IRL (IN REAL LIFE): BREAKING DOWN THE BINARY OF ONLINE VERSUS OFFLINE SOCIAL INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

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IRL (In Real Life): Breaking Down The Binary Of Online Versus Offline Social Interaction examines the framework of "real versus virtual" that is often applied to studies of online social activity. This framework is often employed as a default in new media research, influencing a number of areas including the ongoing debate among scholars about whether or not the word "community" can be justly applied to a virtual group. The difficulty lies in the fact that few researchers have examined the framework in a critical context, in particular in the context of our larger narrative of the history of mass media technologies. This research begins with a detailed discussion of the real/virtual binary as a theoretical construct, in order to see if the idea of a sharp separation between online and offline activity is supportable. Having broken down the binary construct, this work turns to a case study of an online community known as "the Bronze," which existed from 1997 to 2001. By utilizing interviews and archival information, the case study examines the ways in which Internet users combine online and offline social activity seamlessly, the ways Internet forums can become integrated into daily activity rather than exist as exotic oases away from normal routines, and concludes with examples of the community organizing to deal with unwanted behavior, and also with a discussion of what the risk of deception in an online space means for the legitimacy of online social interaction.
Dedication:

To all the Bronzers, wherever they are now.
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WHAT WAS THE BRONZE?

Before I attempt to explain the purpose of my research work, it seems fitting for such a loquacious group of people to allow the members of the Bronze to explain what their community was in their own words:

It's an Internet posting board community, which I think is important to understand that it's on the Internet. And the word community is extraordinarily important. It's a group of friends (stina).

I start off by saying, well I used to just say, well it's a community and people would say, "Isn't it online?" And I'd say, "Yes, it's an online community." And now I say it's a community that is rooted in online community that is rooted in the fandom but is a sort of more generalized community than that now, both because it's gone offline in so many different ways and it's gone fare beyond being about Buffy. Obviously there's a core about that because we all keep coming back (SarahNicole).

Because I would tell people that I watch the show and people would go, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer?" and then I feel silly. And it was a place to go where I didn't feel silly. It made me feel like it was okay for me to watch the show and like it as much as I did. A place that I felt like I belonged
and I could go anytime I wanted and I didn't have to worry about being mocked or judged… unless it was in a fun way (amberlynne).

The Bronze was a posting board developed by the makers of the show for the fans to get together and discuss the show in an open forum. There were some rules but for as long as I was there you could say whatever you wanted within reasons. Somewhere you went when you wanted to talk about it. Then it wasn't anymore. Instead of being about the show it was about the people. The place to go when you were looking for people that were like you and not like you at the same time (Missi).

People who all got together because they liked the show but at the same time they would talk about things that had absolutely nothing to do with it. It was cool because it all seemed fit together. You could have a person, and I would do it myself, you'd start out talking about something from the show and two lines later, you're talking to someone about where you had lunch yesterday, or your feelings about the current political climate (shehawken).

It's also a place. I always talk about how the majority of the people that were posting there were incredibly intelligent; varied backgrounds, varied educations and were just looking for some… because most of us were pretty isolated in our liking of the show, so you would be so excited about
something that you saw and you wouldn't have the opportunity to talk about it with anyone else on the level felt you needed discuss it. So it was a vehicle to have intelligent discussion and sometimes not so intelligent discussion but usually… for the majority of us it was always pretty intelligent, whether we were goofing around or being serious. It was like being back in university and being back in the coffee shop sitting around talking about things that were meaningful for you (angelgazer).

That was my first real experience with any type of net community, and it was very shocking to find out other places weren't like the Bronze because that was my first experience. Because other places are so different (moppety).

It was not just … I don't think I ever even said "I'm going to go look at the Bronze" I would say said "I'm going to the Bronze." I remember the first time I said it to my father, and I was literally in the living room and my home office was down the hall and he said, "What are you getting ready to do?" And I said, "Oh, I'm going the Bronze." And he said, "Oh okay, see you later." And I was going into another room! And we both kind of stopped and went, "Yeah, okay, this is weird" (SarahNicole).
I would probably just say it's a place where you can go to and talk to Buffy fans about everything, and frequently never about Buffy. But it is a place where there are some pretty articulate people and they have a lot of fun with words. And it's hard to explain that. It's an ephemeral thing, the fun we have. I suspect the things we talk about out loud are the things that frustrate us and that we want some feedback on. I suspect the stuff that's good we just put it in that good place in our brains and hold on to it and keep it the way it is, it doesn't need a whole lot of massaging to make it palatable and acceptable (Jaan Quidam).

I was always a Bronzer because once you're a Bronzer you're always a Bronzer. No matter what happens. Unless you're some people who will remain nameless and have been banned... but I'm sure they still think of themselves as Bronzers. Because it's still a part of what you've done, it's still something you've done. Because you got people from it. It's changed your life. You stay in contact with these people because they're not fans of a show like you anymore, they're just your friends. They're just your friends (Missi).

I've dated people from the Bronze, I've lived with people from the Bronze, I've had 17 Bronzers at my house for a memorial day party, my dog has met a probably good 20 Bronzers and that's just unbelievable. Just unbelievable people and even though the Bronze doesn't exist the way it
did in the heyday, Bronzers are still going to be out there for each other ('stina).

The friendships, just straight out, the people that I met who are still my best friends. I know that no matter where I go, practically on this planet, there will be someone there that I know that I can hang out with because I knew them from the Bronze (moppety).

THE BRONZE FAQ

"The Bronze" was the name given to the interactive section of the official website for the television show *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. Named after a club on the show, the forums originally included a chat room and a linear message board. A community developed on the linear message board starting in 1997, and the members of the community referred to themselves as "Bronzers." The website operated continuously from March of 1997, when the show debuted on The WB network, until July of 2001, when the series switched to UPN and the website was shut down. At that point in time, the group fragmented and scattered across a number of websites into a state of "cyberdiaspora," with contact between certain factions growing more and more sporadic and many members of the community disappearing entirely. For the five years of its life, however, the Bronzer community was unusually tightly knit and contained hundreds of active members, as well as unknown numbers of lurkers, all connected through the central virtual home of the Bronze.

The format of the message board itself, and what the community members did to
adapt the format to suit their needs, represents a point of confluence for research with other work on online forums. The Bronze message board was linear. Linear boards are rare in online forums. Most discussion forums segregate topics into threads, with one catch-all area for any overflow. The Bronze had no such segregation. All topics and all posts were in one giant thread, and the only identification on any post was the name of the poster, the time and the IP address. The Bronze was not a mailing list, yet some of the functions identified by Nancy Baym, Howard Rheingold and others as occurring on a mailing list occurred in the Bronze. The "netiquette" rules of the Bronze (as could be found in the community's FAQ pages) align closely with the Usenet "standards of conduct" as they were catalogued by McLaughlin, Osborne and Smith (in Jones, Cybersociety, 1995). Yet the format of the board allowed for near-synchronous communication, unlike a newsgroup. The Bronze had no code features to allow a user to create an image of their "avatar" or to "emote" as a user can in a MUD (Multi User Dungeon). Bronzers instead created a convention whereby any poster could "act out" physical activity in the Bronze by posting narratives of action in italics, using basic html codes. While the board allowed for synchronous communication, it was vigorously defended as not being a chat room. New posters who used common shortcuts found in chat rooms (i.e. "NE1" instead of typing "anyone") were harshly ridiculed by the membership. The community placed a strong amount of value on the use of the written word. All these elements taken together suggest that the time and environment were key factors in how the Bronze evolved.

The Bronze began life as an online fan forum. Within the first few months, offline meetings between posters started happening. By the time the Bronze was a year
old, an official party was created that would recur for the next six years – one year after the television show went off the air. The virtual forum remained active for five years. In addition, numerous other websites and channels of communication existed, including the regular face-to-face meetings. *There is no way to chronicle the existence of this community by looking only at the virtual component.* Online groups are often like icebergs; the majority of the structure is not immediately visible. A virtual forum is only the most visible part of a group. Bronzers themselves call it "backchannelling" – contact is maintained through other electronic means like message programs as well as through phone conversations and even visits. This last reason speaks to my difficulties with what I refer to as the real/virtual binary split, a framework that has been applied without enough critical reflection to all interaction which occurs via the Internet, and a framework I intend to examine in great detail. Online and offline contacts in the Bronze combined and twisted together in all kinds of ways. This group provides a case study for this idea of the virtual group as the "tip of the iceberg," and that my interviewees had already addressed the lack of a division in the way they seamlessly spoke of both online and offline interaction, the regular face-to-face meetings that helped define and shape the Bronzer community.

What is perhaps most unique about the Bronzer community is that the television text, while it had an impact on the group – sometimes a palpable one – was rated by the participants of my study as secondary to the community itself. The identity of being a "Bronzer" implied that one was (or had been) a *Buffy* fan, but in the same way that not all rectangles are squares, all *Buffy* fans are not Bronzers. The Bronze community existed during a specific time frame, at a unique place. Membership in the group is thus
limited from the outset. To be a Bronzer meant participating (untold numbers of people "lurked" or read the board without posting, but without being visible, there is no way to account for their actions or reactions to the community) on the linear message board on the official web site between 1997 and 2001. Bronzers themselves have said, both to myself and to other researchers such as Gatson & Zweerink (2002), that identifying as a Bronzer meant something more than simply being a *Buffy* fan. The identity is more complex and is almost entirely rooted in the group of people who made up the community, rather than being attached solely or primarily to the television show. While I will account for the influence the television show had over the community, and therefore need to acknowledge the media reception studies just mentioned, my research is less about a television audience or a fan group than it is about a community with a specific history, traditions, conventions, social hierarchy, and multiple channels of communication. This study is not of a group of *Buffy* fans known as Bronzers. It is a study of a community called "Bronzers" who happened to be *Buffy* fans.

**THE RESEARCH AND THE OUTLINE OF THIS STUDY**

This project is an interpretive case study of a particular online social community which had online and offline elements. This work is qualitative in nature, aiming at description and analysis of the use of language and techniques of virtual interaction to build community and shape group identity. The ethnography here is a combination of interviews with community members and studying the archives of the community; the memories of the participants have guided me through my study of the archives. While it is estimated that the Bronze had an active population of well over 1,000 people by the
end of the five years, there is simply no way to gauge how many people lurked. Additionally, participation could range from multiple daily posts to the occasional online post to members who no longer participated online but maintained social contact via other channels. A statistical analysis of the Bronze's composition would have been extremely difficult given the size of the community and the lapse of time since the group's closure, which would have created immense difficulties in tracking down former participants. Ultimately, such a study would not make the same contribution as this ethnographic description. My aim is to address the question of what people actually did online and offline in this community.

Twenty-eight face-to-face interviews were conducted over the course of several months, from May to November of 2003. Additionally, 17 people who were unable to meet with me in person answered an e-mailed survey of the same questions by writing out their responses, for a total of 45. Eleven of the 45 were male. The bulk of the interviewees were in their 20s or early 30s, with only nine people being over 40. Two respondents from the United Kingdom participated, as did four Canadians. With three exceptions, all the respondents were Caucasian, and most came from middle or lower-middle class backgrounds. Most were college-educated, including one tenured university professor, several graduate students and one lawyer. The interview questions were extremely broad and open-ended, for example, "What is your favorite memory of the Bronze?" and were designed to provoke general responses without unduly leading respondents (the complete list of interview questions is included in Appendix A).

The analysis of the responses presented here does not follow any strict chronological pattern, nor does it adhere to the order of the interview questions. I have
grouped the subjects brought up in my data along a framework that addresses several aspects of the community which help expose the weakness of "real life" as a distinct construct when talking about online social interaction. The aspects I will address are the frequent offline meetings and employment of multiple communications channels within the community, the integration of the Bronze into everyday life, the way behavior influenced how the community handled problems in the online forum and finally how the community addressed the risk of emotional harm.

Before turning specifically to my findings, however, Chapter One will review the history of mass media technologies in an attempt to contextualize the Internet in terms of the transmission of information from sender to receiver. The chapter also addresses some of the basic principles of postmodernism, including the alarmist nature of the discourse surrounding the simulacra. Most importantly, the chapter looks at the overarching framework applied to our conceptions of Internet use, and how that framework, which is based in gendered notions of behavior and value, impacts debates surrounding social activity on the internet. This chapter serves as an introduction to some of the wider themes underlying my research before I turn to the specifics of the real/virtual binary in the next chapter.

