tried.) More importantly, it means having tools that help people connect and that connect to each other. Successful implementations of commonspace have to enable many-to-many relationships between people. They also need to talk to other tools using open, commonly available standards.

In commonspace, distributed technology thrives, but siloed technology dies. Proprietary technology can survive for a while in isolation. But as soon as people want to connect to the outside world - and they will - these disconnected tools wither and die.

***Principle #7***
***Revolution comes from the strangest places.***

It is almost impossible to predict where the next revolution is coming from in commonspace. Often, major breakthroughs come from the use of technologies in unintended ways. Or they result from organic, grassroots, non-commercial efforts that were never meant to be The Next Big Thing.

To see where commonspace is heading, look to the margins and the underground (if you can). But don't be surprised if you're sideswiped. Great new ideas in commonspace rarely come from a lab. (And when they do, it's often a 'mistake': Gnutella lumbered out of the Nullsoft/AOL lab like Frankenstein's monster on a killing spree.)



These principles are the essence of what we've learned about the collective, boiled down into little bouillion cubes of information. They're not immutable, and some of them aren't even very original (originality is overrated). But they are helpful if you want to get a sense of what the Internet is doing to our culture.

## Don't Be Afraid. Just Change Everything About the Way You Work, Think and Play

If you'd just arrived from outer space, you might just think that the only reason that humans invented the Internet was to fuel new ways of making money and providing ourselves with amusing toys. But commonspace is about changes in the way we think and live, not new gadgets.

As customers connect to each other and markets become conversations, businesses have to change the basic premises by which they operate. Honest discussion is replacing hucksterism. P.R. weaselspeak is replaced by honest engagement in the conversation. Instead of standing back *in* a zero-sum *us* vs. *them* position, businesses are becoming a part of the sum-sum communities they serve. Certainly, not all businesses have made these changes. In fact, those that have already made the switch are by far in the minority. But these are the businesses that are thriving online, and are gaining the trust of their customers.

Many of these same businesses also know that the walls that separate the inside of the organization from the outside of the organization are becoming thinner. In fact, informal interactions between customers and employees, and cooperation between companies working on the same project are constantly punching holes through these walls. Commonspace is behind it all and is making the lines that demarcate 'the organization' much fuzzier. Partnership becomes more possible, allowing businesses to focus on their core strengths. Of course, many businesses don't see the opportunities. They see disaster and stick their heads back into the swamp.

The same forces that are connecting customers to customers are connecting voters to voters, shifting politics (sloowwwwly - politicians *still* live in a 2400 baud world) back to the grassroots. And holes are penetrating in the walls of government and non-profits just as they are in corporations. Jurisdictions and service delivery are increasingly becoming fuzzy, and relationships with the outside world are becoming harder to control. For that matter, it's not even clear that the boundaries between nations mean anything anymore. Like business, politics and citizenship are going global.

These changes aren't coming from some weird cynical techno-god. They are coming from us. We're involved and have a say through our day-to-day actions. If we can learn where the potential and the pitfalls are, we can navigate around them. The changes that commonspace brings aren't scary. They're exhilarating.

Buckle up.

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