Pervy Hobbit Fanciers Unite!

The dynamics of online communities from the perspective of the *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal.

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1. Introduction

This paper is a follow-up of "Das vernetzte Individuum. Identität im Zeitalter des Internets" (2003), which focused on the formation of identity on the internet. With the help of a questionnaire I discovered the importance people place on their relationships with other people on the net. For many this is the main reason to go online. This coincides with my own experiences and therefore the focus of this paper will lie on the dynamics of online communities.

The theoretical research on online communities has been steadily growing in recent years, paralleling the rise of online communities on the internet. There are many interesting aspects worth looking at, but it was necessary for me to choose those that seem most relevant in connection with my own research in the form of a questionnaire. Therefore the first part of this paper will use a theoretical approach, referencing a selection of the many scientific resources available on the topic of community building and maintaining on the internet. Here it might be important to say that my own experience with online communities has been largely positive, which has naturally colored my outlook. It has also led me to including a section on gender aspects of online communities, because the communities that I've been a part of have had a high, if not exclusive, majority of female participants. Because it is important not to lose sight of the criticism that has been voiced in connection with online communities, this paper will also include a critical perspective on the phenomenon.

After looking at these aspects of online communities in general, we will look in detail at one particular community as an example. Relying on my personal knowledge and connections, I decided to use the community of *Lord of the Rings* fans as it manifests itself on LiveJournal, "an online journal service with an emphasis on user interaction" as the website's mission statement says[1]. Here online fandom[2] serves as a platform for

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[1] http://www.livejournal.com
[2] The term will be explained in the fourth chapter.

fans to connect, discuss – and to use the source material in a creative fashion.

All of this leads to the formation of a community felt by many to be on one level with their offline relationships. In an effort to get input on the matter from as many members of the big *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal as possible, I posted a questionnaire. The opinions of 31 fans form the main part of this paper, as I look at their views and perspectives on their involvement, trying to get an impression of tendencies and developments in this particular online community, which unites several thousand mostly female fans.

This paper does not claim to present a complete picture of online communities, not even of the *Lord of the Rings* fandom. It just wants to highlight some of the issues connected with the phenomenon and maybe lead to some insight into the ever-growing appeal of online communities in today's world. Scientific research on the matter has only just begun, but it is important to continue it as more people discover the internet and realize that, while online communities are not in any form a utopian society, they are not just a cheap replacement of the "real thing" for the lonely and socially incompetent, but a way of building social relationships crossing geographic, social and age boundaries.

2. Online communities: A short description

Müller (2001: 3) differentiates between four types of online communities. The first one he calls "communicative communities", which are defined by direct, regular interactions between people, in any shape or form. The second one is described as "imaginary secondary relationships", connected by a medium like online auctions, commonly used websites or webrings, where people have the possibility to get to know each other but rarely choose to. The third type is that of the "imaginary online

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community", which is often a purely symbolic construction with people claiming membership without actual interaction, comparable to the affiliation to a certain nation or the "community" of all fans of a specific football club. The fourth type Müller defines is one where relationships are one-sided, because only one side is actually aware of them, as in most surveillance measures, for example video cameras in stores or a census.

In the context of this paper, only the first type is truly relevant, although, especially in connection with fandom, the third option also bears certain validity. From this point of view, online communities (often also referred to as virtual communities) are a new form of social networks emerging on the internet, often without any offline connection between the participants. The term "community" fits, because, as Baym (1998: 35) states:

> Social relationships thrive on-line and have since the beginning of interactive computing. For many observers and participants the word "community" seemed appropriate for the new social realms emerging through this on-line interaction, capturing a sense of interpersonal connection as well as internal organization.

This was also clearly shown in the questionnaire I sent out for my earlier paper about internet and identity, where many people voiced the importance of the friendships they had developed via the internet, citing them as one of the main reasons for going online regularly.

There are different ways to interact online which evolved over the last few decades, when the internet allowed computers to connect in decentralized networks. According to Jones (1998: xiv-xv) it started with email, two people exchanging electronic letters, but quickly the usefulness of sharing news with several people simultaneously became obvious. Therefore, mailing lists were created, where one person emails a message to a central point, from which it is then forwarded to everyone who subscribes to this particular mailing list. Mailing lists are often themed, connecting people with the same interests. Some of these are purely for the exchange of information, while others also have a social component. A similar format is the bulletin board, although here messages are not relayed by email but

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hosted on a computer. Both formats, summarized under the heading of "newsgroup", result in threads of messages, with people replying to what others have said. The best-known example of massive collection of newsgroups about all sorts of topics is Usenet.[3] Today, most networks use the World Wide Web, which was created in 1990 by Tim Berners-Lee.

In addition to the newsgroups and mailing lists, people also connect via internet Relay Chat (IRC), Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), message boards and Instant Messaging protocols (like AIM, MSN or ICQ), which all cater for different needs, from virtual conversations to fantasy roleplaying. In academic literature one often finds the term Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) for all forms of online interaction between people. All of them share a social, communicative aspect, which is more or less pronounced, leading to casual acquaintances, friendships or even romantic relationships.

Rheingold (1993: Chapter 1), who is attributed with coining the term "virtual community" through his work on the subject, sees CMC as an opportunity for forming relationships, despite (or even because of) the anonymity and lack of face-to-face interaction:

> Because we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public. […] CMC is a way to meet people, whether or not you feel the need to affiliate with them on a community level. It's a way of both making contact with and maintaining a distance from others. The way you meet people in cyberspace puts a different spin on affiliation: in traditional kinds of communities, we are accustomed to meeting people, then getting to know them; in virtual communities, you can get to know people and then choose to meet them.

Rheingold also mentions the possibility of people hiding behind false identities, but dismisses this as simply a new version of already existing possibilities of fooling people, for example via telephone or even face-to-face. In agreement with the results from my first questionnaire, Rheingold

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[3] Resource for Usenet groups: http://groups.google.com. According to the website, "Google Groups contains the world's most comprehensive archive of postings to Usenet, dating back to 1981."

insists that for many, the anonymity even leads to greater honesty and openness "than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms".