Chapter Two will further review some of the existing literature on online community formation and social activity online, including the intense debate regarding the use of the word "community" when applying it to online groups. Most importantly, I will look at the real/virtual binary and discuss how the binary breaks down as soon as it is examined from a critical perspective and through the lens of actual experience. The binary underpins so much research, it needs to be addressed and the theory at work
supporting it needs to be examined before I turn to the more concrete examples of how "real" life and virtual life are intertwined. The rest of this work will be devoted to a more practical analysis of my research findings in terms of online/offline separation.

In order to provide a basic understanding of what the community was, Chapter Three will begin with a review the history and major events of the Bronze, both online and off. The origins of the Bronze, as it relates to the television show and also as a discrete entity, are a necessary first step before I begin any analysis of the community. I will also focus on the development of the offline elements of the group and how the offline events impacted the online spaces. The annual gathering in Los Angeles every winter, from 1998-2004, was a source of both unity and contention for the community from early on, a fact which had consequences both in face-to-face situations as well as online. As previously stated, the offline events are part of the group as a whole, and no history or analysis of the Bronze community would be complete without considering both the virtual and the offline elements that make up the community's identity. What is remarkable about the responses to questions about the group's common history is the way in which Bronzers perceived offline and online events to be equal, and the fact that my respondents shifted smoothly from one communication channel to another and back without hesitation. This channel switching is at the heart of breaking down our notions of an oppositional binary between the "real" and the virtual, especially when dealing with virtual social interaction.

Chapter Four deals with the Bronze as a community of practice. Unlike the previous chapter, Chapter Four focuses on the online arena in more detail. I will use information from the interview responses to discuss another concept that has received
little attention from scholars to date: the idea of cross-pollenization between different types of online forums. The specific time and cultural milieu that the Bronze was born into had an impact on the group's development. The wider development of the Internet and the World Wide Web played a role in how the Bronze came to be the community it was. The members of the community gathered at their "virtual water cooler" every day. What did they do all day? What did they talk about? With regard to the online space, the community developed a number of rituals and traditions which helped cement group identity and continuity. Activities which occurred in the shared virtual arena were important in enriching the character of the group and forming a recognizable whole.

This chapter details exactly how a person participated in the Bronze. Participation was not an occasional or exceptional activity but rather deeply integrated into everyday practices. The sense of stability and "ordinariness" contradicts some assumptions about the fundamentally transitory nature of computer-supported social interaction. The routine nature of participation further helps break down the sense of the online realm being some exotic space removed entirely from the "real" world.

Chapter Five continues to focus on the online forum, but moving outward from the specifics of practice, the chapter looks at the way in which the community dealt with objectionable behavior. The risk of deception – being deliberately mislead about another person's "real life" because of identity masquerade – is a major concern within online groups, for a variety of reasons. This risk is also a favorite topic of both scholars and alarmist media stories. Deception occurred in the Bronze, and the community took action to deal with it. Each online community has its own expectations regarding honesty and identity performance. In the Bronze, deception was often determined by
identifying false information given about offline truths, but a person's behavior online was frequently the catalyst which provoked censure and attracted the attention of the community. Members of the community came together to handle threats to the stability of their online space as well as to censure objectionable behavior. This bonding together rather than simply walking away from the community suggests to me the depth of the emotional attachment to the community despite its being "only virtual."

Similarly, the way in which researchers address the risk of deception implies that the genuine emotional harm that is possible when one is the victim of online identity deception validates the possibility of genuine positive emotional consequences.

Chapter Six will briefly sum up the considerations brought forth regarding the real/virtual separation and discuss whether and how the Bronze qualifies as a community. Additionally, I will discuss some of the key issues that need to be addressed by future scholarship on virtual social activity, including more emphasis on time and longevity, and a caution against attempting to generalize results without due consideration for the unique elements of every online group.

The ultimate goal for this project is not to refute any existing research but to supplement what we currently know, or think we know, about the Internet as a social medium. Howard Rheingold wrote in 1993,

> it is important to look in more than one corner and see through more than one set of lenses. Before we can discuss in any depth the way CMC technology is changing us as human beings, as communities, and as democracies, we need to know something about the people and places that make the Net what it is (16).
Rheingold's admonition has still not been adequately addressed by CMC research, even with the passage of a dozen years. We have studies available telling us who is using the Internet, and even what they are using it for, but there is a dearth of research detailing why people are doing what they are doing with computers. While statistical and quantitative research must continue to be done, there is a need for more qualitative and ethnographic studies that utilize thick description to get at the heart of what goes on in an online group. We need more scholarly work that presents the users and has them talk in their own words about who they are, what they actually do online and why. My goal here is to add to the literature on virtual groups by providing a case study of one particular online community. It is only by combining quantitative studies and qualitative studies, including ethnographies, that we can fit the pieces into something resembling a clear picture of what the Internet is, so that we may be able to consider what it might, in the future, become. Unfortunately, the present state of new media scholarship ignores the place of the Internet in history, and having taken the Internet out of history, we are unable to see that we are projecting the same old tired frameworks that have been applied to all other mass media forms to this new, "revolutionary" technology.

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1 This is not to say that statistical work on CMC is irrelevant; qualitative and quantitative approaches (should) complement each other.
2 No overlap between these two groups was allowed. Those who had completed a face-to-face interview were not allowed to do a textual one.
CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

THE INTERNET "REVOLUTION"

The Internet has been presented by various writers over the past two decades as a magical, violent, stunning, ideal or disastrous development that is the perfect illustration of the postmodern age and the world where simulations override our understanding of reality. In the postmodern world, the theory goes, the media have invaded our lives to such a degree that we supposedly no longer recognize a difference between real things and simulations of them. On the Internet, this means we fail to discern that our interactions with others which occur through the Internet are not real, just as the images we see on websites are likewise no substitute for actually experiencing the physical world. Baudrilliard argued that the final stage of development of postmodernism was to enter a type of "hyper-reality" where nothing is real, there are only simulations of objects. The Internet seems to fit flawlessly into this conception. Sherry Turkle, addressing the application of postmodernism to the Internet, wrote in 1995,

The technologies of our everyday lives change the way we see the world. Painting and photography appropriated nature. We look at sunflowers and water lilies, we see them through the eyes of the art of Van Gogh or Monet. When we marry, the ceremony and the ensuing celebration produce photographs and videotapes that displace the event to become our memories of it. Computers, too, lead us to construct things in new ways. With computers we can simulate nature in a program or leave nature aside and build second natures limited only by our powers of imagination and
abstraction. The objects on the screen have no simple physical referent. In this sense, life on the screen is without origins and foundation. It is a place where signs taken for reality may substitute for real. Its aesthetic has to do with manipulation and recombination (47).

Turkle later mentions that writing about the Internet at that time could be split into three categories: utopian, practical and apocalyptic (231). Depending on the point of view of the writer, the Internet was salvation or damnation or merely a brand new technology.

The era when the Internet was either worshipped or reviled as a major social, cultural and economic revolution has ended. Within of few years of Turkle writing about the trifecta of Internet characterizations, the dot-com boom was ending, the social revolution of the Internet creating a classless and pure society free from the social ills caused by racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice had failed to appear and the Internet was fast on the way to becoming just another domesticated technology. To be sure, the adaptation of the Internet occurred with stunning rapidity. Lisa Nakamura, in the introduction to *Cybertypes*, even jokes that perhaps the Internet's "heyday ... succumbed to 'Internet time,' that compression of time to which we've grown accustomed in our high-tech lives" (xi-xii). While it is no doubt a relief for all researchers to have arrived at a point where the Internet is no longer an all-or-nothing subject that will either save humanity or doom us to postmodern hell, a critical element of our conceptualizing of the Internet remains missing.

While the furor over what the Internet might do for us as a species has died down, there have not been enough attempts to place the Internet into a continuum with
other mass media technologies. The fierce debate may have faded, but we still tend to regard the Internet as a wholly new development of the late 20th century. When analogies to other forms of mass communication are invoked, too often writers are turning to television for metaphors. Partly this might be due to the fact that media reception studies has a canon of work on television reception that has accrued over the past several decades, providing one of the few places to go to look for guidance in how to conceptualize Internet use. Partly it might be due to the fact that the computer monitor and the television are boxes that carry signals into the home. The failure of researchers to look at the Internet in the context of the development of mass media continues to cripple our understanding of how the technology is being used, for what purposes, by who and why.

Film scholars and television researchers are just as guilty of not placing their preferred medium within historical context with other forms of mass media. Histories of individual mediums abound, but we tend to ignore the longer view of the history of human communication and the place of machinery within that history. The Internet has much more in common with the telephone and letter writing than it does with film and television, and yet there are elements of Internet use that show strong resonance with certain findings among television and film reception scholarship. In order to make some sense of the Internet's place, I want to propose an extremely broad view of human communication, in terms of the transmission of information between senders and receivers, that will hopefully allow us to understand how we arrived at this place and perhaps let go of some of the erroneous assumptions about the "revolutionary" qualities of the Internet.
A HISTORY OF MASS MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

Jared Diamond pointed out in *Guns, Germs and Steel* that written language has developed spontaneously around the planet in less than half a dozen places. The development of verbal language allowed for standardized communication. Written symbol systems that are identified with sounds and particular meanings allowed for the transmission of information over both distance and time, without the risk of confusion brought on by passing information from person to person. Information could be put into writing and transmitted over a distance to another person without the necessity of face-to-face interaction, but still ensuring the information was received. Thus, the development of written language is the first step in the evolution of mass communication.

The most obvious and first important development in mass communication after the origins of written language is of course the creation of the printing press. When the human hand was the tool required to record written language, that recording was tedious and time consuming. The introduction of a machine that could reproduce text rapidly and accurately altered human communication. Where reading was the province of a select, educated few, in the post-printing press world, literacy grew exponentially in importance over the centuries. The printing press is the original mass media technology. Information could be recorded and transmitted not just from one person to another, but from one source to many receivers. Interestingly, the development of the printing press did not destroy hand-written communication. The two forms co-existed (and still do), being used for different purposes. When the printing press and handwriting are presented, the immediate purposes that spring to mind are publishing
books and letter writing, respectively. The one is an industry that serves large numbers of people simultaneously (one sender, many receivers), where the other is an intimate, and frequently social communication form that is generally conceived of as being between two people (one sender, one receiver). I will discuss the purposes of the media and how ideas about their purpose may affect our conceptions later.

Looking at the history of communications in the context of transmitting information, very little changed from when the printing press was invented until the late 19th century. However the ink was inscribed on the sheet of paper, by machine or by hand, the paper still needed to be transported somehow from the sender to the receiver. Geographic distance still had to be covered in order to complete the transmission. Transportation technology also evolved, of course, from horse and foot power to mechanical engines such as the steam engine or train locomotive, cutting down the time involved in moving information from one point to another, but transportation did not eliminate geographic distance. The invention of the telegraph, in the late 1800s, was the first step in communication being liberated from geography. The ability to transmit information via electrical impulses was, in its first iterations, still bound to certain physical limitations. The telegraph wires needed to carry the signals were still physical elements that were only in certain places and could only handle so much data. However, the speed of electronic communications was so much faster than actual travel as to be nearly instantaneous by comparison. When the telephone evolved from the telegraph, a step was taken out of the trip from sender to receiver. Instead of having to write a message down and have it converted to specialized code for transmission, then be decoded and written again all between the two parties, the middle section was removed
because the sender's voice could be transmitted directly to the receiver. The telephone was and remains largely a one-to-one communication technology (though obviously conference calls are an important feature, especially for business purposes), one that ironically removes the written element that first made the transmission of information over distance possible.

Several of the Internet's most practical applications (e-mail and messenger programs) are the historical children of letters and the telegraph. The ability to write a message to another person and transmit it instantaneously via electronic signals over wires is taking the more direct communication of a phone conversation and accomplishing it in writing (assuming, of course, that the sender and receiver are writing in a language they both understand). As hard as it may be to reconcile our ingrained tendencies to look on the Internet as a radical new technology, e-mail is the logical next step of the historical thread running from the telegraph and telephone. Now, before I run the risk of sounding hopelessly reductionist, e-mail is not the World Wide Web and the Internet has other facets besides e-mail and sending textual messages. In order to look at the other aspects of the Internet, we again need to go back and look at the history of mass media technology that preceded the arrival of the Internet.

