

“It falls upon you to create a better place”: exploring ephemeral online communities under the lens of organisational configurations¹

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Purpose: This study seeks to extend Mintzberg’s theory of organisational configurations to the specific context of ephemeral online communities. As such communities self-organise rapidly and temporarily, without fixed hierarchies, authority relationships, or formal structures, they represent a novel and challenging subject of study from an organisational perspective. In this paper, we argue that configuration theory can nevertheless be a powerful framework to understand how such communities organise collective action.

Design: An analysis of a social experiment organised by the Reddit platform called ‘The Place’ is used to study emergent coordination mechanisms in ephemeral online communities. Drawing on data gathered from Reddit and from the experiment’s outcomes, the paper focuses upon the coordinating mechanisms deployed by different communities to establish themselves in a position of power.

Findings: Using configuration theory, we outline four main ways for the participants to coordinate their actions in ephemeral online contexts. The findings suggest that, beyond the study of more traditional organisational contexts, configuration theory is a powerful framework for understanding more emergent and contemporary forms of organising.

Originality: The paper assesses the validity of a well-rounded theory in organisation studies, configuration theory, to study a novel type of organisations – ephemeral online communities. In doing so, it offers new insights into how online environments can facilitate and structure collective action without traditional organisational structures, thus advancing the study of online coordination mechanisms.

Keywords: organisational configurations, online communities, coordination mechanisms, organising

Introduction

*Some have visited a canvas before.
A place where togetherness created more.
Now in numbers far greater, taking more space,
It falls upon you to create a better place.*

Reddit's introductory message for its 2022 Place experiment.

On April 1, 2022, one of the largest discussion and community platforms, Reddit, launched the second edition of their social experiment called "Place." The structuring principles of the experiment were fairly straightforward: a large, blank canvas was made available online to all Reddit users for four consecutive days. During eighty-two hours, each user visiting the canvas could change the colour of one of its pixels. That operation could be repeated until the end of the experiment pending a five-minute timer, meaning that each user had the opportunity to draw a new pixel on the canvas every five minutes. The canvas' size was set to 1000x1000 pixels and doubled in size each day of the experiment, ultimately reaching four million pixels. Very quickly, the canvas was stormed by users who began to fill it in a multitude of ways, leading to a vibrant and evolving mosaic. According to the data released by the organisers, a total of 10,381,163 users placed at least one pixel on the canvas over four days. Hence, the experiment drew significant attention from many online communities worldwide.



Figure 1. Overview of the Place after one hour (on the left) and eight hours (on the right) (Source: r/place)

The Place, then, refers to a specific location on the Internet displaying a canvas that users were allowed to turn into almost anything they wanted for a limited period through drawing. What makes the experiment particularly compelling is that the production of meaningful creations could only be the product of organised communities (Rappaz *et al.*, 2018). Because users were only allowed to dictate the content of one pixel every five minutes, no individual could make a significant contribution to the canvas on their own. Instead, participants had to form and integrate communities capable of coordinating their actions to achieve a common goal (Vachher *et al.*, 2020). Hence, this unique experiment constitutes an ideal setting for (1) studying ephemeral organising mechanisms in online environments, a topic that has been under-researched in extant literature and (2) renewing discussion around the theory of organisational configurations and its relevance to contemporary forms of organising.

These two objectives are seen as mutually supportive. Research on online community organising has often built on theoretical frameworks such as garbage can theory (e.g. Burke *et al.*, 2023) or technological affordances (e.g. Lai, 2015), which do not directly address the mechanisms of online coordination. Therefore, we argue that configuration theory has the potential to shed new light on the dynamics enabling emergent and spontaneous online communities to work together. In addition, this study contributes to broader debates about the relevance of Mintzberg's configurations (1979) for understanding organisational phenomena in a digital world. Over the years, Mintzberg's configuration theory has been the subject of lively debates among scholars (Doty *et al.*, 1993; Krabberød, 2015). More recently, however, researchers have suggested that configurational research has stalled (e.g. Miller, 2018). In this paper, we demonstrate how Mintzberg's theory, originally developed for traditional forms of organisations, can prove insightful to the study of ephemeral online communities. At the same time, our findings also challenge some of its core assumptions, particularly regarding the relationships that it posits between organisational characteristics and contingency factors, such as firm size or the level of uncertainty in the external environment.