What is important to note when talking about online communities is the great variety that exists. There is no such thing as the "typical" online community. As groups form online, consisting of people with vastly different social, geographical and cultural backgrounds and diverging interests, they "develop complex and distinctive identities, identities that result unpredictably from combination of preexisting factors, and the emergent forces that those appropriations generate" (Baym 2000: 197-198). In my opinion Baym (2000: 201) neatly summarizes the phenomenon in her work on the online soap opera fandom as a community:

> Each online community is an ongoing creation, manifested, challenged, and recreated through negotiations that occur implicitly in every message. As people write, they draw selectively on the features of the medium, the joint projects available, their personal histories and experiences and the group's history in ways that collaboratively coconstruct the values, relationships, identities, and conventions that make a group feel like community.

3. Theory: Scientific research on online communities

The internet and especially its social sides have become the focus of much scientific research in the past few years, as more people join the growing (and already here one encounters the word) community of internet users and begin to interact with others via CMC. It is a wide field, depending on the background and focal point of the researchers, ranging from postulates of new, almost utopian forms of society to bleakly pessimistic works on the negative effects of the phenomenon. These kinds of extreme perspectives have become rarer in the past few years, making way for more balanced and complex theories as the internet moves away

from being a strange border phenomenon towards being part of mainstream popular culture.

For this paper I have chosen to highlight three aspects that can be found in the literature on the subject of online communities, as they appear to bear significance in connection with the results from my questionnaire: First we look at some of the dynamics behind community building on the net, which show how and why these relationships function the way they do. Then some notes on the question of gender and gender participation will follow, which is relevant insofar as the community I use as an example, the *Lord of the Rings* fans on LiveJournal, is almost exclusively female. Finally, this chapter will close by mentioning some of the more critical arguments that have been made in connection with online community, in order to balance this paper's otherwise mostly optimistic outlook.

3.1. Dynamics

Jones (1998: 15) quotes Stone's[4] useful definition of the phenomenon. She sees virtual communities and space as "incontrovertible social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'… [V]irtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separated".

Using the term community in association with CMC emphasizes the sociality of the process. As more and more people use CMC to talk not only to people they already know but also to complete strangers, new ways of forming identity and social relationships.

> Such matters speak directly to the creation of community via CMC, as one area of development, that of standards of conduct, is in a sense the development of a moral code, a system of values, akin to the ones that arise and are revised in most social formations. (Jones 1998: xvi)

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[4] Stone, A.R. 1991. Will the real body please stand up?: Boundary stories about virtual cultures. In M. Benedikt (Ed.), *Cyberspace* (pp. 81-118). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Social and emotional ties that develop online can be just as important to the participants as offline relationships. Rheingold (1993: Chapter 4) states that, while new technologies have contributed to a loss of "cooperative spirit" among people, the growing networks can lead to new forms of cooperation, turn newsgroups into communities. Although these can sometimes resemble "battlefields", they nonetheless have regular users and follow specific sets of rules.

Some of the rules that govern the online interactions function similarly to those offline, while others are new, "imaginatively constructed by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by individuals and groups" (Jones 1998: 12). They enable people to "customize our social contacts from fragmented communities and to plan, organize, and make efficient our social contacts" (Jones 1998: 11).

This ability to choose groups and people to interact with is what makes CMC attractive for many. Not every newsgroup or mailing list is a community, and every group with a sense of community follows different goals and rules. Baym (1998: 38) argues that every community is shaped by its participants, who, through continuing communication, appropriate pre-existing structures like "external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics" in which the community is situated. The resulting "dynamic set of systematic social meanings" is the reason for the specific sense of community many experience.

In some communities, the interaction happens on a very personal level, emphasized by the use of real names and the sharing of personal information, despite the possibility of deception inherent in the medium (Rheingold 1993: Chapter 5). Often close friendships that develop online are continued in some form outside of the community. As in offline communities, not everyone is involved in the same fashion and intensity. There are dominant users and "social experts", which influence the flow of communication and the norms inside the community (Baym 1998: 58).

These norms are formed by the purpose and structure of the community and are usually enforced by sanctions from the users against those who violate the standards of what is considered appropriate behavior (Baym 1998: 60-61).

If one follows Berger (2004: 275), the need for social control mechanisms like this will decrease as a new generation of internet users grows up:

> This new generation will be one that is ultimately comfortable with new media, and as they grow older, those unsavoury elements that – as the right-wing press would have us believe – seem to flourish online, will be just as marginalized online as they are in the 'offline' world. The web will be increasingly full of educated and responsible users; a generation that has grown up with this technology, and that is comfortable in using it properly.

This is of course a very optimistic, not to say naïve, perspective, but what is certainly true is that the image the general public has of those who participate in online communities is already changing. If one looks at the users as "social actors", as Sproull (1997: 38-39) does, the net becomes a "social technology", a place where people gather regardless of physical location and can be actively involved in conversations or almost invisible as passive "lurkers", reading but not posting. This sort of passive behavior is easier sustained in the electronic environment. In online groups reciprocity and mutual benefits, the "social glue that sustains face-to-face groups over time", are adapted into a "more generalized altruism", where an active minority can hold a big group of people together because their actions are visible to everyone (Sproull 1997: 46).

This type of interaction leads to people forming many more weak than strong social ties in the course of their involvement in online communities. According to Müller (2001: 9) only 2% of all strong relationships formed online are sustained completely on the net, without stabilizing them through offline interactions. Yet, while strong ties offer deeper emotional support and generally a "wider variety of such social resources", weak ties enable people to form connections with "other social worlds, providing new sources of information and other resources" (Wellman 1997: 196).

In online environments, people can find both strong communities and loose gatherings, with norms defined by their different purposes and the needs of their members. They can connect with others, broadening their social horizons without having to leave their comfort zones.

3.2. Gender aspects

The role of gender does not lose its relevance in an online context, although it becomes much less visible, due to the anonymous nature of the media that enables people to present themselves in whichever way they choose. But, similar to a lot of offline environments, many of the groups that form online are either predominantly male or almost exclusively female.