In roughly the same historical era that humanity reduced the time required to send a message over large spaces down to seconds, communication was finally freed from geographic conductors entirely with the invention of radio¹. The wireless radio signal, transmitted from a tower to any and all receivers within range, liberated signals from wires and made them available to a wide group of people. In this respect, radio
succeeds books and printed matter as the next generation of one-to-many communications technologies. Just as a single printer might reproduce one manuscript and send it to many people, a single radio broadcast could reach multitudes, as long as they possessed the correct mechanical device to receive and decode the signal. Where books and printed material and even the telegraph/telephone were received by specific people, radio announces the arrival of broadcasting. As the word itself implies, radio signals are sent out to a large audience indiscriminately. A book or newspaper needs to be purchased to be received, just as a phone call needs to be answered. A radio transmission simply exists, though the receiver does need to flip the switch in order to hear it.

Television broadcasts are of course far more technologically similar to radio than to film. Just as with radio, a television broadcast, even cable transmission, exists and the receivers only need to possess the right technology (or have paid for it) in order to receive the signal. In this respect, again, the Internet is very much the next evolution of this technology, not a break from it. Web sites are online at all times. Internet content is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The only thing required to receive these "broadcasts" is the correct equipment, though obviously with the staggering proliferation of web sites, finding a particular site is another issue. The main difference between radio/television and the Internet is not unlike the co-existence of printed and handwritten communication. The Internet contains the potential, simultaneously, for both one-to-one and one-to-many transmissions of information. Additionally, the Internet, unlike any technology before, can offer many-to-many communications. A television signal is always coming from one sender (a corporate-owned channel more
often than not) and being sent out to multiple receivers at the same time. E-mail can be one-to-one, or one-to-many. The closest analogous structure in television and radio is amateur, short-wave or "ham" radio operators who exist in a loose network outside the one-to-many model that exists across all corporate mass media forms. The capacity of many people to send information to many receivers all at the same time, while sustaining one-to-many and one-to-one transmissions, is one of the only truly new aspects of the Internet as a communication technology.

While this overview attempts to draw paths through history of how our mass media technologies function, there is one category of mass media that does not fit cleanly, which is film. A film is in some ways a regression to communication dependent on physical location. In order to see a film, at least for the first two-thirds of the 20th century, a receiver had to actually go to a theater and see the projection of a physical print of a film on a screen. Even now, in the Blockbuster era, seeing a film requires possession of the VHS tape or DVD, a physical object. Obviously, the broadcasting of films on television channels blurs the lines here, and the rapid growth of downloading video via the Internet destabilizes the way we conceive of film as requiring physical presence. It may be that the era when film was the exception is coming to a rapid close and film will become like all other mass media forms – something we can receive as an electronic data file via wired or wireless transmission.

The concept of the simulacra was introduced by postmodern theorists as a critique of our culture's removal from real, physical experience. Echoes of this argument appear frequently in attacks by pundits and cultural critics that we spend our days staring at images in boxes rather than leaving our houses and interacting with the
physical world. My point here is not to take a position on this debate, but to point out that the framing of the debate is missing the historical perspective. The freeing of communication from the constraints of geographic distance made the world smaller. Where once a person living in a small town in a rural area was expected to live and die in that same place, as transportation methods have improved, our ability to go beyond the small radius of our birthplace has expanded. Similarly, the person who lived in an in such a place their whole lives was isolated from the rest of the world. Books and newspapers were the first communication methods that brought knowledge of the rest of the world to all people. Films and especially television have pushed that capacity farther than anyone could have once imagined. When something dramatic happens on the global stage, people turn to the nearest television set to watch images of events that might be happening on the other side of the globe. This phenomenon of television bringing the world into our living rooms has been true of the medium since its early days.

Watching a television program about the city of Rome does not equal the experience of traveling to the city. The program does, however, provide us with different, and more detailed, information than we would get with still pictures or text. From the early days of film newsreels all the way back to the Lumiere Brothers' actualities from the early 20th century, we have been experiencing more of the world via media than was ever possible before, opening up the limited horizons of the small, isolated human settlements. We have been interacting with simulations and representations of the world via the media for over a century – longer, if books are included. The idea of people taking information about something they have not
experienced in a physical sense from a media program is not a revolutionary
development of the late 20th century, and certainly not a unique result of the Internet.
Our mass media have been providing this for decades. In fact, it is nearly impossible to
imagine formulating our conceptions of the world without the input from mass media to
provide information more quickly than we could ever collect it first-hand. The Internet,
therefore, is not by its nature revolutionary. It is more complex and multi-faceted than
any mass medium previously in existence, largely because it combines aspects of
various other media, but it fulfills some of the same purposes. Looking at the Internet as
the latest iteration in the progression of media channels that transmit information helps
locate the technology within a framework of media history that has been sorely lacking
in previous research. Unfortunately, when the framework of how we conceptualize mass
media, and especially media usage, is examined, new problems are revealed. In
discussing the framework, it is useful to look at the way Internet research has
progressed and how it is connected with media effects research as a broader segment of
communications theory.

MEDIA AUDIENCES

Communications scholarship in general has become much more preoccupied with
audiences in the past several decades. Reception studies within communications has
gained prominence since the development in the late 1960s of the "uses and
gratifications" approach to media, which posed the question "what is the audience
getting out of media use?" and helped shift emphasis away from both textual analyses
of the media programs and also from the assumption that the audience was a
homogenous, passive blank slate taking in every media message without a critical eye. The overthrow of this "hypodermic needle" approach marked a serious change in how communications scholars approach mass media, be it film or television. Media scholars began to incorporate new theories, some borrowed from linguistics, including semiotic theory, utilized by scholars such as Christian Metz, which became influential in film studies, into their examinations of what audiences got out of consuming media. What audiences did with media products became more and more important to media studies scholars as mass media began to completely saturate the lives of most US citizens, with the arrival of cable television and pay-per-view, and particularly with the widely increasing availability of the Internet.

A variety of new theories regarding media consumption have been developed in recent years, many centered on television reception. Perhaps the most well-known example is Stuart Hall's "coding/decoding" theory, which has become a fixture for media reception scholars. Hall's methodology for "reading" visual texts has had a profound influence on media scholars, including John Fiske. Fiske became a touchstone for audience research with *Television Culture*. Fiske's book detailed the ways in which audiences can "read" a television text, both hegemonically and resistantly. He also discussed the influence of social settings on television reception and meaning-making. Fiske's work was so thorough that almost all research done on television reception since traces its academic lineage back to him.

In the years following Hall and Fiske's work, several scholars produced well-known work on specific media audiences. In 1985, Ien Ang was one of the first researchers to examine soap opera fans through interviews and observation. Henry
Jenkins wrote the first seminal work on "fans" as a particular category with *Textual Poachers* in 1992. Jenkins work was largely credited with building acceptance for fans as a legitimate area of interest for scholars. That same year, Camille Bacon-Smith published *Enterprising Women*, another highly influential book about fan activity. Both of these latter books have become the cornerstone of the area of media studies that is developing into a discrete subject: fandom studies. Both Jenkins and Bacon-Smith spent a great deal of time studying *Star Trek* fans, one of the oldest prime time television fandoms in existence at the time. In the late 1990s, the television show *The X-Files* arrived and became one of the first science fiction shows to develop an Internet fan base.

The dizzying increase in Internet use during the years surrounding the turn of the century opened up vast new fields of study for communications scholars of all stripes. Audience researchers quickly discovered that the Internet allowed them to locate and investigate audience groups with an ease and speed that was previously unheard of. In recent years it has been acknowledged that online groups are more fan groups than audience groups and that distinctions between a fan and a general audience member need to be understood better. See Gray, Maxwell, and Siapera for recent discussions on typologies of media consumers.

Nancy Baym's *Tune in, Log On* is one of the most prominent examples of ethnographic scholarship on online groups of media audiences. Baym's text is split into two sections, and the first half of the book examines her research subjects as an audience community (Baym, 31-32). In the second half of the book, Baym looks specifically at the online aspect of the community. Baym's subject was a mailing list,
and she narrowed her focus to a subset of participants who existed within the broad group of the entire mailing list. While Baym's use of "practice theory" is especially relevant for my work, there is a fundamental difference in the structure of the forum where the Bronzer community was housed as opposed to a subset of a generic mailing list such as the one Baym studied, which was a mailing list that was not affiliated with any media text in an official capacity. One of the problems with current work on virtual forums is that too many researchers fail to acknowledge that different forums operate in different ways, and with different expectations, a mistake I will not make. My study of the Bronze is of a particular type of forum and not intended to be taken as any kind of universal truth, for either online groups or media audiences.

Other researchers such as Mia Consalvo and Susan Clerc have also investigated online fan groups for their online components. Consalvo's work on the Buffy fandom, "Cyber-Slaying Media Fans: Code, Digital Poaching, and Corporate Control of the Internet," focused on the relationship between the broad base of Buffy online fandom and the corporations which owned the television show. She highlights issues surrounding intellectual property rights and also the ideological issues of fandom through organizing components such as webrings. While the ideology that underlies the way the user interfaces for the Internet were designed is an important area of study, and one that has only begun to be investigated by scholars such as Lisa Nakamura, Consalvo's article is about a broad-based group of fans, not a specific community, and makes no mention of the Bronze. Other studies have been done about online fan groups, including Geraldine Bloustein and Rebecca Williams' work on Buffy communities other than the Bronze and Susan Clerc and Sarah Wakefields' respective works on women in
the *X-Files* fandom. Media audiences seem uniquely suited for research when they coalesce online; a fan community comes together around a central text, unlike, say, a hobbyist group that comes together around an activity. An online group of quilters would have a different dynamic than a group of soap opera fans. Much debate still rages on whether reception tactics are "resistant" to the dominant message or not and such questions will doubtless continue to be argued for years to come. However, the reception of the media *text* by the group, the interaction between the text and the fans, and the identity of the group members as fans have been significant themes of the existing research on fan/audience groups to date and will provide a point of departure for my work to begin. This brief history of research on media audiences provides a scholarly legacy that guided my work on the Bronze as a community that revolved around a cultural product, specifically a television show. However, the television aspect of the community was only one aspect. The Bronze was an online community, and research into online venues has its own peculiarities of development.

**ONLINE GROUPS**

Computer-supported social activity is a large subset of the research that falls under the collective title "new media studies." The reasons for this are fairly obvious; social activity occurring via a computer is an interesting subject. One of the genuinely new aspects of the Internet that has held up to early claims is the ability of digital technology to free people from the limits of geography. Long-distance phone calls are no longer needed to maintain relationships between people on different continents. E-mail, especially with the capacity to send more than just text but also pictures, can
assist in maintaining those relationships at a fraction of the cost. Additionally, forums on the Internet make it possible to seek out other people who share your interests regardless of where they live. Greater interaction with other people is a fairly compelling subject for researchers.

Given this interest in social interaction online, it is unsurprising that so many of my examples in the previous section are studies which looked at online groups that coalesced around television shows. The first waves of Internet research on social interaction took up two of the most common forums that were available in the early days of the World Wide Web: MUDs and MOOs and e-mail lists. Rheingold wrote about The Well, Turkle wrote about MUDs, McLaughlin, Osborne and Smith wrote about Usenet, which was a type of e-mail list. Other scholars followed in their footsteps, but actual use of MUDs and e-mail lists was declining even as the work was published. Whether this renders research on MUDs and lists irrelevant would be another discussion, but I firmly believe it does not (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of cross-pollenization across multiple online forums). As usage shifts, research emphasis also shifts, so that an uptake of work on weblogs is occurring now, with research on networking sites such as MySpace and Friendster sure to come. The problem for academics is that research, writing and publishing are slow processes in a media environment that changes rapidly. The salvation, I believe, is that some issues brought up in research on virtual social interaction are universal across all types of forums. If we again take a longer view and look at the broader context of all work on online social activity and the frameworks we apply to it, all the existing research remains fully relevant.
THE REAL/VIRTUAL BINARY

The Internet, computer-mediated communications (CMC) and new media are perhaps the hottest topics in academia in the early years of the 21st century. Certainly communications studies has embraced CMC as a vital area in need of closer attention. Other disciplines, from linguistics experts in English departments who parse the variations of language usage on the Internet to political scientists studying the "digital divide" and its impact on the gap between industrialized nations and the Third World, have also jumped on the "cyber" bandwagon in recent years. This state of affairs has an unfortunate consequence for anyone hoping to begin to study any online phenomena; identifying the central texts that form the core of the research is problematic at best. Indeed, research just on virtual communities is scattered across various sections of the library, just as it is scattered across disciplines. Cyberstudies does not exist as a discipline, only an area. The positive side of this development is that the study of CMC and related topics is open to anyone with an interest and is benefiting from an interdisciplinary approach.