Organising collective action in online environments

In the last decade, research has become increasingly focused on the challenges raised by online collaboration (e.g. Majchrzak *et al.*, 2017). While studies have looked into how digital platforms could help in developing and sustaining online communities (e.g. Pyle *et al.*, 2019), the dynamics of organising through online platforms have received less attention (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017). To date, scholars who have been interested in online collective action have mostly done so in the context of crises (e.g. Burke *et al.*, 2023; Lai, 2015), studying emergent response efforts organised through social media (Pyle *et al.*, 2019). These studies have shown how emergent online groups could manage to

orchestrate virtual interactions and provide help in difficult situations (Burke *et al.*, 2023). The term “emergent organising” is used to designate the process through which individuals self-organise temporarily and rapidly (Burke *et al.*, 2023; Lai, 2015; Pyle *et al.*, 2019). Yet, nowadays, collective action in online environments does not solely occur as a response to crises. Online platforms also offer opportunities for ephemeral creative collaboration, as exemplified in the present case. Consequently, there is room for a better understanding of how organising unfolds in online environments (Burke *et al.*, 2023).

In organisation studies, well-established theoretical frameworks have been tried and tested for decades to study coordination mechanisms in “standard” environments such as business firms and governmental institutions (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009). One of the most famous of these frameworks is Mintzberg’s theory of configurations (1979). This theory suggests that organisations often appear to take given “forms” that share similar characteristics in terms of structuring and organising work. These configurations should be understood as ideal types that provide a rich typology for analysing organisations (Krabberød, 2015). Central to configuration theory is the assumption that there is no “one best way” to structure organisations (Pichault and Nizet, 2024); rather, there are several ways for individuals to coordinate their efforts, albeit the variety they have in doing so appear to be limited due to “*powerful themes that orchestrate their characteristics*” (Miller, 2018, p. 455). Hence, the power of configuration theory lies in identifying coherent patterns in organising collective action (Meyer *et al.*, 1993)¹.

Over the years, configuration theory has grown into a popular theoretical framework to study a wide range of businesses and sectors. However, it has also lost steam over the years (Miller, 2018), and it has seemingly not been used to understand more contemporary and emergent forms of organising such as ephemeral online communities. Indeed, a social experiment such as the Place breaks from a traditional organisation and challenges configuration theory in at least two ways. First, such communities are *ephemeral*: they bring together people who do not know each other and never collaborated before, requiring all the organising to take place at once (Litherland and Mørch, 2021). The Place experiment creates a new purpose (filling a canvas) implying a new type of work (coordinated drawing) that requires setting up new structures for collaboration (Rappaz *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, collaboration should be immediate – the experiment lasts for a few days – and without an authority structure or relationships of economic dependency as found in traditional organisations

¹ For the sake of brevity, we will not offer a detailed development of Mintzberg’s key configurations in this paper and assume that the reader is already familiar with their fundamentals (1979).

(Mintzberg, 1980). Hence, such a case contrasts with traditional organisations that have well-oiled routines and structures in place. Second, almost all interactions within these communities take place solely *online*, the Internet being the essential place and means of organising (Orelj and Torfason, 2022). Online communities have now grown increasingly common in all sorts of contexts such as virtual workplaces, platforms, or online crowds. However, they challenge configuration theory in ways that remain poorly studied. Mintzberg’s theory is built on elements characteristic of traditional firms – such as supervision mechanisms, hierarchical levels, formalized positions, decision-making structures – that are not necessarily meaningful for studying ephemeral online communities.