This is mostly not planned but seems anchored in the subject matter of the respective communities that attract a certain audience. This is the case with the *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal, where especially the subgroups that use the source material of both J.R.R. Tolkien's books[5] and Peter Jackson's movie trilogy[6] to create artwork or fanfiction are almost exclusively female. Bacon-Smith (1992: 150) did not focus on the *Lord of the Rings* fandom in specific, but her explanation for the reasons why women are especially drawn to fanfiction and other creative fan ventures appears to be valid:

> Over time I realized that the community draws women who engage the masculine cultural model of active agent, and who are looking for a way of understanding that vigor and integrating it into a female lifestyle. Fan culture teaches them how to reinterpret the heroic figure in mass media in terms of a feminine culture model of emotional relatedness through the process of reading and writing the fan fiction.

Baym (1998: 41) makes a similar observation in her work about the soap opera newsgroup r.a.t.s.[7], explaining the female majority with the fandom

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[5] HarperCollins Publishers official site: http://www.tolkien.co.uk

[6] New Line Cinema official site: http://www.lordoftherings.net

[7] r.a.t.s. = rec.arts.tv.soaps, a Usenet newsgroup

subculture, which focuses on the emotional content of soap operas, while generally Usenet participants are predominantly male. She says that the female environment invites the discussion of more personal, women-oriented, issues, while groups with more men were more fact-oriented and less "likely to self-disclose and try to prevent or reduce tension" (Baym 1998: 48). Also, she sees a tendency where women establish more relationships online than men, which, although "not particularly intimate, […] display 'moderate' levels of commitment to these friendships" (Baym 1998: 58). Harcourt (2004: 243) goes even farther, claiming that the internet "is fast becoming a tool for empowerment, changing women's daily lives, their hopes and their futures", by allowing them to connect and interact. According to Harcourt (2004: 251) the percentage of female internet users rose from 15% at the beginning of the 1990s to about 50% in 2002, making them a more and more attractive audience.

> In this vision of the world, solitary women together are both beyond the pale of human experience and at the heart of it. […] As a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through masculine approval alone.

Auerbach (1978: 5) did not write about online communities but about women in literature, yet her words mirror those of the later researchers, describing an almost romantic, feminist image of "a community of women [that] feeds the dreams of a world beyond the normal", giving women the opportunity to form relationships with others in the safe harbor of an online community.

3.3. A critical perspective

So far the perspective of this paper has been predominantly positive, in keeping with my own experience with online communities, as well as that of many others. In order to gain something at least resembling a complete, balanced picture, however, it is important to keep in mind some of the critical opinions that have been voiced in connection with the subject.

The primary point of criticism is that community online is just a substitute for community offline and therefore takes something away from 'real' relationships. Most researchers today seem to agree that this is not a valid observation of the complexities of online interactions, even if they remain critical of the phenomenon. One of them is Jones (1998: 29), who states that "CMC in many ways exists side-by-side with social relationships already formed and that relationships formed only on-line develop differently or just more slowly than others", while at the same time criticizing the unrealistic range of expectations people set in the new technologies:

> No one medium, no one technology, has been able to provide those elements in combination, and often we have been unable to find them in any media. CMC has potential for a variety of consequences, some anticipated, some not. (Jones 1998: 30)

One of these unrealistic expectations is the idea that the internet is a world without borders, without access restrictions, free for anyone. In reality, of course, only a small minority has access to the World Wide Web, creating a quite homogenous group consisting mostly of Western people of higher education, while well over 90% of the adult population of the world will in all likelihood never have internet access (Baym 1998: 36). Stratton[8] went so far to say that, "the American mytholigization of the internet as a community represents a nostalgic dream for a mythical early modern community which asserts the dominance of the white, middle-class male and his cultural assumptions". Yet, even keeping these restrictions in mind, Berger (2004: 278) sees reason for optimism, as more and more people gain access:

> Only time will tell if the gap between the info-rich and the info-poor increases, or decreases, although there is cause to be optimistic that the outcome will be a good one for all, especially in the developing world.

Already women have managed to bridge the gap, as described in the previous chapter, but in all other aspects, like "income, education, and – to

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[8] As quoted by Baym 1998: 37, from: Stratton, J. 1997. Cyberspace and the globalization of culture. In D. Porter (ed.), *internet culture*. New York: Routledge. 271.

a lesser extent – race/ethnicity, location, and age", Bikson and Panis (1997: 426) propose that only an active change of policy will help close the gaps, even in the Western world.

The ease of deception and the creation of false identities is another factor often criticized and collected in many tales of betrayed trust. Yet Kolko and Reid (1998: 219) see the problem lying more in the restrictions membership in an online community puts onto the plurality of the self than in the creation of false identities. The focus on one particular topic forces the user to create a persona to fit each community they participate in, leading to less adaptability and a "cultural schizophrenia [which] makes the on-line community brittle and ill-equipped to evolve with the demands of circumstance". An example are the so-called "flame wars", which quickly become violent and hateful exchanges because "individuals become polarized and fixed in their opinions" due to the inflexibility of the written word (Kolko and Reid 1998: 220). In this inflexibility they see one of the main reasons why many online communities are short-lived in comparison with offline groups.

4. Example: The *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal

This last criticism is especially interesting because the example community I am using to illustrate the phenomenon is set on LiveJournal, where people create personal journals/identities with which they then can choose to join as many 'communities'[9] LiveJournal offers as they want. Therefore people can easily become members of a number of different communities, covering all their different interests and being kept together by the use of their personal LiveJournal username in every one of them.

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[9] LiveJournal 'communities' have to be differentiated from the word as it is used in this paper. It is the term used by the website for a messageboard which covers one specific aspect of a topic, so that multiple LiveJournal 'communities' can be part of a greater online community. For example the *Lord of the Rings* community consists of all members of the countless LiveJournal 'communities', which cover everything from Tolkien's languages, over discussions about the movies or books, to fanart featuring only hobbits.