Even without a centralized "canon," an examination of the existing literature just on virtual groups, whether they are qualitative ethnographies including thick description of online social interaction or quantitative surveys about Internet use and participation, one theme appears to underlie much of the research, and that is the distinction between virtual and face-to-face interaction. As Nancy Baym described it, "Although in many ways research has become more sophisticated, the continuing debates over the nature and worth of the virtual community belie an ongoing presupposition that there are two types of communities, one authentic and the other
virtual" (Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, 199). Whatever particular type of online group the research focuses on, the split between the "real" and the virtual is always there, although sometimes the authors seem unconscious of their biases. Many writers become so caught up in arguing about whether online social interaction is good or bad, whether it is destroying face-to-face social activity or enhancing it, they seem to forget to ask the more pertinent and practical questions (Bakardjieva, 168). As Don Slater puts it, "What is really required, therefore, is a move from asking about 'the nature of online relationships and identities,' to asking the entirely different question: 'What do people do online?'" (539). Slater also calls for "more rich and integrated accounts of the social relations" occurring in online venues arising from "deep ethnographic studies of particular social groups with real histories" (539). Instead, the field has been dominated by an enormous debate about the legitimacy of using the word "community" to describe an online social group.

The divide between "real" life and virtual activity is not so much false as misrepresented. Differences do exist between a purely textual e-mail interaction and sharing physical and temporal space talking to someone in a coffee shop. However, as I will demonstrate, the difference between the two is one of degrees and not automatically total separation. Unfortunately, because they are treated as radically different, different value is assigned to the various forms of interaction, with face-to-face interaction nearly always being given more weight. The value system at work here is not simply a matter of academic bias; it exists throughout society (Slater, 537). The devaluing of computer-mediated activity allows for biases that are anywhere from misleading to illogical. For example, "Commitments to any particular online group can
often be shallow and transient when another group is but a mouse click away" (Norris, 33, in Society Online, 2004). "Virtual communities are 'low-risk.' In a virtual community, we are not forced to deal and interact with people we dislike" (Bird, 81). Because the group is virtual and easy to leave, as opposed to a geographic community, it is assumed that the member's emotional ties to the group are just as easy to sever. Little mention is made of investment in and commitment to the group as potential factors in the decision-making process. When research turns up connections generated online that are more than superficial, they are usually treated as exceptions or mentioned offhandedly (e.g., Kendall, 142, Bird, 74). Research is skewed in this way by the underlying value system which prizes face-to-face intimacy and/or older forms of mediated communication over virtual, text-based interaction, despite the fact that some authors have argued against the supremacy of the face-to-face model for decades (see Jones, Cybersociety, 26-29).

The real/virtual binary is a continuing preoccupation within CMC research that is affecting the direction of the research agenda as well as distracting academics from more pertinent questions, such as how are social ties formed online? In group situations, what about group norms and standards, structures and traditions that create a sense of unity, how are they enacted in a virtual environment? Most importantly, at least for myself, given the supposed separation between online and offline, what about online social interaction that moves offline? What impact does ongoing, regular offline contact have on virtual interaction between the same people? Baym's research, along with a number of others dating all the way back to Rheingold, referenced close relationships formed via virtual channels which moved into other mediated channels.
(telephone conversations) or face-to-face meetings for at least a portion of CMC users. In much of the existing work, any mentions of this transition have been tangential rather than the focus of the research. My work on the Bronze will attempt to specifically address this problem by exploring the group in terms of how the online and offline elements intertwined to make up the whole experience for those who were involved with the group. But my research is operating on a specific level, and a larger issue, dealing with another framework, needs to be addressed first.

GENDERING TECHNOLOGY

The "community" debate, which I will examine in detail in Chapter Two, crops up over and over again when online social groups are being discussed. Critics rail that nothing online can ever be a true community because of the very nature of the Internet:

Much of the net [sic] is a Byzantine amalgamation of fragmented, isolating, solipsistic enclaves of interest based on a collectivity of assent (regardless of the minor dissents – "flames" – that occur within them; indeed, the much-discussed phenomenon of flaming is merely a symptom of the lack of real community amid this impoverished thing called virtual community) [Doheny-Farina, 55].

The root of this debate appears to be in the split between virtual and real; a relationship that occurs without any face-to-face component cannot be "real." An online group without the boundaries of physical place cannot be a community. The critics are stubbornly insistent that something is inherently lacking in the online realm, and the missing element lessens the worth of any interaction which takes place in that arena.
What is most interesting is that all these assaults on the validity and worth of online interaction are almost exclusively aimed at social activities. No scholar has ever put forth the argument that a freelance contractor who communicates with her supervisor exclusively through e-mail is not doing "real" work. While critics assault the Internet for being unable to maintain relationships because there is no physical co-presence, there is no similar assault on the telephone being used to maintain ties between friends or family members widely scattered across the globe. No one suggests that business meetings that occur via conference calls are not legitimate. Apparently, the purpose of the interaction is in fact the most important factor that decides whether the interaction is "real" or not.

To go back to the historical perspective of mass media technology, I mentioned briefly the idea of letter writing being thought of as an intimate and social activity. In other words, it is conceptualized as a feminine activity. To state this in reverse, when we think of letters being used for social communication, the image of a woman (possibly from the 19th century, prior to the adoption of the telephone) writing letters comes immediately to mind. Masculine letter-writing is more associated with business communications.

The adoption of the telephone followed a similar gender-specific pattern. Men used telephones for business purposes, where women used it to communicate with each other and with family. In derogatory terms, women used the telephone to gossip with one another (and still do). The medium of the telephone, like the medium of letters, remains neutral here. The technology is itself not inherently real or not-real, useful or
wasteful. It is the purpose the technology is used for that is characterized as genuine and worthwhile or not.

This same gendering of the technology is blatantly obvious in looking at television content. Soap operas, the daytime serials that began on radio and were among the first forms to migrate to television, are widely regarded as being feminine and completely without artistic, social or cultural merit. Ian Ang's reception study of soap opera fans was not considered startling because it was a study of television viewers; it was startling because it was about women who watched the derided form of a soap opera. The very name, "soap opera" indicates the gendering of the programs; detergent companies were the original advertising sponsors of the shows, attempting to reach the female audience that bought their products. The combination of "soap" being part of a woman's work and "opera" is meant to be humorous. "Operatic" is a description of an epic story full of grand emotion and scale. How can soap be operatic? Only when one considers the audience, females who are prey to their emotions and interested in melodrama.

The studies of television audiences that I referenced earlier, many of which fall under the subdomain of "fandom studies," are also prey to this same framework. Male viewers watch news and sports programs. Women watch dramas and soap operas. There is a predominant assumption that men are using television for information first and recreation second, while women are indulgent and less intellectually rigorous because they prefer fictional shows. Fans, then, who are almost always gathered around fictional shows rather than news programs, suffer from the gendering of the medium's usage, accounting for the snobbery existing in academia towards those people who "waste their
time” studying people who are so pathetic that they base their social lives around a television show. Social activity is considered a feminine pursuit overall, and thus not as respectable or legitimate as information and business purposes. Social activity that revolves around programs that are considered feminine because of their content is a double-layer of condemnation. This prejudice is not just within scholarship. Men who participate in fandom activities struggle constantly against the cultural stereotype of the "geek boy" who is underdeveloped physically and lacks emotional and financial independence from his parents. Pursuing a feminized lifestyle costs them heavily in the eyes of society.

Analyses of the Internet have followed the gender lines almost to the letter. Maria Bakardjieva, in *Internet Society: The Internet In Everyday Life*, is confronted by male respondents proclaiming that their interest in the Internet is strictly utilitarian (179). Despite several of her female respondents discussing the importance of social connections they have formed online, most of her respondents seem to emphasize that they initially went online seeking information rather than companionship, a result that I found in my own research. The breakdown between male and female reasons and reactions is brought out clearly in Bakardjieva's research, but she focuses instead on real versus virtual and stays away from the gendering arguments except in broad terms. Rheingold introduced knowledge seeking as a viable explanation for going online, though at the least he connects the sharing of knowledge to the building of social groups, as well as being a way of acquiring social capital within a group. Among new media scholars, there is a great deal of discussion about the risk of gender masquerade
(see Chapter Five) and not nearly enough discussion of the gendered framework we project onto the technology ourselves.

Gendering the use of technology stems from deeply rooted cultural biases about the roles of women and men in our culture. Focusing on the argument that online groups can not be communities because they are inherently not real allows scholars to ignore the larger impulses at work, ones that are entrenched in our society so deeply we easily fail to recognize them. New media scholarship has simultaneously removed the Internet from the historical context of mass media and also projected our old gendered frameworks regarding the use of media onto the Internet and the Web. The Internet is thus completely removed from all other forms of mass media and yet its adoption and usage fall along precisely drawn lines of gendering that have been witnessed in every other form of mass media. All of this has been done without any serious consideration of why we are having the debates we are having, why we are making assumptions about the nature of online interaction, the purpose and results of that activity and who is pursuing it.

At the risk of appearing to be making the same error of omission, my central thesis is not to look at the Bronze as a female space or to use it as a way to discuss the gendering of technological use. I have brought up the larger issue in order to provide a wide-scale setting before I delve into my specific purpose. The field of Internet research is in need of much more work on the more masculinized purposes to which new technologies are put. I believe that the process of researching those purposes will help raise awareness of the gendered framework that has been applied to digital media because applying our pre-conceptions regarding real and virtual environments will be
much harder in a space that lacks the social pre-conceptions to reinforce the arguments. This is not something my research can accomplish, however, because the Bronze was one of the social spaces that served a population that gathered around a cultural product. The Bronze was also predominantly a female space. The population ratio strongly favored women, and my interest lies in looking at the community as it existed both online and offline simultaneously. Within the gendered framework, the concept of real versus virtual is employed heavily to discredit the feminized/female spaces. My goal is to break apart the real/virtual binary and discredit the online/offline separation by reviewing the case of the Bronze, which straddled both realms and can not be studied without studying both sides. The real/virtual binary is a tool, in a sense, used within the discussions of legitimacy of online social activity. Eliminating the gendered framework of values regarding uses of technology is an enormous struggle. Breaking down the binary removes one of the tools of this struggle so that it can no longer be used.

WHY "IRL"?

When considering how to approach a topic as a researcher, common practice is usually to consider what questions are being asked, or what answers are being sought through the research. Another possible approach is to identify a theme or theory to follow and suit the research practices to adhere to the theoretical framework. In qualitative research, establishing the parameters of a study can be more frustrating because, by nature, qualitative work often becomes expansive, leading sometimes to the use of limitations to define the research. When dealing with new media technologies,
especially social aspects and uses of technology, it is all too tempting to introduce metaphors that too often become far more grandiose than perhaps necessary or appropriate. While I was in the early stages of organizing my research into an online community known as "the Bronze," I was seeking the unifying element that I could use to guide my study and methodology. I knew that I wanted to examine the community in terms of online and offline activity and the way in which those two supposedly separate realms interacted and affected one another. As I considered my central question, and read through the existing research on computer-supported social interaction and online groups, certain elements appeared in the research over and over again. The geographic separation of group members, the enormous academic debate over the application of the word "community" to an online group and the presupposition of the transience and shallowness of online relations all were recurring themes, but one of the most commonly discussed elements in all the studies I read was the way in which language was used – and also abused, adjusted and morphed – in online venues.