Over the years, there have been many variations in the typologies of organisational configurations, ranging from five (e.g. Mintzberg, 1979) to eight (Matheson, 2009), including attempts to coin new forms such as, for example, the “political arena” (Mintzberg, 1985). Most recently, Mintzberg published a new edition of his book, revising and updating his configuration theory (2023). The book emphasizes “four fundamental forms of organisation”: the personal enterprise, the programmed machine, the professional assembly, and the project pioneer (Mintzberg, 2023), which are slightly adapted names for the simple structure, the machine bureaucracy, the professional bureaucracy, and the adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1979). Mintzberg (2023, p. 141) further describes “*three more forms*” that are “*less fundamental than the other four*”: the divisional form (an “*extension of the programmed machine*” (p. 141) that was present in his earlier works as the “divisionalized form” (Mintzberg, 1979)), the political arena, and the community ship. For the sake of clarity, this paper will mostly build on the four “fundamental” configurations as emphasized by Mintzberg in his revised book (2023).

With that in mind, this paper pursues two objectives. First, it sets out to study how emergent organising unfolds in ephemeral online communities through the lens of configuration theory, offering an in-depth analysis of the coordination mechanisms used by such communities. Second, the paper seeks to probe the value of Mintzberg’s theory of configurations (1979, 2023) in analysing emergent forms of organising in online environments. By doing so, it questions the challenges raised by ephemeral online communities to configuration theory. The paper also creates bridges between organisation studies, where configuration theory is well established yet rarely applied to online settings, and the field of information systems research, which has extensively explored online communities while overlooking the dynamics and implications of emergent organising.

A place of many ends

This study reports on the r/place experiment organised by Reddit between April 1 and 4, 2022. It builds on data gathered directly from the Reddit platform, as well as from the analysis of the canvas itself and the processes through which different communities managed to establish themselves in a position of

power. If examined in detail, the final version of the Place (figure 2) reveals a stunning mosaic of thousands of illustrations collectively drawn by online communities. The most immediate and visible form of expression on the Place tends to be national flags representing the countries that the users identify with. Flags are relatively straightforward to draw and do not require complex skills, allowing anyone to contribute quickly to the canvas. However, they are also objects that appear to be rather dull from an artistic perspective. Many users participated in the experiment with the aim of making quality art. Some focused their efforts on drawing other cultural references (e.g. movies, books, video games, visual novels, etc.), illustrating political opinions (as illustrated by the large Ukrainian flag on Figure 1) or reflecting group identities (LGBT+, sports clubs, streaming communities, etc.) The Place can, therefore, be seen as the unpredictable outcome of multiple communities coordinating their efforts, competing, making decisions and organising themselves in a span of four days. It should be noted, however, that even the largest communities participating in the event only stood for a very small portion of the Place. To provide an order of magnitude, the French community, who was assessed to be the largest of all communities, controlled approximately 185,000 pixels at the end of the experiment, which represents 4.6% of the whole canvas.



Figure 2. The final and full version of the Place (Source: r/place)².

While the Place does not come with any additional rule than the one mentioned above, it bears an inherent limitation in the space available to the users to draw on the canvas. As illustrated above, the canvas was mostly completed in the first few hours of the experiment. While its size was doubled each day, these expansions were not sufficient to consistently provide space for users to draw on. Consequently, there came a time when any community wanting to contribute had to draw on a spot already occupied by others. As the dataset revealed once the experiment came to an end, the participants placed a total of 160,353,104 pixels during the event, while the canvas' final size could hold four million. This means that only 2.5% of the pixels drawn made it to the final version of the canvas, and that the rest was erased (by other users) during the process. Besides, many users did not wait for the canvas to be full to contend for specific spots (e.g. corners), or to undo the work of others

² The full image can hardly be reproduced in a paper. Readers can most likely find a high-quality version online. A community project has emerged after the experiment to describe each piece of art on the canvas (<https://2022.place-atlas.stefanocoding.me/>)

for a variety of motives. As such, the Place quickly turned into a contested online space. While the first hours were all about coordinating forces to achieve the realization of a meaningful contribution, the participating communities had to make sure that their drawings would last until the end of the experiment and would not be erased by others.

