

# 'Reading Lord of the Rings: The Final Attempt:'

## an analysis of a web community

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The Internet has had an enormous influence on fan communities of all kinds. Soap opera fans discuss plot twists, Xena fans trade fan fiction, Star Wars fans analyse movie trailers frame-by-frame, and so on. The Internet has made it extraordinarily easy for devotees of any subject to find like-minded people with whom to exchange news and discuss their passions. *Lord of the Rings* fans are no exception; there were hundreds of sites devoted to J.R.R. Tolkien's creation worldwide before the Peter Jackson movie project began, and the number mushroomed as soon as it was announced. As a contributor to one discussion group noted:<sup>2</sup>

'The amount of Tolkien fan interaction which occurs over the Internet every [day] is simply staggering. I tried to develop an approximate picture of it over two years ago for a project I finally had to abandon. I counted over 200 forums before I gave up.'

What we hope to do in this paper is to contribute to the study of characteristics of Tolkien readers, and make some observations on the topic of community on the Internet, especially as it relates to fan communities.

First, what goes into an online community? Jenny Preece offers this list of components:

- People who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating.
- A shared purpose, such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community.
- Policies, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws that guide people's interactions.
- Computer systems, to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness.<sup>3</sup>

### People and Purpose

In April 2001, Toronto writer, musi-

*'This is certainly an interesting community that has assembled here. I have an almost uncontrollable urge to run scientific experiments on it. "People who read the Lord of the Rings once a year have a 43% lower incidence of heart disease, report above average levels of job satisfaction, and love citrus fruits.'*<sup>1</sup>

cian, and cartoonist Debbie Ridpath Ohi decided she needed to read *The Lord of the Rings* before the first instalment of the movie trilogy came out at the end of that year. As a filksinger,<sup>4</sup> she was already familiar with many elements of the story, but had never managed to read the trilogy the whole way through<sup>5</sup>. She was an experienced web forum host, with an online diary called "Blatherings" and a number of associated discussion forums on filk singing and other topics. For six years she also managed an online writers' community with a 50,000 member mailing list<sup>6</sup>. Posting reports on her web site as she read each chapter was a logical extension of her online diary project, and she felt that inviting her friends to comment on her observations would encourage her to finish the book. Later on she also mentioned some other motivations:<sup>7</sup>

'It would make me very happy if my online journal helped encourage other Tolkien skeptics to try reading *Lord of the Rings*, and also help show them that the Tolkien fan community welcomes all potential "converts", even ones who may not necessarily enjoy all the battle scenes.'

The first participants were mainly Debbie's friends and people who read her online diary regularly. But when her site was reviewed on the unofficial movie site TheOneRing.net (TORN), a diverse group of people from around the world was made aware of her project and joined the discussion.

### Policies and computer systems

Debbie initially set her site up as an unmoderated bulletin board. As she read each chapter, she would post a brief essay about what she found interesting or boring, how she felt about the characters and plot, and so on. Sometimes she added questions to stimulate discussion. Readers did not have to register to use this site; anyone could post a reply to the list<sup>8</sup>. Replies would include the poster's name, linked to their email address if they wanted to include it, and the date and time they posted. There was no way for the writer to go back and edit a post in this format. Earlier chapters remained open for posting even after Debbie had moved on, and in fact they are still open, but we cut off our analysis as of the day we posted our consent form.

### Statistics and comparisons

#### *Demographics*

Who participated in this discussion? This was an amazingly heterogeneous group. Members reported ages from 12 through to 51. Some were reading *The Lord of the Rings* along with Debbie for the first time; most had read it several times, and many had read it over ten times and owned multiple copies. Occupations varied widely, too; there were schoolteachers, soldiers, graduate students, homemakers, software writers, and so on, all united by an interest in one book. As Wellman points out<sup>9</sup>

'The relative lack of social presence online fosters relationships with people who have more diverse social characteristics than might normally be encountered in person ... This allows relationships to develop on the basis of shared interests rather than be stunted at the onset by differences in social status.'