"Chatspeak" is a general term for a subset of slang language that grew out of online spaces and communication using cell phones where saving keystrokes was more important than worrying about the rules of grammar and spelling. Chatspeak shortcuts include deliberate misspellings or variations of words ("you" becomes "U" to save the extra keystrokes) and a vast number of abbreviations. "In my opinion" becomes "IMO," and "picture" becomes "pic," demonstrating the two most popular forms of chatspeak, using a shortened word or using initials. Part of this linguistic shortcutting can be ascribed to the constant use of abbreviations to identify technological developments. A DOS computer is actually a "disk-operated system" computer. "Peer-to-peer file sharing
networks" is a long description, whereas "P2P" is much easier to both say and type. The infiltration of netspeak or net slang into wide usage, particularly among young college students who have spent much of their lives communicating via messenger programs and pagers where speed and shortness are vital for conveying information, will be one of the many challenges facing every university professor for some years to come.

"IRL" is a chatspeak abbreviation for the phrase "in real life." Of all the myriad acronyms in use online, "IRL" is emblematic of something much larger than just a technophiles culture that regards the information as more important than the structure of the message. "IRL" is usually employed in an online space as a precursor to explaining a person's identity offline. Within a role-playing game (RPG) that involves wizards and knights fighting dragons, for example, a virtual knight-errant may admit to another player, "IRL I'm an accountant." "IRL" suggests another place, a separate and distinct realm away from online venues. The abbreviation embodies the binary construct that separates what happens online as not normal, not ordinary and not to be taken as representative of a person's true identity. The other life that comes after the abbreviation is the "real" world, one of ordinariness, daily routine, and defined by face-to-face encounters that supposedly hold far less risk of deception and injury than online equivalents, and which provide more depth of feeling and personal meaning than all the online interactions any one person could ever have.

The oppositional binary of "real" versus "virtual" exists in nearly every part of Western culture and is in fact rooted in a legacy of separating "reality" from "fantasy" that goes back hundreds of years, through the arrival of the Enlightenment in Western society and the elevation of reason, logic and empiricism. The binary underpins our
culture and can affect even those who believe themselves to be progressive regarding the Internet. Scholars and cultural critics, ranging from those who warn against the invasion of technology as being dangerous to society to some of the greatest technophiles, all operate, in some cases without realizing it, within the context of this separation of online and offline realms. When we speak of "real life" we are, by employing such a phrase, implying that we do other things that are not part of our "real" lives but that still take up our time and energy. This walling off of online social activity can be protective, intended to block off pursuits that we are not comfortable admitting to or not yet ready to be open about. The separation can also be the result of cultural pressure from a society that treats some hobbies as acceptable and approved (reading books) while others (reading fanfiction, stories written by amateur authors about television or movie characters) are dismissed as having no inherent value and a waste of time. Online spaces being treated as liminal or otherworldly is a result of the underlying belief that social communication between people that occurs through a machine (namely a computer) somehow cannot possibly be as important or valuable as face-to-face interaction.

"IRL" as a term then functions as my entry point for this project, because this seemingly simple acronym represents our cultural conception of online and offline social space and further epitomizes the value structure at work in that dichotomy. Privileging face-to-face contact and treating computer-mediated social activity as inherently suspect (articles appear in the major news outlets regularly about the impact of online romantic liaisons on marriages, for just one example) is not just the prerogative of the mass media. The real/virtual binary underlies a great deal of
scholarly research as well, and as alarming as the prejudice in the mainstream may be, to see it functioning as the unquestioned bedrock of communications research into the Internet and new media is deeply disturbing. One of the purposes of scholarship is to strive for objectivity and constant critical re-evaluation. As researchers, we are trained to question the authors we read as well as ourselves and ask what our subject position is, what biases may be influencing the work, and we attempt to seek out alternative constructs with which to rebuild our theoretical frameworks. While some of the leading scholars of Internet research such as Rob Shields have taken close looks at how we conceive of "the virtual," too much of this nascent interdisciplinary field seems to accept without question the idea that online and offline social interaction are separate realms with at most tenuous connections to each other. In these cases, the virtual social spaces are always treated as somehow inferior and secondary to offline social spaces, even when the focus is on the online realm (e.g. McLaughlin, Osborne and Ellison, 149). Even within debates about the nature of the scholarly field, the false dichotomy of "real" versus "virtual" is generally only hinted at and almost never brought to the surface.

The purpose of my work is to look at the existing research and take the arguments of those who have approached the real/virtual binary a step farther. Beginning with this notion of "real life" being automatically separate from online social activity by default, my intention is to show that online and offline life can be intimately connected by highlighting three aspects of online social activity. First, I will discuss the ways in which offline meetings and the use of multiple communications channels, both virtual and otherwise, can connect the online social space to offline social interaction so
closely that the two arenas are treated as part of a greater whole. Second, I will show that online social venues are not always exotic vacation spots but sometimes are integrated into the daily routine as much as the workplace, the lunch room or the local coffee shop. Third, while dangers exist online, including the heavily discussed risk of being deceived regarding another person's "true" identity, it is not the risk of physical danger but emotional harm that is behind the distrust of the highly performative nature of online self-presentation. If the danger of emotional harm is a "real" threat, the converse must be true, that positive emotional consequences are no less "real." I will do all these things by presenting a case study of one particular online community, known as the Bronze, which existed from 1997-2001. The Bronze was originally a forum for fans of the television show *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*, but the community which developed on the linear posting board on the website evolved into a group with a unique identity. By examining aspects of the Bronze, I intend to illustrate the ways in which the binary construction of real/virtual breaks down when examined closely through the lens of the experiences and practices of an online social group. Ultimately, I hope that along with some of the other voices already agitating for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between online and offline social activity, a shift will begin where Internet and new media scholars will begin questioning their own prejudices and start reconceptualizing the framework for dealing with new channels of communication.

This work is not, however, a treatise on how all online social interaction occurs. Ideally most researchers hope their work can be expanded to a larger set of experiences, but I cannot claim that this case study represents any kind of definitive work on online social communities. Online groups are relatively easy to categorize, especially in terms
of synchronicity and format, but not easily compared. Differences in format (chat room, mailing list, bulletin board, etc.); population, including age, gender and race; time (both length of existence as well as speed of interaction), and many other factors affect each group in a way that makes comparison problematic. The Bronze was an asynchronous linear message board which existed for a specific period of time and had a unique population. I can only present my data for this community and use it to illustrate possibilities. While some of my findings are useful for refuting certain broad claims regarding online social interaction, I maintain only that this case study presents potential variations, never absolutes. The Bronze may disrupt some of the sweeping generalizations that have been made regarding online social interaction, but it is not representative. The premature rush to generalization has been an unfortunate trend within existing Internet scholarship over the past decade as researchers, eager to jump into a new field and help shape its formation, have in some cases made unconsidered comments suggesting that one specific group or forum is representative of the online experience. As cyberstudies develops as a research area, it is incumbent upon scholars to weigh any generalizations carefully and consider the possible implications, as well as counterarguments, before making claims about the fundamental nature of online activity. We can begin addressing issues of overgeneralization first by being more circumspect in our conclusions. Secondly, we need to start examining the biases at work within the entire field of media studies, beginning with the notion of an oppositional binary pitting the "real" against the virtual.

1 Freedom from geography of course does not mean that geography is not a factor. Radio transmissions have certain ranges, and radio waves are limited by the physics of moving through the air. The point here is to discuss how information transmission left the confines of wires running over land.
Perhaps the most pervasive ongoing debate for academics dealing with new media technology is the debate over whether online groups can be legitimately called communities. Critics maintain that any social group which has no corporeal location and no face-to-face components cannot be recognized as a community. Defenders respond that the value of the emotional commitment is independent of whether the group meets face-to-face. Arguments for and against have raged within various journals and forums and will probably continue to do so for some time.

I believe that the community debate is merely the surface level of a deeper issue: the presence of an oppositional binary with "the real" on one side and "the virtual" on the other. Critics of using the term "community" align themselves in defense of "the real" by citing the need for geographic proximity to make a community. At the same time, proponents feel compelled to defend the non-corporeal interaction as legitimate despite the fact that it is "only virtual" or "only text on a computer screen" – the word "only" indicating in this context an assumption of lower value needing to be overcome. I believe these types of assumptions are inherent in the functioning of this binary and influence every line of scholarly inquiry into online communication. The binary underlies much more of the discourse than most scholars are aware of, but it is particularly easy to see the binary at work when dealing with online groups, networks and communities.
SO-CALLED COMMUNITY

Before turning to the binary, I want to address the debate surrounding the word "community" and how I will be using the word within this research. Jan Ferback observed, somewhat humorously, that "community is a term which seems readily definable to the general public but is infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse" (39). Indeed, since Howard Rheingold’s 1993 book *The Virtual Community* took the step of using the word for online groups, a small storm of controversy has raged in academia over whether any online group merited the title of community or whether the term could not justly be applied to a social group that (at least in theory) included no face-to-face element.

At the risk of sounding as though I want to have it both ways, I acknowledge that labeling all online groups "virtual communities" is rash and ill-advised. I agree that some sense of group identity must exist, that there are elements required to make a community out of any group of people. Not all online groups are communities. However, some of them, including the group which I have studied, qualify for the term. What troubles me about the debate are the arguments used by those who deny the word "community" from discussion of online groups wholesale, because some of the arguments stem from the same prejudices that reinforce the real/virtual binary.

The logic of the negative side of the community debate seems to flow from an adherence to physical presence as being the ultimate determining factor providing legitimacy for a group. "A community is bound by place, which always includes complex social and environmental necessities. It is not something you can easily join [...] it must be lived" (Doheny-Farina, 36). This perspective assumes that there is no
social space with complex rules anywhere but physically, and that it is fundamentally impossible to "live" during the times one is online. If a group is online and has no physical component, it cannot be termed a community. Turkle makes a brief reference to this assumption (Life On The Screen, 236), and a number of scholars have taken this subtly hostile attitude towards technologically mediated communications, such as Stoll, "by logging onto networks, we lose the ability to enter into spontaneous interactions with real people" (43), a position that implies that none of the possible communication partners within a network are "real people." Mark Poster observes of the cultural critics who attack the Internet, "The uniqueness of the Internet is here fully recognized. But it is configured as a threat, not to specific groups but to general types of practice that are characterized as 'human'" (480). Community for them refers to a particular kind of association of people drawn together by geography more than anything else. This preference for physical location is a weak argument, "There is so little community life in most neighborhoods in Western cities that it is more useful to think of each person as having a personal community: an individual social network of informal interpersonal ties, ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties" (Wellman and Gulia, 187). Jones also calls into question the assumption of idealized communities existing solely based on geography, "How are we to recapture and realize a nostalgic conception of community, one predicated on the convergence of interests, goals, language, even reality? Has such a convergence ever existed for anything but the most fleeting moments?" (Jones, Cybersociety, 27). The idyllic notion of community generally being defended by critics seems perhaps to be little more than nostalgic fantasy.
The criticism leveled against using the word community to apply to online activity also works from an assumption of transience in online relationships. Because finding social outlets online requires only clicking a mouse, the prevailing opinion seems to be that any relationship borne of this particular medium is shallow, weak and always short-term,

Roots in a virtual community are shallow at best; with a small investment of time and frequency of 'virtual' interaction, members can establish themselves forcefully within the community. Just as easily, though, they can disassociate themselves with the community by refusing to log on, thereby leaving the community with much less trauma than would accompany leaving a physical community (Fernback, 41).

I do not argue that unlike physically packing and relocating an entire household, departure from an online group is far more simple in terms of what must be done to leave. The difficulty lies in equating ease of departure with a lack of repercussions because of the departure. Just because something is easy to accomplish does not make it easy to do.

Along the same lines as transience, some critics accuse online communities of lacking in commitment or common focus. Nessim Watson, discussing critics of the use of "community," recalled that,

[Neil] Postman wants us to remember that a community involves living amongst people with whom we may disagree strongly, but with whom we continue to communicate for the purposes of meeting our common obligations. He points out quite rightly that Internet discussion groups
are formed out of common interest, not common obligation (Watson, 122).