They even create their own personal community of 'friends' – a list of other people's personal journals that they can read regularly and can exchange comments with, called (sometimes misleadingly) 'friends list'. In my eyes, this mix of personal journals and public message boards is what makes LiveJournal so attractive for many people, because they can create their own customized online experience. Many of the *Lord of the Rings* fans that filled out my questionnaire have never used another site in order to connect with fellow fans, but before analyzing the results of my probing, we will look at the community that supplied the answers.

4.1. A community of fans

Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia that allows contributions from everyone, defines 'fandom' as follows:

> Keen aficionados of any phenomenon such as authors, hobbies, ideologies, genres or fashions can collectively manifest as fandom. Fans (or the plural fen) typically are interested in even minor details of the object of their fandom; this is what differentiates them from those with only casual interest. […] Fandom can also refer to the community of fans (usually online) who all share a fandom. These communities are often online, especially for less well known source material, but can also exist in the real world.

Pullen (2004: 80) describes the relationship between the source material and its audience as a dialogue: "texts are presumed to be open to various interpretations, and audience members are presumed to interpret those texts in various ways and for various uses". The number of fan websites to on the internet is almost impossible to estimate, the medium making it easy to instantly publish and communicate fandom-related content. Today it is possible to find fellow fans even for the most obscure or potentially embarrassing interests online, regardless of physical location, enabling people to express parts of themselves that they might not be able to share with others in their offline social circles, protected by physical distance and anonymity (Baym 2000: 214-215).

By now, fandom has also been recognized as commercial opportunity by producers, which often actively court the fans. A famous example of this

were the *Lord of the Rings* movies, where both official[10] and inofficial websites[11] were supported and fed with news and information right from the start of production (Pullen 2004: 89).

The *Lord of the Rings* or Tolkien fandom is one of the biggest fandoms around. It has been around for several decades, but participation and websites have skyrocketed with the release of Peter Jackson's movie trilogy. There is something of a divide between the "old-school" fans, which go back to the 1960s, and the newcomers, some of which have never read the books. It is estimated that by now about half of the fans are female (Wikipedia: Tolkien fandom). As has been mentioned before, on LiveJournal the fandom is predominantly female, with quite a big following of movie fans. The sense of community is quite important as well, as are the creative forms of dealing with the text found in the source material.

4.2. Fandom, appropriation and community

The social aspects of fandom are important to many, although not all, participants, making it a real community where interpersonal relationships are highly valued instead of being restricted to "group-text interactions" (Baym 2000: 209). As Bacon-Smith (1992: 41) puts it:

> Members of the latter group actively work to create an ideal society for themselves and fellow community members through the medium of their work and through the social organization they build around it.

One of the ways the community interacts is through the creation of a "meta-text", as the fans "understand and analyse texts in terms of the fan community", giving them more meaning than what can be seen at first glance (Pullen 2004: 81). This additional information, which is passed along through the fandom until it becomes almost general knowledge, is

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[10] The New Line Cinema official site (http://www.lordoftherings.net) is "one of the most detailed film marketing sites on the Web" (Pullen 2004: 89).
[11] The biggest inofficial movie news website is TheOneRing.net (http://www.theonering.net), which even had movie release parties attended by Peter Jackson and many members of the cast.

often called 'fanon', as opposed to 'canon'. The term means the plain facts as they are presented in the source material.

Fanon is often used in the creation of fanworks like fanfiction[12] and fanart[13], which also serve as important instruments in the building and maintaining of fan community online, as fans publish their own takes on the loved material and receive instant reactions from their peers. The phenomenon of fanfiction has become so wide-spread on the internet in the past few years that it's drawn the attention even of mainstream media like some major newspapers. This causes new problems, like a reinforcement of some negative stereotypes of internet users and the danger of copyright issues as producers find it harder to overlook the fanworks (Pullen 2004: 87, 90).

For the fans it is a way to appropriate the source material, addressing issues near and dear to their hearts, correct plots that they thought went wrong, and (this is the most common theme) write romantic relationships where none were intended (Pullen 2004: 85-86).

Interestingly enough quite a big portion of fannish writing is dedicated to so-called 'slash fiction'[14]; stories that pair people of the same sex in a romantic fashion. Most of these stories focus on male couples[15], although the majority of writers are female and heterosexual. Why this genre is so attractive has been the topic of quite a lot of discussion, also in academic circles, very often in fandom itself, where quite many participants have an academic background.[16] But in the context of this paper, the main point to note is that the process of writing fanfiction (and the creation of other

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[12] Fan-written stories using the characters of TV shows, movies and books.

[13] Fan-created artwork inspired by TV shows, movies and books.

[14] Bacon-Smith 1992: 52: The term is derived from the orthographic character (/) used to separate the names or initials of the two or more characters involved in a sexual-romantic relationship.

[15] In order to make a distinction, female couplings are usually called 'femslash'.

[16] A result of academic research on slash fanfiction is available on http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/bonking.html [Sept 1, 2005]. And an example for an essay by a fan can be found here: http://hopeless.dombillijah.com/geek/slashfandom.html [Aug 9, 2005].

fanworks) is active, far away from the image of the internet nerd sitting locked up in his room watching TV (Thrupkaew 2004).

It is an act of appropriating items of popular culture and a way to create community, as Bacon-Smith (1992: 57) describes it:

> Many writers contribute their work out of social obligation, to add to the discourse, to communicate with others. Creativity lies not in how a writer breaks with the tradition of the community's work but in how she uses the language of the group to shed a brighter light on the truth they work to communicate.

5. Questionnaire: A view from the inside

The community of *Lord of the Rings* fans on LiveJournal is big and varied, ranging from book purists discussing Tolkien to movie fans writing slash fanfiction. I tried to obtain as broad a perspective as possible and posted my questionnaire to five different LiveJournal 'communities'. In addition it was linked in several other journals. The questionnaire as well as where exactly it was posted can be found in the appendix of this paper.