Participants were primarily from Canada and the United States, and other English-speaking countries such as England and New Zealand

were well represented. But other posters wrote in from places as diverse as Sweden, Greece, and South Korea. Everyone posted in English, but although there were several discussions on translation issues<sup>10</sup>, in general nationality was not a major topic of conversation. In a discussion of popular television shows, Paul A. Cantor speaks of the "tribalisation of the audience ... the flip side of ... globalisation"<sup>11</sup>. His conclusions are just as applicable to a book-based fan community:

In general, the Internet allows people to break with traditional community configurations and group themselves with anyone they choose on the basis of perceived cultural affinities. The main point of all this talk of globalisation and tribalisation is that television in the cable and the Internet era is redrawing the cultural map in ways that increasingly ignore national boundaries.<sup>12</sup>

Gender was an important factor in the demographics of this group. More than one participant felt that there were probably more female than male posters in this forum because of the tone and style of the exchanges. A psychology student from Sweden, for example, wrote<sup>13</sup> 'I remember sometimes thinking that "it's so nice here, that's probably because there's so many women around". Was I right? Or was that just prejudice?'

Allison Durno is a close friend of Debbie's and one of the major contributors to the "Final Attempt" project. She also noticed this "feel":<sup>14</sup>

'...it intrigued me how many women in general were posting over in that board, though I'm not sure why. Part of it is that I think of Tolkien fandom as heavily male-based, though I'm not quite sure if that's true. Part of it is because other Tolkien message boards I've lurked at do seem to be heavily male. So, I wonder if women posted more because the board was run by a woman, if there was a tone to the discussion that was less-intimidating, if issues came to the foreground that women found they had more to talk about, if female-oriented reports (from Debbie) just generated more female response.'

Interestingly, however, the statistics show that 50% of the users used

a masculine or probably masculine name or identified themselves as male, and only 22% were female or probably female. 27% of the posters used gender-neutral names and did not identify themselves as male or female<sup>15</sup>.

But the number of posts by gender is also surprising, given this distribution. Most studies of online communities conclude that men post more and longer posts than women<sup>16</sup>, but that isn't the case here. The male participants posted 46% of the posts; the female participants, only 22% of the total posters, wrote 40% of the posts; and the gender-neutral participants wrote 14%.

However, the type of post by gender seemed to follow the theoretical norm for Internet posting behavior. This norm predicts that women will provide more "social glue" through off-topic posts than men will. In her study of three Usenet newsgroups on science fiction television, Cromer found that the groups with a higher percentage of female members felt more off-topic messages were posted on their boards, and were also somewhat more tolerant of them<sup>17</sup>. Herring's research also shows more tolerance for off-topic posts by women than by men<sup>18</sup>.

We divided the posts into three groups: primarily discussing the chapter under consideration; discussing anything else related to Tolkien's writings; and posts that went completely off-topic, including discussions of the upcoming movie. Of the total posts by women, 32% were on-topic, 16% were Tolkien-related, and 52% were off-topic. For men, 43% were on-topic, 17% were Tolkien-related, and only 40% were off-topic. The distribution for gender-neutral posters was close to that for female posters, so we can hazard a guess that these are likely to be women because of the theory that women are more likely to pick a gender-neutral nickname than men<sup>19</sup>. If this is so, there could be a more evenly balanced gender and posting-by-gender distribution than there appears to be at first sight, but the on topic/off topic distribution would remain the same. (On the other hand, the gender-neutral posters posted far less as a group than either the male or female posters.)

The fact that the women in this group spoke up more than might be

expected, given the gender distribution, might explain the "feminine" feel. Five of the top ten posters by number of words written were female. It is also likely that the gender and the behaviours modelled by the person who originated the board, and by Allison, who was the top poster and took on a "hostess" role, set the tone.

### Characteristics of interactions: rules and roles

From the earliest messages on this forum there was a balance between "scholarly" postings providing background to help Debbie understand and appreciate Tolkien's works, and "encouragements" that urged her to continue reading and posting. As time went on and the group got larger, there were more discussions that went off-topic. As noted above, the percentage of women's postings that were off-topic was larger than that for men. Off-topic postings often help form a kind of "social cement"<sup>20</sup> between group members.

