

Welcome to the

Cyber Community



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The Battalion

Ask an average student to give an example of a community and his or her response is likely to be something similar to a college or a small town.

Ask Texas A&M sociology professor Sara Gaston for an example of a community, and her response will be a small group between 300 and 500 people who interact, not at their local market or campus cafeteria, but at a local hangout known as the Internet.

Sociologists define a community as a group of people who share a common sense of identity and interact with one another on a sustained basis. Since its 1997 start-up as a discussion forum about the television series "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer," an electronic bulletin board known as the Bronze has developed into the bustling center of a community whose residents boast IP addresses instead of street numbers.

While this lack of a real, geographical location may make some people question the Bronze's stake as a community, it is this unique environment which intrigues Gaston.

"Many people say that the Internet only depersonalizes human interactions," she said. "But one thing the Bronze and the community that has formed around it have proven is that it can do the exact opposite. People, regardless of where they are or who they are, can get together and form a unique type of community where interactions, even though mostly in text form, are just as important as anywhere else."

The importance of these interactions separates the cyber community of the Bronze from most other boards or chat rooms.

"This isn't an environment where there will be completely different people just showing up every day to talk after school," Gaston said. "Some people do, but there are that group who have settled in and made it their place. Their lives have been altered by this environment. They are the community."

As a community, they share events. Today, an all-day baby shower is being thrown on the Bronze for the first baby born to a couple who met through the cyber community.

Matching blood types

Gaston, herself an admitted addict to the adventures of everyone's favorite blond beastly slayer, became involved with the board after the first time it was advertised during the television show.

"[The show] became sort of a ritual for me and I pulled my family into it," she said. "My dad came home one day and said, 'I just want you to know that, in front of a group of grown men, I just checked my watch and said that I had to get home to watch 'Buffy.'"

Gaston originally used the Bronze to talk with others who enjoyed the show as much as she does, but she quickly realized that, beneath the superficial conversation revolving around the show, lay a complex network of relationships, social cliques and hierarchies of popularity.

"It was really kind of ironic that the subject matter that was often discussed revolved around what high school was like (the show was set at a high school)," Gaston said. "All the while, the relationships and interactions that were going on were very similar to that which you may find in a high school setting."

Gaston estimates that the average age of the members is 26 with women constituting 60 percent to 70 percent of the group.

"The women are definitely the dominant speakers in the group," she said. "This is not unusual for a social organization like a fan group, but it is unusual on the Internet — especially when the current statistics say that the majority of computers are owned by males."

Gaston said the majority of residents in the cyber community are not extraordinarily computer savvy. "Most of the people are not tech-heads," she

said. "These are people who are just using tools that already exist to communicate with those who have a common interest."

The members may not be computer geeks, Gaston said, but difficulties with fitting in while in high school is a common experience of the residents.

"A main theme of the show was how much of a hell high school can be. ... I mean the school actually sits over a hell mouth — that's a metaphor," she said. "A lot of the people in the community can relate to that. It makes the show entertaining, but it also give the members of the community a little bit more of a common background."

The conversation of the community, however, is not limited to discussing the television series.

"There will be days where the show isn't mentioned at all," she said. "All you will see is just random conversations about a variety of real-life topics. In fact, the biggest complaint from people new to the board is that no one is talking about the show."

Virtual reality?

Gaston said that, while many people may consider conversing on the Internet impersonal and superficial, the members of the cyber community consider it as much of an interactive and real experience as talking to someone in person.

"Some people call this a form of virtual reality," she said. "But for these people, it is not a virtual atmosphere. It is talking to another person, except in a textual environment like this, language is behavior. How you are going to be judged is based upon your textual skills, but, at the same time, there is still that feeling of somehow being removed that can allow one to open up and say things that you wouldn't normally say to someone's face."

Capital letters mean shouting and words in italics depict virtual actions being performed, such as laughing or virtually clapping.

"Sometimes I'll log on and they will be playing a virtual game of Calvin ball, like the game Calvin and Hobbes played in the comic strip," she said.

Just because a level of intensity similar to personal interaction can be reached via Internet does not mean that members of the community do not meet face to face.

Gaston said that one of the unique aspects of this cyber community is that group outings are often planned in places such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas so that the community can gather and talk in person, sometimes drawing people from as far away as Germany and England. Members who live close to one another often get together as well.

This is how the couple who are currently enjoying a baby shower met.

"Is face-to-face interaction an essential component for a community? I don't have an answer for that question yet," Gaston said. "But there are many who haven't met who are participating in this social ritual of a baby shower. I see that and say, 'that's a community.'"

"You can laugh at these people and make fun of the level of interest and intensity that they put into this community, but if you do, you also have to make fun of your mother's garden club or your friend's weekly Shakespeare meeting. To these people, this is just as substantial of an interaction."

Self-policing

Gaston said that, in this community where language is behavior, a special set of social rules apply, such as limiting postings to the Bronze to four an hour and refraining from harassing language.

"The Webmasters are not the ones that enforce the standards; it is the members of the community that do the enforcing," she said. "There was a period of time when a flood of vulgar comments would start to flood in. This happened at the same time every day."

"The members traced the messages to a boarding school in England, and a member near the

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