The result of my inquiries were 31 replies, ranging from short one sentence answers to carefully formulated opinions, which I will attempt to summarize.

5.1. Statistical data

All 31 replies came from women, which can be explained with the overwhelming majority female fans are on LiveJournal, especially in the fanfiction-centered communities. They range in age from 14 to 60, with a quarter of the answers coming from young women under 18.

Age groups

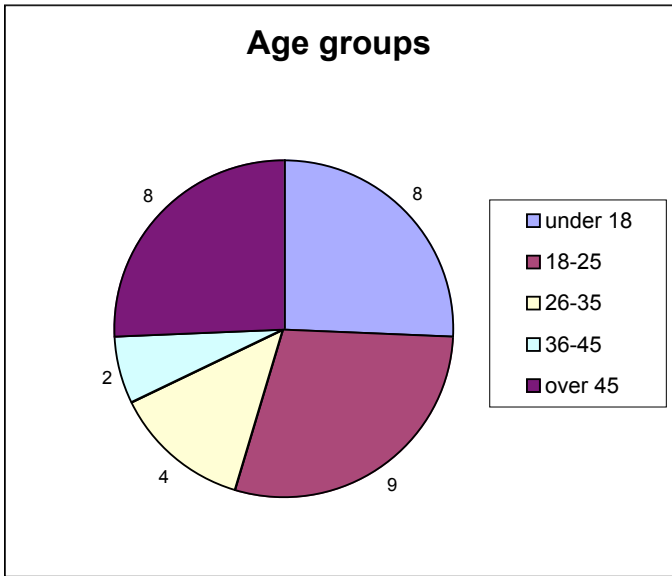|	
8	8
	under 18
	18-25
	26-35
	36-45
2	over 45
4	
	9

Table 1: Age groups

Geographically over half of the participants come from the United States, probably influenced by the fact that LiveJournal is a US-based service. No one from Asia or Africa replied, and only one person from Latin America, which is probably be a result of the exclusive use of English in the community as well as related to the relative spread of wealth.
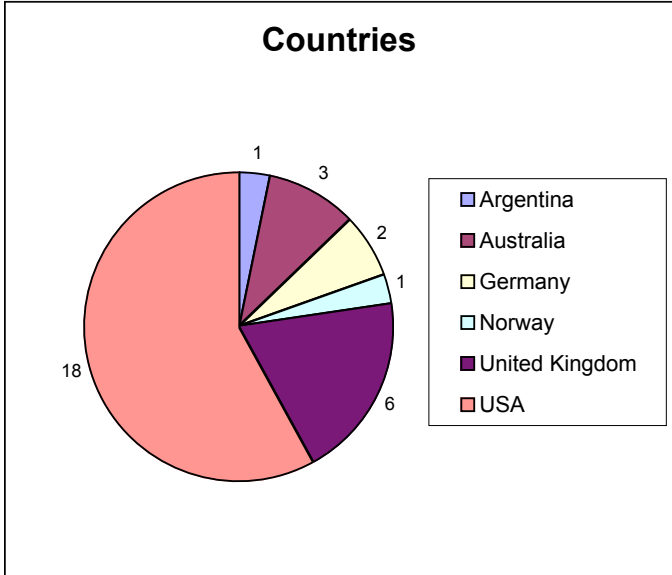
Countries

Table 2: Countries

The internet is still mostly a territory of the well-educated. This shows in the survey, with half of the participants self-identifying as students. Another quarter is employed in administrative functions. The rest have more manual jobs or are retired/disabled.
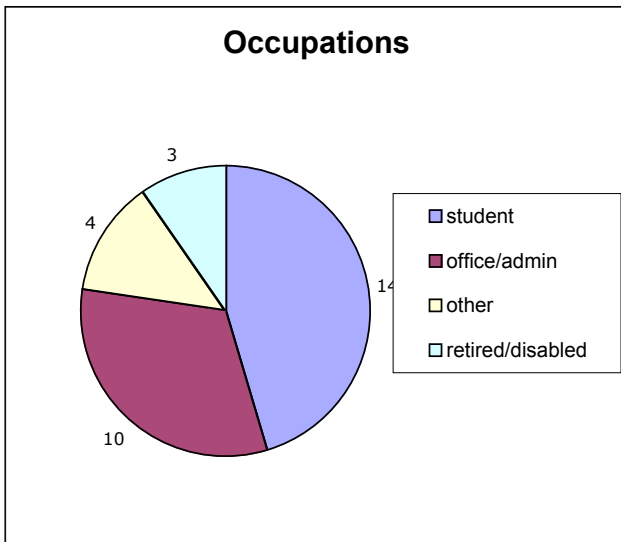
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Table 3: Occupations

While for some community participation is the only thing they do online and others only check the community for a very short period of time each day, most participants appear to split their online time quite evenly between community involvement and other interests. The overall time people are online varies quite a bit, from one to 16 hours a day, but more than half spend at least several hours each day as part of an online community.

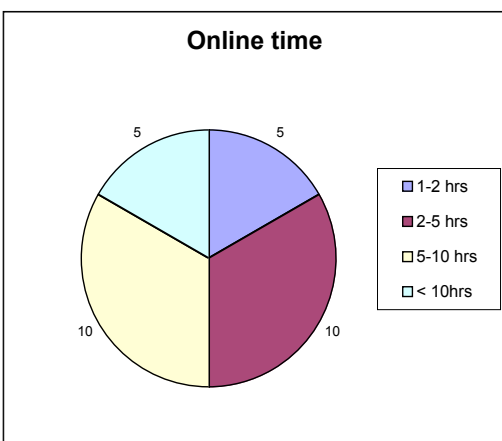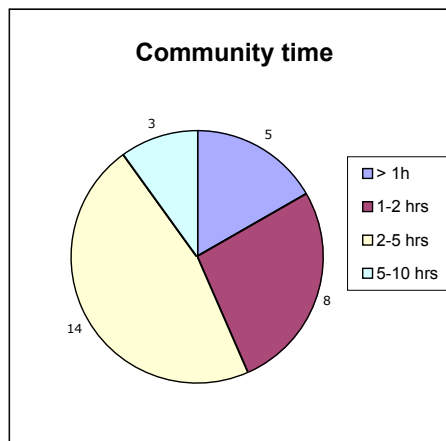

Table 4: Online time

Table 5: Community time

5.2. Personal histories

App1e_pi, a 31-year-old American living in Germany, describes the advantages of joining the fan community on LiveJournal like this:

I joined because I discovered that I loved reading other people's

fanfiction and also enjoyed getting feedback on my own writing. There was a strong sense of community immediately apparent, which I enjoyed. Living in a foreign country, no matter how much I like it, does give me a certain sense of isolation. I know many other Americans here, but it is tough to find people who share my interests, and LJ basically guarantees that I can find a community of people who like the same things I do.