Communities start defining themselves when they begin to develop rules. In this case, concerns about "spoilers" ruining the book for Debbie by revealing too much led to some posters appointing themselves "spoiler police" as early as the chapter "Farewell to Lorien". Even earlier there were hints about the fate of Bill the pony and the upcoming death of a favourite character that influenced Debbie's reading. The situation came to a crisis in the chapter "The King of the Golden Hall," when Debbie made a comment about how meek and subservient Éowyn seemed. This of course was a red flag to those familiar with the whole story, and one poster did reveal Éowyn's later pivotal role. As Allison recalls<sup>21</sup>

'That was the spoiler that caused me to call Deb at 7:00 in the morning to warn her off the discussion boards and that freaked her out so much she gave me editing power for spoilers that night... [T]hat's how my role stepped up on the page, once Deb gave me "the keys" to be able to erase spoilers from the board. It rather startled me to see how my role changed on the board from that point on.'

Polite online behaviour is distinct enough from face-to-face behaviour

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that it has its own neologism: "netiquette". And this was an exceptionally polite board. The closest thing to a flame during the whole history of the forum was a single incident of one poster calling another's post "absolute rubbish". Even complaints about spoilers were leavened with humor and 'emoticons' to soften the blow (as in one example where a participant suggested posting decoy spoilers). One participant pointed out about the subsequent Silmarillion discussion, in which many of the same posters participated:<sup>22</sup>

'As heated up and controversial as they were, the discussions always remained fair, there was always an undertone of mutual respect and affection, even when we disagreed ... and we never called the other person stupid or bashed him or her down in another way when he or she held a different opinion.'

Is it possible that the subject matter – the works of J.R.R. Tolkien – automatically led to more mature and polite online behaviour? Apparently not – several people commented that the overall tone of this board was far more mature than that of other Tolkien discussion boards they had visited. One went so far as to call the behavior on some other Tolkien boards "orc-like"<sup>23</sup>. One poster wrote:<sup>24</sup>

'...in my opinion, the discussion climate at the Final Attempt board, and the subsequent Silmarillion board, was a lot more open-minded, tolerant and well-educated than many others. That is, most people seemed to be genuinely ... and lovingly interested in the works and world of Tolkien, and truly interested in hearing other people's points of view. On many other boards where I've lurked a bit, I find that ... people who don't have the same opinion as the majority tend to get bashed or ridiculed.'

Another participant speculated on the reason:<sup>25</sup>

'Having lurked a bit at some other boards, the level of deep feeling and thought at this board has seemed to be a good deal greater than the norm. I have seen some boards that go into a similar level of detail, but without getting down to the real level of meaning. Also we haven't had too many people

posting the kinds of comments that seem to be mainly repetitive drawn-out vowel sounds or interjections and which seem almost the norm at some other boards. Perhaps this is due to the median age of the participants.'

Unfortunately, we do not have enough information on the ages of the participants to come to any real conclusions, since only twelve of the nearly 200 posters gave their ages. As we mentioned above, it is unlikely to be due to the subject matter; while Tolkien wrote seriously and many readers take him seriously, this does not guarantee mature behavior. Some posters mentioned Tolkien "fanboy" sites as being particularly flame-ridden; these are forums where the median age and gender distribution are probably quite different from the "Final Attempt" group. A cursory look at the "getting to know you" thread on the later Silmarillion discussion board does seem to indicate a higher median age for this group than for Internet users in general.

In an intriguing article titled "Politeness in computer culture: why women thank and men flame," Susan Herring surveyed male and female posters on a variety of boards and came to some interesting conclusions. Both male and female respondents said that they valued polite behavior online, but actual behavior was skewed by gender. She speculated that "[f]or women, a cluster of values emerges that can be characterised as democratic, based on an ideal of participation by all and validation of others' experiences ... For men, in contrast, there is a valorisation of speed ... and rational debate...". Because of this value system, men may be more likely to be annoyed by incompetent acts on the part of other posters, such as sending time-wasting messages and spam, and may respond like "net vigilante[s]" and justify flaming as "a form of self-appointed regulation of the social order"<sup>26</sup>.