The idea conveyed here is that any person may join an online group seeking like-minded individuals who share a common interest, but if the person encounters anyone unpleasant or just one other member with whom she or he disagrees, it is easy for the person to exit the group without any risk. Howard and Jones summed up this perception of online participation,

Commitments to any particular online group can often be shallow and transient when another group is but a mouse click away. Most purely online communities without any physical basis are usually low-cost, 'easy-entry, easy-exit' groups. To avoid cognitive dissonance, it is simpler to 'exit' than to try to work through any messy bargaining and conflictual [sic] disagreements within the group (33).

As I said before, yes, shallow and transient involvement is a possible outcome. But as with the underlying real/virtual binary structure, assuming all online interaction results in this kind of involvement is such a simplistic view of human social activity, it is difficult to understand why this representation has continued to hold any influence. In no form of human interaction is it possible to find another person who will agree with you on absolutely every point, whether the channel for interaction is online or off. No group of people (two or more) is ever going to agree on every subject. Depending on the common interest they share, even that interest may breed conflict between the participants.
If we use as an example an e-mail list for people who enjoy quilting, we could assume that most of the subscribers to that list would be female, that a number of them would be middle-aged or older, and possibly most would be white. Beyond those very moderate class and gender-based generalizations (which will likely have their exceptions within the mailing list's membership), there is no other way to be certain who would be on that list. We cannot predict the religious, ethnic or economic backgrounds of the participants. There is no way of generalizing the sexual orientation of the members of the group. Beyond demographic principles, in actually discussing quilting, it may be that there are different ways of approaching a quilting project and some members are vehement in their support of one way, while another group disagrees. Perhaps this disagreement becomes pronounced. One member is tempted to leave. As we have established, it would take little work on her part to do so. A few clicks of a mouse, almost the same number of clicks that allowed her to join the group in the first place, and she could leave. Certainly, painless exits occur from online groups all the time. But what of her social ties to the group at large? What if she has friends or even family members within the group? A decision must be made that weighs the difficulty of dealing with people who do not think precisely the same way against the social connections with other people. Which is worth more?

This kind of value judgment never seems to enter into the criticism of those who dismiss online interaction as automatically transient and shallow:

Protected by computer terminals and separated by distance of often thousands of kilometers, users feel that the likelihood of any of their fellows being able to affect their 'real lives' is minimal. There seems little
chance of a virtual action being met with an actual response. There is a sense that no one can be embarrassed, exposed, laughed at or heard in their day-to-day lives. There are no sticks or stones to contend with, and although words may hurt, users can always resort to the off switch on their computer (Reid, 112-113).

Yes, the mediation of the machine protects against physical harm, but it can offer no shield to emotional harm if a rupture or difficulty arises in an online venue that a person has invested her or himself in. Reid invokes the childhood rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." I have always preferred the more accurate version, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words hurt worse than anything." Social interaction via a computer may just be typing words on a screen, but words can have tremendous power. This power will help explain the cultural framework that has brought the real/virtual binary forth. Before discussing that, however, I want to turn to a closer look at the binary itself and how it functions both within scholarship and mass media.

REAL VERSUS VIRTUAL

Research on new media and new forms of communication has been influenced heavily by postmodern thinking, in particular the idea of simulation and the belief that we (collectively as a society) are coming to accept simulation in the place of "reality." Ideas such as "hyperreality" and the supremacy of signs and simulacra seem to blend almost naturally into our conceptions of cyberspace, where all interactions and experiences are taking place via symbols on a screen which are themselves being
mediated by a machine. The substitution of the simulation for reality is assumed to happen and to a negative result that deprives human beings of more direct, real and valued contact with each other. Sherry Turkle brought up this fear in *The Second Self*.

If there is a danger here, it is not the danger of play but of infatuation with the challenge of simulated worlds. In the right circumstances, some people come to prefer them to the real [...] Like Narcissus and his reflection, people who work with computers can easily fall in love with the worlds they have constructed or with their performances in the worlds created for them by others. Involvement with simulated worlds affects relationships with the real one (82).

The assumption here is two-fold. First is the fear that the simulation will have a dangerously powerful hold on some people and second that simulated worlds will replace activity in the real world. This same fear of replacement is evident in some attacks on online social activity; writers assume that people will forgo face-to-face interaction in favor of virtual activity to the detriment of older forms of community. Mark Poster addressed the expression of such fears regarding the Internet somewhat humorously,

For this cultural critic the Internet destabilizes community and undermines the felicity of face-to-face relations. As an aside one must ask why, if humans are so needful of bodily presence, they so regularly turn away from each other and bury their heads in books and newspapers, stare vacantly at television, move catatonically with portable music players
blaring in their ears, or gaze with fascination at a networked computer
screen (480).
Poster is discussing the cultural critics raising alarms regarding the Internet and rightly
points out that the overtaking of personal life by media is hardly limited to the Internet,
or is it a new phenomenon. However, it is the arguments about the supremacy of the
simulation in terms of the Internet and digital media and how the arguments ground
themselves that are of particular interest to me. Two underlying beliefs support the
attacks on the Internet and virtual realms. One of these is the inherent belief that the
simulation is automatically "less than" the reality. Rob Shields summarizes the
prejudice against social activity that takes place via machines and the manifestation of
the negative feelings towards simulation as it applies to communications,

Technology is often viewed as a source of separation. In allowing
interaction at a distance, first the telegraph, then the telephone and now
the computer have negated the limitations of physical presence.
 Conversations are held with distant and absent others. Nonetheless, the
local and co-present remain privileged. There is an all too easy tendency
to contrast the here and now with the distant (5, italics in original).
Scholars also tend to assume that the powerful effect of simulations on people's lives is
a new phenomenon related to late-20th century Western culture. The immediacy and
strong hold computer-mediated interaction has on some people is treated as a new,
discrete aspect of communications technology that has been generated spontaneously in
the last two decades, rather than being the outgrowth of older forms of mass
communication which have always exerted a strong pull on people – often with the
same panicked response from critics and scholars. For just one example, the Payne Fund Studies of the 1920s, widely regarded as the earliest social scientific research on a form of mass media, were generated by public fear of the unhealthy power movies were having on young people. The automatic devaluing of the simulations presented by computers in current research is yet another evolution of that same reaction and also is a display of the deep roots behind the real/virtual binary that stretch back much farther in time than just the computer age. That an opposition necessarily exists between simulation and reality – specifically as they are expressed in virtual social interaction, namely online communication versus face-to-face interaction – is an idea which I will attempt to deconstruct in the rest of this chapter.

The underlying assumption of a real/virtual binary opposition throughout much of the research presents a fundamental problem because the binary construct is itself too simple. What constitutes "real" in this case? What constitutes "virtual"? Is it accurate to equate talking with a family member in the same house with conversations in line at the grocery store just because both take place face-to-face? Few scholars would agree with that, just as few would agree that an online chat room designed for sexual experimentation can be equated with a mailing list for people who are interested in quilting. Making a binary work requires reducing multiple categories and degrees of difference to broad constructs.

Philip Auslander pulls apart another binary, one between "live" and "mediatized," in his book *Liveness*, for the purpose of complicating the discourse (51-52) within performance studies. He argues for a more nuanced understanding of this binary, in particular a closer examination of the historical context in which the
live/mediatized binary operates. His arguments have an interesting relevance to the real/virtual binary. Auslander argues that "live" was not a category of experience that existed for people until it was possible to experience a performance that was not live, i.e., that had been recorded in some fashion (54). The very idea of a performance being live could not have been conceived of until another option was created. Auslander feels the live/mediatized binary is too simplistic for the scope of the field of performance studies, and his point is well carried to the real/virtual binary in CMC research.

Real/virtual and real/mediatized are hardly the only binary constructs that are being deconstructed by scholars. Feminist scholars have been looking at the concepts of gender and sex and how they are arranged in contrast to each other. More importantly scholars have been breaking down the oppositional nature of how these two terms are used in order to complicate the discourse and our understanding of the concepts themselves. In order to achieve my own goal of breaking down the real/virtual pairing, it will be helpful to look at some of the discussion surrounding sex and gender by feminist scholars, in particular those who deal with online social spaces.

SEX AND GENDER: ANALOGOUS CONSTRUCTS?

Jenny Sunden's *Material Virtualities* was written about Sunden's experiences with a particular MOO (which is similar to a MUD) and her personal investigation of online textual embodiment. She summarizes the fundamental research question, "What happens to (the idea of) the sexed and gendered body, conventionally thought of as not more than one, in online textual practices?" (14, italics in original). Sunden does not address the real/virtual binary at length in the book, as her interest is focused on
questions of sex, gender and bodies, but her application of feminist and performance theory to these questions has relevance to a deconstruction of the binary.

Because of her interest in the body as text, especially the gendered body in online social spaces, Sunden delves deeply into feminist theory regarding the body and gender, including performance of gender. In the concluding chapter, titled "Material Virtualities," Sunden traces arguments put forth by a multitude of feminist scholars regarding ideas of performing gender versus the idea of sex as corporeal and determined. After summarizing some strains of thought regarding gender and feminist roles in cyberspace, as well as the perils which the supposedly neutral ground of online social space can offer to the female body, Sunden starts to edge towards discussing the real/virtual binary on page 183, "a romanticization of the spoken word in face-to-face encounters – under the illusion of immediacy – has proved to be die-hard theme," an excellent description of the privileging of the real that occurs so often in discussions of online social activity. She then moves back to gender, arguing, "it is urgent that online research stop making sharp divisions between sex and gender" (183).

Sunden invokes Judith Butler, as almost anyone talking about gender as performance must do. She brings in a concept reminiscent of Auslander's historical contextualization of "liveness" in talking about the cultural context of gender and how it functions as a formation for each unique time and place in history (183-184). Sunden mentions that Butler has pushed the discussion of gender even farther, possibly to the point of irrelevancy, "if sex is always already gender ... what is the point then in using the concept of gender?" (184). Having introduced the idea of a theoretical concept
being made obsolete by researchers, Sunden goes on to set up her own new theoretical framework.

What do we do with a concept that for a period of time has been very useful in pointing out that the body, always sexually specific, is anything but stable, unambiguous, and predictable – but that in the process of pointing this out gradually makes itself redundant?

The answer given in this book to this (rhetorical) question is that a discussion of the sex/gender distinction in online research is essential as a starting point to make clear that every simple division that aligns sex with 'real' and gender with 'virtual' is doomed to failure. But once the category of gender has displayed that the sexed body itself is utterly unstable–and when the category of sex, in reverse, has showed that 'unstable' does not equal unreal or immaterial–gender as a strategic concept for thinking about the constructedness of (online) embodiment might as well be abolished. In the wake of this disappearance, it is possible to develop a perspective of online textual embodiment that rather investigates the dissonances and tensions within the sexually specific, cybernetic body (184-185).

I believe a parallel can be drawn between Sunden's investigation of the sex/gender divide and how it plays out in online social spaces and the real/virtual divide which she references. When scholars like Judith Butler began to examine the divide between sex and gender, Sunden argues, they realized the two were tied intimately together, and the one that seemed more mutable (gender), when deeply examined, began to break apart
the supposed stability of the other (sex). Sunden herself ties these concepts to "real" and "virtual" and points out that when the concept of gender (virtual) was used to complicate and destabilize understandings of sex (real), gender (virtual) began to lose its power as a useful "strategic concept" in thinking about sex (real). This process of looking at the two concepts and coming to the realization that both are mutable and are too-often defined as mutually exclusive broke down the supposed separation between them. Sunden is leading the reader through this line of thought in the hopes of moving towards a new perspective on the body and gender definitions in virtual space that goes beyond more traditional notions of "gender" and "sex" and address the importance of the corporeal body and its influence on our behavior in any setting, online or off. Her term for this new framework is "material virtualities," hence the title of her book.