Most people became part of the *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal in the last three years, often in relation to seeing and liking the movies. They state that they came to LiveJournal and its many 'communities' while looking for fanfiction and friendly people to share their interest in the material. Quite a number also specifically joined in order to talk about the actors cast in the movies, which also speaks of the great influence the movie trilogy had on the fandom.

Jenna, 17, a student from Australia:

Been part of it for about 2/3 years now, after Fellowship came out. I found it through interest search. I actually discovered the fanfic first, and through fanfic, went to the writers' LJs and gradually, to the LotR communities as well. Reasons for joining were mainly because I was interested to read more fanfic or see more icons or just to mingle with people with similar interests.

Most spend some time just reading different journals and LiveJournal communities before getting a journal for themselves and actively joining. Elouisa was one of those that watched at first: "I spent hours each day searching through the communities and after a few months plucked up the courage to get my own LJ to join the communities myself and contribute".

Quite often, in addition to *Lord of the Rings*-related LiveJournal communities people are also part of other fandoms, like Harry Potter. For the majority of the participants, the fan community on LiveJournal wasn't their first experience with online communities, although especially for the fans that only joined in the past year LiveJournal is their first community experience. For the others, who as a rule joined their first online community five to ten years ago, depending on their age, the most

common starting points seem to be message boards like ezboard[17], newsgroups and mailing lists, especially Yahoo! Groups[18], which dominated fandom for quite a number of years. Some came to LiveJournal already part of the *Lord of the Rings* fandom, but most started in other fandoms like pop groups, book authors or TV shows.

Mirabile Dictu, a 52-year-old administrator at an American university, puts the journey of quite a number of fans into words:

> I started in the early 1990s, reading the newsgroup a.t.x.f. [alt.tv.x-files] and subscribing to mailing lists devoted to science fiction novels, movies, and television. Slowly, people migrated from newsgroups and boards to mailing lists, then yahoo groups sort of took over, and now it's LiveJournal.

5.3. Priorities and creativity

There are two main reasons for joining the *Lord of the Rings* community on LiveJournal for the participants of my questionnaire: The people and fanfiction. It is not so much about getting information about the books or the movies, which only about five people mentioned as their main incentive, but rather about the friends found and the exchange of stories (and, to a lesser degree, fanart) and feedback. Often those two are connected, as Kristina (25, UK) says:

> The people are *incredibly* friendly. I was curious about online communities and chat rooms before I got interested in LotR and always wondered how people could become friends via the internet. But I felt welcome from the very first post I made, and people were always very kind and supportive about the fanfic I wrote, so that is the main reason I stayed. If I'd thought no-one was interested or that I had no chance of making friends, I would have lost interest in LJ, and in writing fanfic, very quickly.

The creative appropriation of the material is very important to most, which is probably a peculiarity of LiveJournal, where the fanfiction 'communities' make up quite a big part of the community. Even RogueM, a 23-year-old film student from Norway, who is one of the few who joined in order to find

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[17] http://www.ezboard.com, with the slogan "community discussion boards for everyone."
[18] http://groups.yahoo.com, "the easiest way for groups of people to communicate on the internet."

information and not fanfiction, admits: "The creative part of LJ isn't why I joined, though it has turned out to be a great venue to share my icons and such".

Elwenlj (50, UK) explains the importance of the creative exploration with the way Tolkien's literary world challenges the imagination:

> I think that, unlike other fan communities eg. pop groups, the fans of a book world bring creativity with them. They want to explore the world someone else created for them and that they love so much and exploration brings with it a need to share what we discover.

The possibility to get instant feedback and criticism of one's work is another feature that makes the community attractive to people that enjoy writing and creating art. Mary (19, USA) summarizes it:

> The creative aspect of LJ is really important because it enables people to get their art out to the world, and it allows others to comment or critique, when needed. As an icon maker myself, I really look forward to the feedback that people leave, helps me grow as a maker. Another creativity booster is being able to see what everyone else is making and trying those methods or effects; getting a different perspective.

Several people even go so far as to say that they would probably have left the community already if it was not for the fanfiction and fanart. They all stress that, should they leave at some point, they would not break off contact with the friends they made through their involvement. One of them is _JamJar, a 21-year-old from England:

> As for staying a part of the fandom itself, I value the source material (i.e. Tolkien) and how it's explored in fanfiction - if I weren't interested in the fanfiction, I would have left the "fandom" and just kept in touch with the friends I've made.

So fanfiction and fanart not only bring people together that share the interest in *Lord of the Rings*, but they also serve as the glue that keeps the community active and alive.

5.4. Participants and interaction

The high value the members of online communities place on personal relationships has been mentioned several times in the course of this paper. The *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal is no exception: Every single person that replied to the questionnaire mentioned the importance of the friends they found through their interaction in the community, which often continued on a more personal level.

The 16-year-old Kimberley Boylin from the UK states it like this:

> My interactions in online communities are very valuable to me because I have met so many of my close friends via the internet. I am online daily and can not go longer than 3 days without some kind of internet access. My relationships with people over the internet are just as important as those in real life because they have become such a big part of my life.