Very quickly, then, the Place became a space of territories, neighbours, and negotiations. While designing art remained the central activity of all communities, a prevalent question for everyone became the preservation of existing art over time in a saturated space. The language used by the participants was unequivocal in that regard: “attack” was used as a term to designate attempts to conquer more space on the canvas by replacing an existing piece of art, while “defence” designated coordinated efforts to maintain a piece of art under attack. Therefore, a major challenge for the communities became to maintain and defend their creations (if they wanted and could afford to do so), as well as to decide where to “attack” if needed. Coordination became more essential than ever, as sporadic actions on the Place could be easily defended; for a maximum impact, it was necessary to ensure that all members of a community would act in a coordinated fashion (i.e. work on the same drawing) while avoiding redundant actions (i.e. drawing on the same spot at the same time).

The Place was thus dictated by the following implicit rule: to master a portion of the canvas meant that a community had to have superior numbers and more advanced coordination mechanisms than other communities coveting the same spot. It follows that the Place was the theatre of large-scale wars and shifting alliances. Most notably, on the final evening of the experiment, “streamers”³ from the French community gathered more than 700,000 viewers to defend their flag against the coordinated assault of the Spanish community, a few American streamers, and the BTS community (a Korean boy band). As Figure 3 illustrates, a war in the Place would be materialized by conflicting pixels over a given area – here, attempts of the BTS community to distort the French flag by inscribing the logo of BTS in purple colour on it. Conversely, the defenders – the French – attempted to coordinate their efforts to restore the white colour of their flag.

³ We use the generic term “streamer” to designate individuals broadcasting live entertainment content through various online platforms.

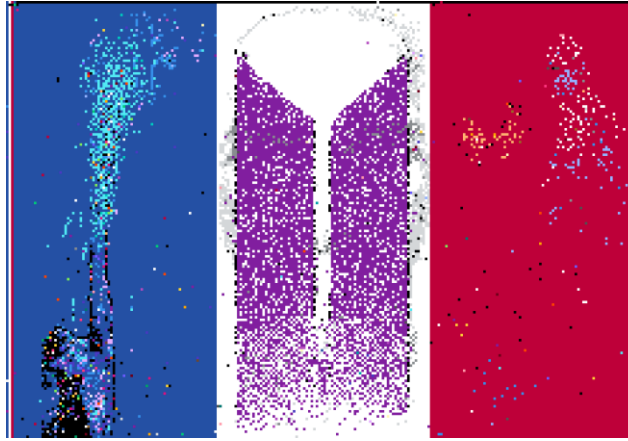


Figure 3. An attack on the French flag by the BTS community (Source: r/place).

A place of configurations

Over the four days the experiment was running, some communities managed to grow larger and get more organised than others. The experiment, however, did not come with operating instructions: all that Reddit did was to make a canvas available on the Internet and allow users to draw a pixel on it every five minutes. The platform did not issue any best practices or guidelines on how communities could organise themselves to achieve better results: all the organising had to be done by community members themselves. This is why the Place offers a rare, almost unique context to study how organising dawns, starting from a blank page, with no hierarchies, no authority relationships, no fixed communities, no coordinating mechanisms, and no structure. Yet, collective action was the only way of achieving any meaningful result. In that context, pixels were used as the default metric to assess communities' importance. Pixels could be counted, contrary to, for instance, the number of members per community, which was constantly shifting. Larger pieces of art could be achieved by communities who had the numbers and could devote significant resources to reach their common objective, but also to protect it against eventual attacks and to maintain it over time.

We examined four communities that appeared to adopt different approaches to coordinating their actions and engaging with the canvas, revealing four main organising strategies. The first is the one of *professional streamers* who played a central role in the Place by directly commanding thousands of followers. Second, we elaborate on the model of the *German community*, which set up a stringent structure with formal processes and roles to achieve better results. Third, *spontaneous artistic communities* committed to more complex designs and realizations. Finally, we examine the case of *Amogus*, a loose group with a simple aim that managed to occupy a significant place on the canvas with minimal coordination of work.