But this board was different. While levels of computer competence and knowledge of Tolkien's legendarium varied, at all times a plea of ignorance invoked a deluge of help instead of ridicule. Participants in this forum exhibited "reciprocal supportiveness," a value that builds community and at the

same time is "a means of expressing one's identity" and increasing "self-esteem, respect from others, and status attainment". In contrast to "real life";<sup>27</sup>

'The accumulation of small, individual acts of assistance can sustain a large community because *each act is seen by the entire group* [italics added] and helps to perpetuate an image of generalised reciprocity and mutual aid.'

Participants in this group also seem to value and reward (by responding and praising) a similar group of communication or performance skills to those observed in a soap opera discussion group by Nancy K. Baym: "humour, insight, distinctive personality, and politeness"<sup>28</sup>. For the "Last Attempt" group, it also seems that knowledge and the ability to share it in an informative but not condescending way are appreciated.

Performance is one way individuals establish an identity online. Participants also use distinctive names or nicknames, and employ strategies to associate their screen names with a distinct personality; "Katarina" and "Katerina", for example, sensitised the group to the subtle difference between their names through joking exchanges and personal revelations about where they lived and their occupations. On many boards, including the other forums on Debbie's site, participants use signature lines that include meaningful quotes, but the original "Last Attempt" forum did not allow this.

One interviewee, though, may have hit on the real reason why the tone of this board was so comfortable. A strong leading personality can influence an entire community:<sup>29</sup>

'[I]t felt kind of like entering Deb's living room, where a nice, long party was going on. My guess is that the real life community around Deb has a truly friendly atmosphere, or flavour, and that flavour was contagious. All us who entered digitally became infested with it, and adapted to it quickly. ... I soon got the image of Deb as the host and head of the table, the object of celebration had it been a birthday party, and Allison acting as the perfect hostess, going around and checking on everyone, introducing people



*Flotsam and jetsam*

*Lorenzo Daniele*

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to each other and handing out the hors d'oeuvres, if you know what I mean.'

### Growth of the community

A viable community grows and changes over time. One way a computer-mediated community can grow is through members' interacting outside of the forum where they met, and thus reinforcing their bonds. Etzioni and Etzioni conclude that a "hybrid system" that combines the best features of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication would "allow the special strengths of each system to make up for the weaknesses of the other;" a group that communicates both ways would have the superior level of interpersonal knowledge generated by face-to-face contact in addition to the memory-storage capabilities of a computer community<sup>30</sup>. But meeting face-to-face to reinforce bonds can be problematical for such a widely scattered group, and may be more probable in a situation where the community members have more in common and are more likely to have reasons to meet, such as an academic community whose members are likely to attend the same conferences.

In this case, aside from Debbie, Allison, and one other filk musician whom they already knew, only two of the interview respondents seem to have met in person at the time of the writing of this paper. (The authors met Debbie and Allison in person for the first time when presenting this paper at a conference in their home town.) However, many of the interviewees reported that they have exchanged private emails with other participants from time to time or visited their personal websites. Wellman calls online ties "intimate secondary relationships" – they are moderately strong, but operate only "in one specialised domain." Yet they can become more intimate over time, and he speculates that the "limited social presence and asynchronicity of computer-mediated communication" only slows the development of stronger ties and does not mean they will never occur<sup>31</sup>.

While the on-topic discussions were the main purpose of the board, it was the off-topic exchanges that provided the social glue. As Haythornthwaite *et al.* point out,

"such wanderings [off topic] may ... be taken as a sign that the group is becoming a community"<sup>32</sup>. We noted above that we counted posts that discussed other Tolkien works as on topic. But discussions also ranged farther afield to other fantasy writers, Tolkien-inspired music and art, the Peter Jackson movies, and so on.