In addition to the shared love of Tolkien's world, the support they find in the community goes much further in the eyes of many participants. They do see differences between their circles of friends on- and offline, but not in respect that they value one over the other. "I think they *are* different, and I value them equally", _JamJar (21, England) states emphatically. And Jess (22, Australia) describes how much her online friends mean to her:

> I feel much less restricted in my online friendships, and even though I have never met any of my online friends in person, feel I have a deep and meaningful relationship with them, that transcends the digital medium. They are vital people in my life who I can share thoughts, insecurities, anxieties, and who understand where I am coming from.

Another Australian, the 17-year-old Jenna, also feels that she can be more honest because of the distance and because she can control who she talks to, but she also stresses the support offered by the social net she found on the internet, especially when offline relationships fail due to circumstances:

> And my online friendships are very important to me because when RL [Real Life] goes to shit, online life becomes my sanctuary. I've recently migrated and suffered mild depression due to leaving my RL friends and everyone I know, but my online friends and social life have buffered me up in a manner because they're still with me everyday =)

A slightly different voice comes from RogueM (23, film student, Norway):

> I value the friends I've made online, but it's not easy to have the same kind of relationship as you would with somebody in real life.

One or two other people mirror this feeling, but all of them appear to experience the community on a less intense level than the average user, like RogueM, who only spends about 5-30 minutes every day participating in the community.

When asked what kind of people they encounter in the community, most participants mention the diversity they encounter, like Elwenlj, a 50-year-old civil servant from the UK:

> I think we are a very creative lot. We also tend to be folks who can't find others offline who share our love. So we have to bond with others miles away. I think that is really all we have in common. Otherwise we are a diverse group of people with diverse home lives. I believe that is one of the reasons that I feel I do fit in. The only requirement for acceptance in this wide community is a love of Tolkien.

This is experienced as a positive addition to their lives, broadening their horizons, not just when it comes to *Lord of the Rings*, as Anmarwalk (51, USA) describes:

> When we are discussing non-fandom issues, such as work, relationships, food, etc; I have a much wider circle of friends, in terms of age, cultural backgrounds, etc, online. It's very interesting to hear their perspectives on life, romance, careers. Certainly a more varied and interesting group of women then available to me in RL.

Most participants feel that the gender aspect influences the way they live in the fan community on LiveJournal, which is essentially a community of women. Elouisa (29, UK):

> Female 'geeks' are a rare breed and in other communities might not have a voice but [in] the LJ communities have found a 'home' and are being heard.

But LiveJournal is not as unique in that aspect as some seem to think, at least according to Michelle (50, USA), who says:

I've noticed it's predominantly women wherever I've gone – LJ, EZBoard, Yahoo groups – and a lot of the same people overlap on them. So the differences seem to be relatively small, at least where I hang out.

Although she was the only one to remark on this, it is probably a fact that people tend to seek out the areas of fandom that they feel comfortable in, be it on LiveJournal or elsewhere. On LiveJournal specifically, it is very easy to customize the community experience, as Mirabile Dictu (52, USA) describes:

One of the reasons I like LiveJournal is you can tailor your flist [friends list] so only like-minded fellow-fans are represented. That's good, in that I enjoy every person on my flist, but probably bad because I have a very insular view of the fandom. […] I would, by the way, imagine this is true for most people.

It is a deliberate choice on her part to view only a small portion of fandom, motivated because she is "terrified of 'wank'[19], so that also inhibits my participation in discussions". Yet others find exactly the drama that Mirabile Dictu and many others try hard to avoid an interesting aspect of online fandom. The 29-year-old Elouisa from the UK is one of them:

Another feature of online communities I have found fascinating has been the 'mocking' or 'wank' communities which I would never have imagined before I found LJ. It is incredible how revealing these communities are about human nature, that people can be so vitriolic about other parts of the LOTR [*Lord of the Rings*] community while hiding under a pseudonym but would be nice as pie in RL.

Reading all the positive opinions expressed in the questionnaire, it seems that what Mirabile Dictu calls an 'insular view of the fandom' might be one of the biggest advantages of the fan community as it is expressed on LiveJournal, allowing people to stay away from negativity and conflict if they want to.

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[19] According to Wikipedia (2005) "Fandom Wank" is the name of an online community on JournalFen (http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank), which is "dedicated to the mocking of over-seriousness, ridiculousness, and general stupidity within the various media fandoms. […] Within the fandom subculture, the term 'fandom wank' has come to mean more than just the name of a virtual community."

5.5. Permanence and change

The migration from messageboards and mailing lists to LiveJournal has been mentioned before and shows the fluctuation of online fandom. Yet fandom has existed, in some form or the other, for decades. Kimberley Boylin (16, UK) neatly sums up the general consensus:

> Online communities as a general thing are going to remain as long as the internet is in use and, with it being such a useful tool, the likeliness of people no longer using the internet is very small. I think that communities in themselves can quite easily fall apart but just as easily start up. I can not see much change in online communities except perhaps their content changing as peoples interests change. If anything online communities will become a bigger part of every day life as more and more people purchase PCs and internet connections.

Some do see the intensity of their participation wane as their lives and priorities change, but everyone hopes to stay in touch with what is so important to them now. Jess (22, Australia) is one of these people:

> I am sad to say that as I am getting older, I am finding less and less time to actively participate, as jobs and graduation are getting in the way, however, I know that it will always play a role in my life.

The "population" of the *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal is already changing, now that the movie trilogy is finished. However, this change is not seen as threatening the community but as a normal part of every fandom. The 16-year-old Elizabeth Welsh from the United States describes it as follows:

> I think that there is a lot of change/fluctuation. Whenever something major happens in a fandom (movie, new book, etc) there is a flurry of anticipatory activity and renewed zest and the community is very healthy. Then afterwards there is the fallout ("OMG [oh my god], how could they do that to meeeeeeeee") and eventually it trickles down again to very little activity unless the fandom is big enough to sustain itself or some new exciting thing happens to the canon.