Each of these strategies features different ways to foster the efforts of thousands of users with no prior knowledge of each other and no existing work routines. They are examined through the four key design parameters in configuration theory, which we selected by combining Mintzberg's seminal theory of organisational configurations (1979) with his revised book (2023). First, we examine the "key" (1979) or "favoured" (2023) coordinating mechanism of each community. Second, we detail the specialization of work, as induced by the vertical and horizontal division of labour (1979; 2023). Third, we study the "structure characteristics" (2023), which encompasses the original concepts of behaviour formalization and unit size (1979). The fourth design parameter under study, the decision-making processes, covers the question of power decentralization (1979), which Mintzberg also called "organisational shape" (2023).

Professional streamers: the simple structure

Central to the Place experiment was the ability of key individuals to mobilize online communities around them. Renowned streamers and leading influencers quickly became the dominant figures of the Place, rallying thousands of followers over four days to produce art on the canvas. Streamers came up with a very simple way of coordinating action: they would simply tell their viewers what to do, issuing orders to achieve a particular result. Viewers would then execute the instructions of their streamer. The most impactful streamers were, unsurprisingly, the ones with the most viewers (usually counted in thousands, the most watched streamer reaching 420,000 concurrent viewers on the final day of the experiment)⁴ who could hardly, in these conditions, establish some sort of participatory governance. Therefore, the streamer would make decisions on their own (i.e. deciding what piece of art should be drawn and who to "attack"). Popular streamers were a powerful force throughout the experiment, as they could instantly wipe out entire sections of the Place by coordinating their followers' actions. However, streamers struggled to maintain a constant presence on the canvas. Whenever they would go offline, their viewers were left without instructions and usually rejoined other communities, leaving their art undefended. Moreover, viewers were a volatile workforce; to remain at the top, streamers had to be entertaining at all times. They also faced the risk of taking controversial actions and losing viewers' support (e.g. by "attacking" a community perceived worthy of staying in the Place). Professional streamers, therefore, often initiated bold and entertaining offensive moves, working on high-impact but ultimately short-lived projects on the canvas.

In many ways, professional streamers were similar to Mintzberg's definition of the simple structure (1979) or personal enterprise (2023). Their key coordinating mechanism was direct supervision: they instructed viewers what to do. The vertical specialization of jobs was high, since the conception was

⁴ According to: <https://streamscharts.com/news/reddit-place-2022-overview>

almost exclusively in the hands of streamers themselves, while viewers were reduced to execute their instructions. The horizontal specialization was low: viewers were all following the streamers' simple instructions. Streamers usually came with a large community that was loosely organised and characterised by top-down communication occurring through a chat system – primarily designed to allow viewers to write to the streamer, although the latter had usually no time to read it. Planning and control systems were minimal, as the streamer could only notice on the canvas whether their instructions were being followed or not, and adapt their plans accordingly. Power was largely centralized in the hands of the streamer, who made all the decisions on their own. In sum, the organising strategy of professional streamers featured many characteristics of Mintzberg's simple structure (1979).

The German community: the machine bureaucracy

The Germans were regarded in the Place as being a highly organised community that managed to obtain significant results while providing significant help to other communities. In the span of four days, the German community pulled up an impressive machinery, later illustrated by a leader of that community (see Figure 4). The Germans designed and allocated several specialized roles to their members: designers, in charge of providing templates for the art to be designed; diplomats, in charge of negotiations with other communities and streamers; administrators and moderators, in charge of supervising the overall functioning of the structure; sheriffs, in charge of moderating the chat; and developers, in charge of writing small programs able to defend existing art on the canvas. Processes were also implemented to allow brainstorming, goal voting, and constant feedback. The communication and recruitment processes were also organised and supervised by the community. Moreover, the German community set up a "night watch", i.e. a group of users who would stay overnight to protect the art and make sure that it subsisted. With around twenty thousand users, they ultimately managed to occupy more space on the canvas than professional streamers with a much more significant viewer base.