At times participants also talked about their personal lives, sometimes tying it in with the chapter under discussion. One member compared the departure of Frodo to his father's serious illness, which led to both expressions of sympathy and empathy, and to even deeper conversation about the scenes in question. This caring behaviour is another example of a community forming. As one European interviewee pointed out, at some point one's personal comfort with the group shifts from protecting one's privacy to caring about belonging:<sup>33</sup>

'After the 11th September however I had some different concerns: Not about privacy, but about getting lost: I suddenly realized that if someone disappeared completely from these boards and even did not answer to emails we would not be able to find out what became of him or her. I think [two other members] know my real name, and I am happy about this.'

Another way a community grows is by developing its own in-jokes. Debbie started this early on – on May 3rd, in her initial comments on the chapter "The Shadow of the Past", Debbie said, "If anything nasty happens to the Hobbits in the Shire, I'm going to be upset (unless it happens to only the Sackville-Bagginses, of course)"<sup>34</sup>.

Participants found it very amusing, and she began using variations of it in her chapter reports, sometimes for a humorous effect and sometimes more poignantly, as in her comments on "The Land of Shadow", where she says "NOTHING BAD HAD BETTER HAPPEN TO SAM!"<sup>35</sup>.

But the main way this community has grown has been by branching off into new projects. Reading *The Lord of the Rings* with Debbie was from the beginning a finite project, and on June 4th, about two-thirds of the way through the trilogy, Big Mike observed:<sup>36</sup>

'There are lots of web sites where

we Tolkien fans can get info, but this has really become a gathering (or Moot) of regular Tolkien loving people. Just like the feeling at the end of the book (wishing there was another 1000 pages to read) I hope some how we can continue this small community after Deb finishes.'

Almost immediately another poster suggested a group reading of *The Silmarillion*, and many other readers chimed in agreeing to the suggestion. Soon Allison stepped in to organize a forum for a chapter-by-chapter discussion, and it got under way in July 2002. Other forums were soon added to the "Talking Tolkien" section of Debbie's site. There are now eight very active forums for participants discussing different aspects of Tolkien's writing and related works, including the Peter Jackson movies, books discussions on *The Hobbit* and Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" (soon to move on to other works and authors), and comments on Debbie's comic strip "Waiting for Frodo". There is even a forum devoted to discussing this research project. The "Talking Tolkien" forum has begun to take on the characteristics of a literary salon (as many online discussion groups do when they have multiple forums and threads), where guests can drift around the room listening to and taking part in a variety of conversations; sometimes one discussion will dominate, and almost everyone will be paying attention to it, and at other times small groups will be conversing all around the room.

### Conclusions

The question remains: Is this a community? And more generally, can any group that rarely or never meets face-to-face really call itself a community? For one thing, most of the participants in Debbie's "Last Attempt" and associated forums seem to think of it as a community themselves, albeit a limited one. As one interviewee put it, he enjoys conversing and considers the other participants his friends, but "there is also a sense of distance"<sup>37</sup>. One interviewee did express doubts about the entire concept of computer-mediated community, calling herself "cautiously enthusiastic", and feeling that her experience with the "well-educated, widely read" people

*“Mearas” - Jef Murray.*

*Jef Murray is a professional artist - see page 2 for details about how to view other examples of his work.*



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on Debbie's board, while exciting and fun, still made her "realize the limitations" of CMC and feel that it could never truly replace face-to-face interactions<sup>38</sup>.

This community grows and adapts to new members and new topics of discussion; bonds between members are strengthened by occasional outside interactions; it has a shared history demonstrated by in-jokes and references to earlier threads; and it has developed its own rules and roles which adapt to new situations as needed. Quoting Haythornthwaite *et al.* again:<sup>39</sup>

'The question of whether or not one can find "community" on-line is asked largely by those who do not experience it. Committed participants...have no problem in accepting that communities exist on-line, and that they belong to them ... Even before the development of virtual communities, people usually cycled between multiple communities ... [M]odern neighborhood ties do not fill all of a person's community needs ...