I argue that this same sort of thought process can be applied to the real/virtual divide. Once a CMC researcher begins to look closely at the supposed separation between the "real" and the "virtual" it becomes apparent that these two realms do not exist on either side of a brick wall. The boundaries are permeable, and further the two concepts are hopelessly dependent on each other for definition. One cannot conceive of the real if the virtual is not possible (just as, Auslander argues, "live" does not exist without "recorded" or "mediated"). The real/virtual binary collapses in the sense that we should not be conceiving of these two concepts as mutually exclusive. Rather they exist on a continuum that is marked by degrees of mediation.
PASSING THROUGH THE BRICK WALL

When considering the two concepts of real and virtual, too many people place them on opposite sides of a wall (binary opposition), when in fact they are on different ends of a spectrum. Sitting in a coffee house eating, drinking and speaking directly to another person would count as "real" interaction and also would be privileged as the most valuable of all forms of interaction between people. The sense is that this encounter is direct because the two people are in the same physical location and communicating without any machines in between them. However, this encounter is still mediated. The two people are using spoken language and body language, both of which mediate the interaction. If one person does not speak the same language, the interaction grinds to a halt. While this kind of face-to-face activity may be less mediated than online interaction, it remains on the continuum of mediated social activity. Indeed, the only way to remove all forms of mediation from human interaction would be a direct psychic link between people, which would remove the need for representative symbol and sound systems known as language. Anything short of that pure communion of minds will be mediated in some fashion. In any case, a meeting at a coffee shop would, in terms of the binary, be an example of the privileged "real."

Supposedly at the other end of the spectrum would be an anonymous interchange of words, either in email or on an online forum, where the two participants know nothing about each other besides their handles, avatars or email addresses. This is a purely virtual interaction in that it is entirely mediated through machines. Differences do exist in the ways these two encounters work. I conceive of the contrast to primarily rest on involuntary information, a concept similar to Erving Goffman's notions of "expressions
given" and "expressions given off." The two people sitting in the coffee shop are able to learn things about each other via their senses, whether or not the other person desires the information to be known (i.e. hair color, whether the fingernails have been trimmed). In an online environment, information is given out by the participants only of their own choosing. MOO users select a gender (including no gender in some MOOs) when they register, people select avatars or handles for their user names, and in most cases each person can control precisely how much information about her or himself is shared with the world. With the heavy mediation interpolating between users, it is possible to release very little information about oneself into the ether. From this control over information, we get the perceptions of distance, removal and security often ascribed to online interaction,

Terrified of being alone, yet afraid of intimacy, we experienced widespread feelings of emptiness, of this connection, of the unreality of self. And here the computer, a companion without emotional demands, offers a compromise. You can be a loner, but never alone. You can interact, but never need feel vulnerable to another person (Turkle, The Second Self, 307).

The potential for anonymity also creates the potential for deception, and the lack of face-to-face contact supposedly limits opportunities for verifying what a person has proclaimed about her or himself. The removal and the attendant risk seem to be the main sources of fear regarding online interaction, the sense of not being able to judge first-hand the truth or falseness of a person's statements by studying her or his body language and appearance. This pairing of examples of interaction certainly seems to
support the idea of a dichotomy existing between real and virtual interaction, at least in terms of control of information.

Sunden explores the supposed break between the two and observes that the real is frequently invoked in online social spaces in order to validate or simply gather information. She mentions that some of the most common questions from new online acquaintances are "Where are you from?" as well as inquiries about "real" genders. She posits that these types of geographical reference questions, "seem to suggest a wish to disrupt the uncertainty of location inherent in online worlds" (112). This intrusion or incorporation (depending on your point of view) adds credence to the idea that real world factors are never far away from virtual realms. Questions about geographic location are invoked to further acquaintance or possibly offer some stability in virtual encounters.

The truth is that real world referents have frequently been brought into online spaces and human-computer interfaces in order to help technologically uncertain users make sense of what they are encountering (Turkle, The Second Self, 190). Allucquere Rosanne Stone discusses at length the way people behave in online spaces, treating them as if there was a geography to navigate, regardless of whether the landscape is part of the programming or completely invented by the users, a phenomenon I witness myself in my own research (87-88). Participants in the Bronze spoke of entering or exiting the virtual area in the same manner as they would enter or leave a room:

I was literally in the living room and my home office was down the hall and he said, "What are you getting ready to do?" And I said, "Oh, I'm going the Bronze." And he said, "Oh, okay, see you later." And I was
going into another room! And we both kind of stopped and went, "Okay, this is weird!" (SarahNicole).

Western society's current comfort and familiarity with computers became possible by projecting a familiar object onto the machine. The entire Windows operating system was created to provide a visual interface – the "desktop" – that would be easy for the novice computer user to understand. Windows replaced the old DOS system which required the user to memorize command lines which were generated by computer code and not normal speech. We take what is familiar and known and use it to make sense of the unknown.

Conversely, new technology can bring with it new phenomena that we adapt to and adopt into our everyday lives in a variety of ways. Too many new media researchers to count have invoked Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the "heteroglot" nature of language and the social context of language development\(^5\). My research subjects made references to "IMing" by which they meant holding a conversation via AOL's Instant Messenger program. "To IM" becomes a verb, just as "e-mailing" and "surfing the Net" have entered the vernacular. Language, of course, is always in a state of flux, adapting new terms and dropping words no longer in common use. The flexibility of language, especially since language is the fundamental mediator through which all human interaction must pass, suggests that perhaps other channels through which humans interact may be just as fluid.

Events which occur in online social spaces, ranging from one-on-one relationships (documented by Sunden and a vast number of other researchers) to the infamous "Rape in Cyberspace" (Dibble), sometimes have deep emotional and possibly
economic, legal or physical consequences. Unfortunately, the cases of a person being physically harmed due to contact initiated online would fall into this category (the specter of the dangerous predator lurking in cyberspace, invoked by news stories to scare viewers and heighten ratings, for example). Of course, the fact that such repercussions from the virtual to the real can and do happen in no way means it is an automatic process. Many kinds of online interaction remain wholly virtual and unremarkable. The point here is not to make sweeping statements about what always happens online, but rather to examine the possibilities.

To return to the idea of an oppositional binary, what we now have are several examples which show a path leading from the real world to the virtual as well as from virtual realms into corporeal space. The mere fact that there are connections between real and virtual spaces in and of itself dispenses with the idea of the two concepts being antithetical and distant from each other.

WE ARE THE KEY

If the brick wall no longer exists, what does this mean for our conceptions of "real" and "virtual"? Sunden, discussing Catherine Waldby and Suzie Plant, argues:

I am not so sure that there are such clear boundaries between the corporealization of fantasies in particular venues on one hand, and those bodily facts created through everyday sexual practices on the other ...

(Textual) fantasies, rather than being a safely isolated phenomena that never come to touch 'reality,' must be understood as always already part of those social practices to which they refer (147).
Sunden is talking about the power of the mind and imagination and how thoughts can impact the physical life. Using fantasy as the entry point, she is describing the connection between the imagined and the corporeal, and also pointing out that fantasy and the fantastic (especially when dealing with sexuality) are socially mediated subjects. Further, she argues that simple thoughts cannot be regarded as irrelevant when discussing physical experience, "And once these stories are told, they inevitably become part of a 'field' of sexual experiences, inscribed in the flesh of the typists" (148). To put this another way, online sexual exploration is only the latest example of how talking or writing about sex is not separated from the human body at all. Human beings are the ones talking or writing about the subject; the acts of talking and writing are part of the participants and should not simply be ignored because they were "just talk."

Others dismiss virtual interactions, especially the type of sexual interaction Sunden is referencing, as being simple experimentation in a "theme park" (an idea borrowed from Waldby) that has no real world consequences. Sunden argues that sexual fantasies which occur in virtual social spaces, and I argue all types of interactions which occur online, "become components in cybernetic systems of circulating fantasies and desires. A scene played out in one part of the system will, inevitably, have an effect on other parts" (148, italics mine). In other words, the human beings who are behind each user name or avatar, who are the actual participants in virtual realms, do not – cannot – unplug themselves from a computer and erase what has occurred to them during their time online. Each interaction with another person online, good or bad, impacts the participants in some way. Obviously the impact can be very minor, and
certainly the majority of virtual encounters are not likely to be memorable, let alone life-altering. Still, with each interaction having some type of impact, it becomes even more impossible to suggest that the real and the virtual can exist in total separation, if for no other reason than that people exist in both realms. We cross into virtual realms, we bring in ourselves, our backgrounds, our personalities to those online spaces (Wellman & Gulia, 170), and we emerge from them having felt some impact from the social activity during that time, and we are incapable of leaving the accrued impressions behind when we go back into the "real world." Sunden gracefully expresses this on page 182, "embodiment includes the virtual in the shape of imaginative projections and phantasmic bodies of dreams, how the imaginary has a capacity to retroact on the physical that significantly blurs the boundaries between the corporeal and the imaginative."

To render the real/virtual binary irrelevant is actually remarkably easy. All that is necessary is to remember that behind every user name, every avatar, is a person. As Sunden argued, every virtual presence is the result of a body typing on a computer somewhere, "The Internet is often presented as a disembodied, weightless medium - a space in which (physical) bodies have ceased to matter. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that communication technologies depend on human bodies, technologically as well as symbolically" (11). The human bodies that create the online personae which interact in MOOs or on discussion forums, no matter what they do when acting "as" their virtual creations or avatars, remain human bodies. At some point they must get up from the computer to attend to biological necessity. I have argued here that each trip into cyberspace has an impact on that human mind, or at least the potential for impact
exists, even if it is not always realized. The user can and does take with her or himself memories of what transpired in those virtual arenas, and that in and of itself is where the notion of oppositional binary falls apart. The mere fact that we interact in all types of mediated spaces, virtual and face-to-face, means we pass through the supposed brick walls which separate the real from the virtual. Our participation in virtual spaces and our continued corporeal interaction with the world bind together those supposedly separate places. They cannot be walled off from each other. Ironically, one of Turkle's respondents touched on this idea over ten years ago in extending the metaphor of the Windows operating system, "'R. L. [real life] is just one more window,' he repeats, 'And it's not usually my best one'" (Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 13).

To adapt Sunden's critique of sex and gender as terms, we are relying on a definition of what is "real" that is outmoded in a world where so many of our interactions with others occur through technologically mediated channels. The problem is not in the binary alone, then, but in how we define what is "real" experience. Given the potential powerful effects of mass media – of ideas in general – it seems to be time to begin to rethink our value system. For if we follow the bias inherent in the real/virtual binary to its logical conclusion, anything non-corporeal, including ideas, stories, faith and so on, is inherently less valuable than physical experience. Clearly, this perspective is not an accurate representation of how most cultures operate, much less how academics wish to operate. Serious attention needs to be paid to our frameworks for virtual and real, for media, media effects and mediated communication.

That all social interaction exists on a continuum from less mediated to heavily mediated; that we can be interacting in multiple degrees of mediation with multiple
people all at once (e.g., chatting on a computer while talking to a spouse); that we can keep certain relationships only on one point of the continuum (strictly online) or move from different points on the continuum within the same relationship (using e-mail to keep in touch with family we then visit at the holidays); that we cycle through all these forms of interaction and have more choice of which type of interaction we will have, all contributes to what Shields called the "crisis of boundaries between the real and virtual, between times zones and between spaces, near and distant" (7, italics original). Much of the alarm being raised about the dangers of replacing face-to-face activity with mediated online interaction, the fears of what it could mean to our more traditional forms of community and society building, come, I believe, from this sense that our communication forms have changed and that what we took to be solid boundaries between the concrete and the fantastic are in need of redefinition. But it is important to ask, have the boundaries actually changed, and were they truly solid to begin with? Perhaps the problem lies not with the boundaries being altered but that we placed boundaries on our experiences at all. What is the source for the real/virtual binary? The limitations already exposed in the either/or nature of the real/virtual construction suggest to me that it is not simply the binary that needs to be evaluated but the larger framework of human interaction with media forms that requires rethinking.