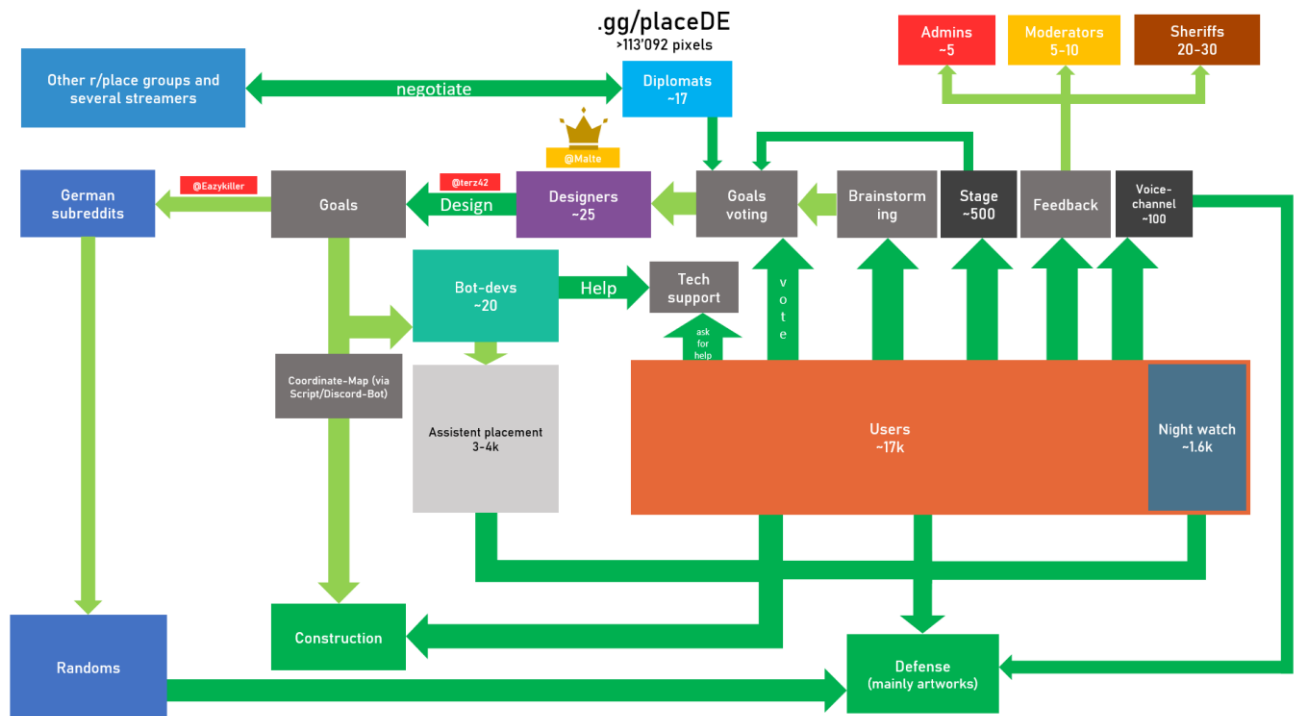


Figure 4. The organisation of the German community⁵

The German community was strikingly illustrative of Mintzberg’s machine bureaucracy (1979) or programmed machine (2023). The coordination of work was made possible by highly standardized processes and the attribution of clear roles to the users. The vertical specialization was high, as a few users were in charge of establishing processes and rules. The horizontal specialization of roles was also high, as users had specific tasks that they oversaw (e.g. diplomacy, moderation, defence, etc.) Coordination was achieved through the processes illustrated in Figure 4, although the interactions between the members of the different groups remained limited. Overall, the structure was highly formalized, with a strong emphasis on action planning. The decision-making process remained clearly organised around feedback mechanisms and a voting system for setting goals, with specific categories of users (such as diplomats, designers, and administrators) holding more power as they were able to dictate how drawings should be performed.

Artistic communities: the professional assembly

Smaller communities that could not count on wide masses of users also had to find their ways to make it to the canvas. Sharing templates of specific pieces of art and recruiting volunteers made it possible for *ad hoc* communities to emerge and draw more complex forms of art. A famous example of such an artistic creation was “The Night Watch”, a famous Dutch painting of approximately 15,000 pixels (see

⁵ As reported on:

https://www.reddit.com/r/place/comments/tx1c8g/for_those_wondering_germanys_organization_of/