According to Ismenin (60, Wales), it is just a certain part of the community that changes, namely the young movie fans, while the longterm fans will stay:

> I have loved Tolkien (and Frodo!) since I was ten years old. My love of his stories will never die. The affection I feel for the

actors in the film is the same. […] The change I perceive is only from those who came into the fandom simply because of the film, and is usually limited to the younger LJ members leaving because they lose interest in the actors or grow out of the fandom. Us oldies will carry on. My LJ life is a permanent part of my life.

And Bronwyn, a 42-year-old logistician from the United States, sees another reason for remaining in the community that is not necessarily fandom-related:

Online communities will definitely be a part of my life in the long run. I live in a small town, and access to others who share my interest is difficult. Online communities help me find others who share my interests.

The possibility to find people to share even the most unusual interests is definitely one advantage that online communities offer. Another is the variety of people with different backgrounds that one encounters, which broaden one's horizon considerably. For Mandy (20, USA) it was even a life-changing experience:

Even if I get out of fandom, it'll still be part of what shaped me. I have a girlfriend now, and before fandom, I didn't consider myself liking girls... but fandom showed me that parts of myself that I was perhaps ashamed of before were actually perfectly normal.

Another young fan, Suvi (15, USA), also sees that online communities fill a basic need for many people, namely that to communicate with others:

People in general communicate with other people that they find interests with, and these fan communities are made up of people that communicate and have similar interests. Note that 'community' and 'communicate' both have the same root that means 'to interact with'. People shall always communicate, and communities shall always exist wherever it is possible, including the internet.

The online community fulfills different needs for the people in it and changes as the people change, with some aspects of it losing importance while others gain center-stage. Mirabile Dictu (52, USA) sees LiveJournal as the technology-of-the-moment which the fans have appropriated for their own use, but this is only a moment in time:

No idea where it's going, but as the technology changes, so will online communities. In fact, it's the social use of technology that most interests me. LiveJournals were not designed for fanfiction posts, yet that's primarily what I use it for. Fans innovate with technology as well as with the source material for their fannish behavior.

Yet, despite all this, at least if we believe the fans that answered my questionnaire, they are here to stay, because the love for *Lord of the Rings* binds them together. As Elwenlj (50, UK) summarizes the overall opinion:

Tolkien's work had a high moral tone and placed much emphasis upon friendship and the coming together of disparate people. I think that is reflected in the community itself. We have our ups and downs of course, but generally we admire the principles of the Professor's work and try to uphold them.

6. Conclusion

It was the goal of this paper to present a picture of the phenomenon 'online community', both from an outside perspective, by presenting some of the results of the scientific research available, and from the inside, using the answers from the questionnaire I posted to the fan community of *Lord of the Rings* fans on LiveJournal.

The internet is constantly evolving, but in the last ten years the trend to community building has been steadily growing, with no sign of slowing down. It is a possibility for people to make connections all over the (industrialized) world, sharing interests not necessarily common in their offline environment and broadening their horizon. It is not a utopian society by any means, but services like LiveJournal offer the opportunity to combine the different aspects of one's personality and creating one's personal community with the 'friends list', in addition to joining different interest groups.

Being part of an online community is an active pursuit, not a passive pastime. Members offer each other support and appropriate both the technology and the content in a form that fits their needs and goals, creating a unique social environment that is for most users a valuable addition to their lives.

Pullen (2004: 82) sums up what appears to be the consensus, not only among the community members but also among researchers, and which can serve as a fitting closing remark to this paper:

> Thus, according to these analyses, fans are not fringe extremists with an unhealthy and unrealistic interest in a particular media text, but savvy consumers who are able to use popular culture to fulfill their desires and needs, often explicitly rearticulating that culture in unique and empowering ways.

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8. Appendix: Questionnaire 'Online Communities'

Paper for a seminary in Media Science, winter semester 2004/05
University of Basel, Switzerland

Hey there,

For my minor Media Science at university I am writing my last paper about online communities, using the *Lord of the Rings* fan community on LiveJournal as an example ('write what you know', right?), and I'd be more than grateful for your help!
This paper builds on a previous one about internet and identity, where I tried to find out if internet users behave differently online than in RL and how they think about their online interactions. This time my goal is to find out why people join online communities, how they participate and how they value their interactions and relationships inside the community. Therefore I wrote a short questionnaire, that will hopefully provide me with some answers...

Please copy the following questionnaire and email it to shirasade {AT} livejournal.com. Give me as many or as few details as you like, and let me know if you'd be interested in reading the finished paper in a couple of months. Many thanks for your help – I really appreciate it!

1. *Some statistical data*
Name (or pseudonym):
Sex:
Age (or age group):
Profession:
Country:
Approx. time spent online:
Approx. time spent in online communities:

2. *How long have you been part of the "Lord of the Rings" fan community on LiveJournal? How did you find it and what were your reasons for joining?*

3. *Is this the first online community you've become part of? If no, when did you join your first and what was it?*

4. *What do you value most about the "Lord of the Rings" fan community on LiveJournal (people, information, fanfiction, etc.)? Why do you stay a part of it?*

5. *In what form do you participate in the "Lord of the Rings" fan community on LiveJournal (discussions, sharing of pictures, reading/ writing of fanfiction, fanart etc.)? How important is the creative part of being a fan on LiveJournal for you (fanfiction, fanart, etc.)?*

6. *Do you value your interactions in the online communities differently than your relationships in Real Life? How important are they in your life?*

7. *What kind of people do you think are generally participating in online communities in general and the "Lord of the Rings" fan community on LiveJournal specifically? Do you see differences? Do you feel that you fit in?*

8. *As how permanent do you see the "Lord of the Rings" fan community on LiveJournal and your participation in it? Will online communities be a part of your life in the long run?*

9. *Do you see a lot of change/fluctuation in online communities or do you see them as something permanent? In which direction do you think they're going?*

10. *Is there anything else about online communities that you'd like to share?*

Again thank you very much - and have fun online!

Take care,
Shirasade

Posted to the following LiveJournal communities, as well as my personal journal: fanthropology, lordoftherings, lotr_news, lotr_fanfiction, lotricons.
Links in: middleearthnews, lotr_het and several personal journals.