Virtual communities are only a part of a person's multiple communities of interest, kinship, friendship, work, and locality.'

Howard Rheingold, in his *The Virtual Community*, concluded "whenever CMC technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as micro-organisms inevitably build colonies"<sup>40</sup>.

Critics of online communities sometimes worry that virtual ties can take over a person's life and cut them off from "real life" and face-to-face communication. Wellman and Gulia offer an interesting perspective on this question:<sup>41</sup>

'Although people now take telephone contact for granted, it was seen as an exotic, depersonalised form of communication only fifty years ago ... We suspect that as online communication is rapidly becoming widely used and routinely accepted, the current fascination with it will soon decline sharply. It will be seen

much as telephone contact is now and letter-writing was in Jane Austen's time: a reasonable way to maintain strong and weak ties between people who are unable to have a face-to-face encounter just then.'

What would Tolkien himself have thought of a web community? Would he have considered it one more incarnation of his "deplorable cultus"<sup>42</sup>? Would it have confirmed his deep distrust of technology? Or would he, like Pippin, say "I wish we could have a Stone that we could see all our friends in ... and that we could speak to them from far away!"<sup>43</sup>. Community is always a good to be striven for in Tolkien's world, and the "Final Attempt" web group is an example of a supportive, but limited, community that serves a need of its members that may not be addressed by other relationships in their lives – a need to examine and discuss the meaning of *The Lord of the Rings* in a mature and thoughtful environment, and encourage new readers to do the same.

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## Notes and references

The research for this project was conducted with the approval of the University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board.

1. ("Kevin")
2. (Martinez)
3. (Preece, 2000, 10)
4. "Filk" is the folk song of the science fiction and fantasy community. Filk songs can be totally original compositions, or new words to established tunes. They can be about writers, characters, or worlds. They can be parody, or loving homage, or a form of science fiction or fantasy writing in itself. Debbie performs in a Toronto-based trio called Urban Tapestry.
5. (Ohi, *Reading*)
6. (Ohi, *Permission*)
7. (Ohi, *V: 10*)
8. We found that since participants were unregistered, they sometimes varied the names they posted under, which may have skewed some of our statistics. The same person may have used several variations of their name.
9. (Wellman, 1997, 191)
10. One lengthy discussion on translation issues resulted in a number of posters copying out the first stanza of "The Song of Beren and Lúthien" in various translations they had access to. This thread is available at <http://www.electricpenguin.com/blatherings/lotr/archives/0000047.html>
11. (Cantor, 2001, 168)
12. (Cantor, 2001, 169)
13. ("Katarina", *Tolkien*)
14. (Durno)
15. This may be higher than in other online communities; many Tolkien fans create Elvish names for themselves, and people who are not scholars of his invented languages would have trouble figuring out the gender of the name.
16. A number of these studies are listed in *Psychology and the Internet* (Morahan-Martin, 1998, 183)
17. (Cromer, 2002, 6-7)
18. (Herring, 1994, 286)
19. (Jaffe et al., 1999, 230)
20. (Fox and Roberts, 1999, 646)
21. (Durno)
22. ("susanna")
23. ("Bodo Hardbottle")
24. ("Katarina", *I First Heard...*)
25. ("Turumarth")
26. (Herring, 1994, 289-290)
27. (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, 343-4)
28. (Baym, 1997, 112)
29. ("Katarina", *I First Heard...*)
30. (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999, 247)
31. (Wellman, 1997, 198)
32. (Haythornthwaite, Wellman and Garton, 1998, 218)
33. ("susanna")
34. (Ohi, *I:2*)
35. (Ohi, *VI:2*)
36. ("Big Mike")
37. ("Brian")
38. ("Nail Paring")
39. (Haythornthwaite, Wellman and Garton, 1998, 212-213)
40. (Rheingold, 1993, 6)
41. (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, 348)
42. (Carpenter, 1977, 231)
43. (Tolkien, 1965, 260)

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