Figure 5) that was recreated by the Dutch community⁶. Instead of banking primarily on numbers and playing for space, artistic communities relied on smaller yet more aesthetic designs with the purpose of embellishing the Place. The difficulty of coordinating the efforts of several individuals to design complex art was central to this perspective. Communities notably resorted to templates, or “grid maps”, shared across their members that ensure the coordination of efforts and the accurate realization of more demanding artistic pieces. By using grid maps, i.e. drawings overlaid on a grid, artistic communities could make sure that their members would draw the right pixel at the right spot, with a high degree of accuracy (not required for simpler drawings such as flags). Many communities in the Place appeared to respect and value aesthetic creations, regardless of their size; therefore, creating good and respected art in the Place could be a way of deterring attacks and ensuring it would stay on the canvas. However, when attacked, spontaneous communities lacked the resources needed to organise a proper defence of their art.



Figure 5. The Night Watch by Rembrandt (on the left) and its pixelized reproduction on r/place (on the right) (Source: r/place).

These spontaneous artistic communities shared many traits of the professional bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1979) or the professional assembly (Mintzberg, 2023). In this model, “skilled” artists assembled, made decisions as to what they would attempt to draw on the canvas, and designed complex tools (i.e. scripts, plugins) to do so. This is reminiscent of the standardization of skills, as participants were expected to possess or develop specific skill sets to join (a knowledge of complex art pieces, a sense of aesthetics, a technical mastery of templates and grid maps, etc.) The vertical specialization was low, as users were participating in both the conception and the design of art. The horizontal specialization was rather high: some users were tasked with designing templates, others with coordinating their execution, and still others with executing them. More experienced designers were also charged with assisting new users in using templates and grid maps. In terms of structure, artistic communities formed small units that collectively formalized processes and tools. They relied

⁶ As reported on : <https://integratedexpat.wordpress.com/2022/04/06/reddit-r-place-collaborative-online-art-2022/>

on specific users who could federate the efforts of their peers, with a fairly decentralized decision-making system among artists themselves, which bears a strong resemblance with Mintzberg's professional assembly (2023).

The Amogus: the adhocracy

The Amogus, which refers to the famous social deduction game *Among Us* published in 2018, had grown into a catchphrase to designate cartoonish drawings of the game's main characters. When the Place started, the goal of the Amogus community became to sneak these little characters into all imaginable spots on the canvas. This aim appeared to be highly consistent with the theme of *Among Us* itself – emphasizing infiltration and stealth. The Amogus eventually managed to claim the 20th place in the community rankings of the Place, not through any attack or defence strategy, but by subtly sneaking into the artwork of others. The Amogus community managed to reach a significant presence on the canvas while being very loosely organised and coordinated. This was notably due to the fact that even very small communities sharing basic knowledge of what an Amogus looks like could manage to sneak one in a short amount of time – making it a fairly easy task.

The Amogus community displays several typical features of the adhocratic model (Mintzberg, 1979). Most notably, because of its straightforward aim, the community did not rely on any other work coordination mechanism than mutual adjustment. Users working for the Amogus community would browse the canvas and contribute, in small groups, to add any Amogus that they would find. The work was weakly specialized, both vertically (as users were free to decide where to draw) and horizontally (as everyone drew the same design). The structure involved very small units – a “web of flexible teams” (Mintzberg, 2023) – operating independently and acting creatively, with no observable liaison mechanism except for the shared mental representations of what an Amogus looked like. A main feature of the Amogus community was that they often shared pictures of their Amogi hidden in the most unsuspected locations of the canvas – usually stimulating other users to find yet more creative ways of inserting other Amogi in the canvas. Hence, decision-making was entirely decentralized in the hands of the users themselves, with a total absence of centralized decision-making processes. The way the Amogus community managed to coordinate their efforts across the canvas with limited interaction resembles the highly flexible structures that are characteristic of adhocracies (Mintzberg, 2023).

Discussion and conclusions

Table 1 provides an overview of the four communities and of the design parameters that characterize them. Notwithstanding slight differences, the result is remarkably close to Mintzberg's theory of organisational configurations (1979, 2023). What this suggests is that these configurations are not only a powerful tool to understand well-established organisations, but that it might also be used to

understand how online communities spontaneously try to frame and structure collective action. In other words, not only can existing organisations be analysed using configuration theory, as the literature has repeatedly shown (e.g. Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009); configurations can also be a powerful tool to account for the emergence of ephemeral online communities in quest of coordination and organisation. In line with configuration theory, the analysis of r/place reveals that there is no best way to structure collective action: professional streamers generated the most spectacular happenings on the canvas; the German community managed to occupy 4.02% of the canvas; the artistic communities created the most complex and respected forms of art; and the Amogus managed to take the 20th place of the largest communities by sneaking into occupied spaces.

	Professional streamers	German community	Artists	Amogus
Favoured coordinating mechanism	Direct supervision	Standardization of work/processes	Standardization of skills	Mutual adjustment
Specialization of work	Little specialization	Strong horizontal and vertical specialization	Strong horizontal specialization	Little specialization
Structure characteristics	Little formalisation within a large unit	Strong formalisation within a large unit	Strong formalisation within small units	Little formalisation within small units
Decision-making processes	Centralized (chief at the centre)	Horizontal decentralization (chain of command)	Limited vertical decentralization (autonomous experts)	Vertical decentralization (web of flexible teams)
Configuration	SIMPLE STRUCTURE	PROGRAMMED MACHINE	PROFESSIONAL ASSEMBLY	PROJECT PIONEER

Table 1. Summary of the four ideal-typical organisational configurations found in the Place (Source: Authors own work)

What does this case teach us about organisational theory and analysis? First, it emphasizes the broad applicability of configuration theory as an analytical framework. It has been claimed by critics that Mintzberg's theory might only apply to certain contexts and industries (Doty *et al.*, 1993). What this case suggests is the opposite: it is possible to use this theory to study loose organisational forms such as ephemeral online communities, in which there are no authority relationships, minimal prior structure, no fixed goals, and no existing coordination mechanisms. Hence, when considered a comprehensive framework for understanding organising in a broader sense, configuration theory continues to offer valuable insights into coordinating mechanisms between people, whether they work in traditional settings or participate in a social experiment over the internet. This study supports the

claim that configuration theory, even if fallen out of favour (Miller, 2018), remains relevant for studying organising in contemporary contexts.

At the same time, the paper challenges the validity of some contingency factors that were originally identified by Mintzberg (1979). For example, it is usually assumed that the simple structure is often characteristic of small firms; that the machine bureaucracy works best in “mature” organisations; that adhocracy is found in complex and challenging environments (Mintzberg, 2023). Hence, in a given context, there would be one organisational configuration that would be predicted to be more effective than others (Krabberød, 2015). However, none of these assumptions work convincingly in the present case: professional streamers bring together the largest communities and yet resort to direct supervision; there is no such thing as a “mature” organisation in a four-day experiment; and while the Place environment is complex and challenging, adhocracies are not the only form of organising that appear. What this study questions, then, is the relationship that has been established between the configurations or forces on the one hand, and their context on the other, as the latter has been largely theorized with traditional organisations in mind (Mintzberg, 1979). It could be said that, while configuration theory is a powerful analytical framework for studying ephemeral forms of organising, one should also exert caution toward interpreting the contingency factors. With this precaution in mind, we nevertheless believe that further studies on ephemeral organising and online communities could strongly benefit from configuration theory to shed light on the mechanisms allowing collective action to take place.

Finally, the paper provides insight into how configuration theory can be used analytically. Historically, configuration theory has been criticized for its tendency to classify organisations into overly rigid categories (Doty *et al.*, 1993). In this paper, it is shown that these categories have nothing rigid about them: individuals are not bound to one configuration and can easily navigate from one to another; communities themselves can share traits of some of several of these configurations – signs of “hybridity” (Pichault and Nizet, 2024) – or evolve over time. Hence, configurations are best understood as “forces” that drive collective action (Mintzberg, 2023) or abstract mental models used to understand organising processes (Krabberød, 2015). Understanding these forces, what they imply for the actors involved, and how they complement each other makes it possible to decipher organisational phenomena such as ephemeral online coordination mechanisms.

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