A MUCH OLDER ARGUMENT

One of the problems within the scholarly discourse that surrounds the Internet as well as other new media technologies is that, over and over, they are treated as being wholly new phenomena. Despite the fact that people have been sustaining – though not
necessarily starting – long-distance relationships that lack face-to-face meetings via the telephone for well over a century, relationships being sustained via e-mail and messaging programs are treated as being without precedent. Partly this lack of historical context stems from the newness of the technology and the rush to proclaim a revolution before the actual effects of the technology could be observed. The utopianism of the early discussions has been tempered as the Internet has gone from being a strange new force to a commodified and domesticated technology. However, the perception of digital media, especially cyberspace, as being radically new lingers. "Because cyberspace, or the digitally virtual, has been treated as ahistorical, located outside of longer trajectories of cultural and technological development, it has been made to appear as an awesomely magical yet violent rupture" (Shields, 54). The lack of context makes it easier for scholars not to consider carefully what kind of biases are being applied unconsciously into the discussion. Treating digital media and the Internet as incomparable phenomena allows the researcher to ignore the underlying framework regarding mediated and mass mediated communications being brought to bear on these new media channels and to bypass any attempts at examining the framework in terms of both social history as well as the history of communications as a field. But the framework being used is what has lead to the real/virtual binary, which has subsequently affected the study of new media technology by attempting to force a dichotomous construction onto what should be a continuum. This framework did not come into existence with the advent of ARPANET or Windows; it goes back much further.
The real/virtual binary is in fact a permutation of a much older discussion, one that stretches far back before Baudrilliard introduced the idea of the simulacra to postmodern thought. It traces its legacy back before the early days of mass media and public discourse that gave rise to studies such as the Payne Fund, where concern about relationships with media replacing face-to-face social ties began to rise. The separation between "real" and "virtual" has in fact long been a source of cultural tension, "rooted in ancient distinctions; like those between orality and literacy, or between non-mediation and mediation" as Sunden mentions on page 182. Turkle recognized the ongoing pervasiveness of this older binary in *The Second Self*, talking about the separation between empiricism and the imaginative, "Our society accepts and defensively asserts the need for a severed connection between science and sensuality, between people who were good in dealing with things and people who are good at dealing with people" (197). What lies at the heart of the real/virtual split is a separation between empirical knowledge and experiences which cannot be measured. Simply put, it is the difference between the quantifiable and the qualitative.

For centuries, Western thought has placed the highest value on knowledge which can be proved through evidence. Our judicial system rests on the idea of evidentiary procedure. Science relies on the ability to replicate results. Rational thought backed up by some kind of supporting information is held up as immutable and truthful. Numbers, data, and many other versions of evidence are a cultural bedrock. While art, philosophy, literature and the like are valued, they are not nearly as concretely supported in our society. For generations, scholars have debated the differences between the "hard" sciences and the liberal arts, each side convinced of its own importance. The virtual,
like many other abstract concepts associated with the humanities, the arts and the mind, is impossible to quantify. The exclusion from the realm of the empirical is the commonality between them, and the basis, I believe, for much of the discomfort people feel towards events that occur within a space that defies our traditional notions of empirical proof. Yet it is important to remember that experiences which leave no hard evidence can motivate people to action, sometimes extreme action. Fictional writing has brought forth ideas that have motivated people for millennia. Sunden brings up the issue of book burnings, and points out that the imaginary has always been a source of contention because of the inherent power of narrative to affect people,

> Once the permeability of imaginative universes is acknowledged, domains such as fiction and imagination can no longer naïvely be conceived of as harmless, or lacking in political potential. Why were books turned into bonfires if they were not, in any sense, experienced as a 'real' danger?

(147)

Rob Shields makes a similar point regarding the use of novels and fiction for learning about ourselves (40). The fact that the mindset deeply immersed in empiricism looks down upon such power in something "not real" does not make the power a myth. Even if faith cannot be quantified, how many wars have been fought over it?

> The split between empirical knowledge and unquantifiable experiences is the true origin point for the real/virtual binary. The virtual is by nature outside of the physical realm and therefore not easily quantifiable, leading to a general suspicion of any activity taking place there. A face-to-face conversation provides evidence we can collect with our senses, where a virtual encounter does not. A geographic community
has obvious, measurable boundaries, where an online group (meeting the community
definition or not) is far more permeable and difficult to restrict. I suspect part of the
eagerness of the early utopian writers who expected the Internet to cause a massive
upheaval may be linked to the fact that virtual interaction supposedly could strip away
the problems inherent in our society that play out through our bodies (racism, sexism,
etc.) by removing people from the corporeal, taking social activity into a "pure" realm
of the mind. Of course the difficulty with proposing a bodyless arena, as my analysis
has shown, is that people remain in their bodies even when they are fighting dragons
online, and we cannot divide ourselves from the knowledge of who we are corporeally.
We take that understanding with us, even into the virtual realm, and then take our
experiences in the virtual realm back into the physical world in a continuous cycle. As
Shields observes,

    The virtual rebounds on the material and the abstract, changing the
    Enlightenment tradition of simple dualisms - not only here and there,
    inside and outside, but of concrete and abstract, ideal and actual, real and
    fake, transcendent and immanent. The either-or model is shifted in a
    tangible and everyday manner into a system of hybrids of the old dualisms
    which are best understood as intensities and flows (14).

Shields is speaking in different terms of the idea of continuum I have invoked
repeatedly. Unfortunately, this understanding of the give and take between the real and
the virtual is not widespread. The struggle between quantitative and qualitative is a
familiar one for scholars, but this type of conflict between rationality and more
recreational pursuits is more common than people perhaps realize, and flavors opinions which may at first seem unconnected to these concerns.

Contempt for using the Internet primarily as a social tool seems to me to be tied intimately to the value system that places the pursuit of knowledge in a rational manner higher than recreational activities such as socializing, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, is part of the gendering of technology use. Using the Internet to do research on a medical condition, or for an automobile purchase or any kind of shopping is highly utilitarian, and the explosion of e-commerce supports the idea that there is no stigma attached to this activity. Using technology for business or informational purposes is associated with masculine pursuits in our culture. Conversely, a strong, highly negative stigma continues to surround using the Internet as a means for seeking out companionship and social interaction, just as, in the past, women were stereotyped as using the telephone for gossip rather than work. The masculine/feminine duality exists along the same separations as the opposition of empirical endeavor versus social purposes. Almost all of my respondents from the Bronze, male and female, made some mention of the taboo nature of forming friendships online. Ironically, the prejudice against online social interaction was most frequently voiced when my respondents were discussing the regular face-to-face meetings which occurred in the Bronzer community. The embarrassment of making friends through a virtual environment was frequently associated with having to "come out" to offline friends or family about these activities. The primary use of the Bronze was to foster social interaction between a specific group of people, albeit for a somewhat mercenary purpose on the part of those who provided the website and the message board where the interaction took place. In the next chapter,
I will discuss these reports in more detail in the next chapter and talk about the impact of carrying such a stigma while maintaining social ties to an online group, particularly an online group where face-to-face meetings were the norm, not the exception.

The heavy value placed by our culture on empirical knowledge, which is attached to masculinity and male pursuits like business, science, etc., generates a stigma attached to social or recreational activities, traditionally feminine pursuits, which occur in a virtual space that brands them as frivolous, unworthy or suspicious. I have illustrated how this framework functions when applied specifically to online social activity, but the implications of the Enlightenment-style privileging of "reality" – minus some of the gendering language – have been affecting communications studies for many decades. I have already referenced the Payne Fund Studies of the 1920s and 1930s. One of the ongoing struggles within communications as a discipline, which started with the Payne Fund results, has been how to grapple with the effects of media, in particular how to quantify them. Various models have been created (the hypodermic needle and uses and gratifications, to name two examples) and applied or misapplied to forms of mass media in attempts to take something deeply individual and unpredictable and find a way to measure it. In the same way that people attempt to categorize interaction as "real" or "virtual," scholars have attempted to find discrete boxes to understand media effects. Both these approaches, I maintain, come from the same original framework. My analysis here has broken apart the real/virtual binary and argued for looking at mediated communications as a broad spectrum. As with the real/virtual binary, we must refrain from attempting to force any kind of simplistic structure on media effects in general. Human social interaction is a complex and highly individualized process, and human
interaction with the media produces just as wide a range of responses. When human social interaction is combined with human-media interaction, the results are irreducibly complex and it is a waste of time to attempt to subdue them into a simpler, more convenient pattern. I am hardly the only scholar calling for a better understanding of media effects. Sonia Livingstone, Eugenia Siapera, Jonathan Gray, Timothy A. Gibson and Maria Bakardjieva have all discussed at length the need to reconsider our scholarly frameworks in the field of audience research and media effects. I am calling for a similar rethinking of the framework – the real/virtual binary – that has been so widely applied to online social interaction.

The overall purpose of my work is to break down the real/virtual binary, and this chapter has been devoted to the theoretical underpinnings of the binary. Also I have tried to examine the binary and how it functions under a close, critical lens, to show exactly how easily the binary becomes a more mutable, unstable arrangement the more attention is paid to it. Merely laying out a critique of the binary is not enough in terms of truly upsetting the framework of online versus offline activity. What is needed is evidence, actual experiences of people who transition from online to offline and back, for whom the binary does not, in a practical sense, exist. Presenting this evidence, in the form of the particulars of my case study of the Bronze, is the purpose of the next three chapters, beginning with a simple history of the community and an examination of the offline activities that were a regular, recurring feature of the Bronze. These regular offline meetings help dispel the idea that online social interaction is confined only to words typed on a screen. Social activity need not be contained within such limited boundaries.
Poster is referring to certain writings of Margaret Morse, specifically her 1998 book, *Virtualities: television, media art, and cybertulture*.

Jean Baudrillard is one of the major proponents of the advancement of the simulacra over objective reality. See "The Mirror of Production" and "Simulacra and Simulations."

I am linking the pairs of terms with the understanding that "virtual" may or may not be a "strategic concept"; however, taking up that particular debate would be outside of the conclusion I am attempting to draw and would distract from the reasoning Sunden is using, which is my main focus here.

A problem with this argument is that no consideration of time enters into the discussion. Based on a single meeting it may be possible to ascertain more about a person's trustworthiness face-to-face, however, one face-to-face meeting versus six months of conversations online presents a different scenario. Time is one of the least-considered aspects in online communications research, a problem that needs to be rectified.

See Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" for one example of his work on this subject.
COMMUNITY TYPOLOGIES

In the previous chapter, I discussed the controversy surrounding using the word "community" when referring specifically to online social groups. "Community" as a term has been part of countless debates across various areas of academic study, largely because what is or is not a community can be such a subjective distinction and the word comes with a level of privilege attached. Classifying communities is problematic at best because the definition is so elastic. In order to refine the use of the word, a number of different modifiers have been attached to "community" in order to specify what type of social group is being discussed. The most obvious is a "geographic community," clearly a group defined by geographic boundaries. Depending on the flexibility of the definition, there are "knowledge communities" of broad and vast scale. Sports fans, for example, are part of a very broad community that can then be narrowed by sport, by team, etc. The hypothetical list-serv for quilters from the previous chapter would perhaps be a community in and of itself but could also be part of a larger knowledge community of arts and crafts hobbyists. This type of large-scale, non-intimate group qualifies as a community of knowledge and shared interests rather than a tightly knit social group. This is not to say that a tightly knit social community may not form around a shared interest. In fact, large-scale communities of quilters or sports fans or television fans all share that in common. They are all communities which form around cultural practices.
In the past twenty or so years a subset of academics has turned to studying online audience communities as part of an upswing of research into reception of films, television shows and books. Often the subjects of these studies are fan groups. Nancy Baym, along with Susan Clerc, Mia Consalvo, S. Elizabeth Bird, Sarah Wakefield and Sarah Gatson and Amanda Zweerink, to name the short list, all look at online audience communities that were fan groups. The unfortunate side effect is that these studies of online social interaction get swept into a category with "fandom studies," which is barely recognized as a pseudo-subset of media and cultural research. What is important to remember about these groups, as well as the Bronze, is that regardless of their online status, audience groups are significant examples of social activity being organized around cultural commodities. The syntax of that sentence is crucial. The social interaction is the primary point of interest for most of the groups in the studies just listed, not the media text around which the community coalesced. Primacy should be given to the social activity, though this by no means suggests that the medium, in this case the Internet, is irrelevant or immaterial. This order of focus is also true of my work on the Bronze. Being a Bronzer carried a specific identity; it meant that a person had been involved with a group of people at a particular time in a particular online location. A prerequisite of being a Bronzer was that one was either a viewer or fan of the television show\textsuperscript{1}. However, not all fans of \textit{Buffy} were Bronzers because not all of them participated and were accepted into that particular online community. A shared set of experiences, history and knowledge (often expressed through linguistic quirks or memories of specific events or meetings) all marked a person as a Bronzer. It was a unique group with a unique identity, and though the community formed initially around
the show, my respondents were often quick to say that their participation in the group "became so much more than that" (KitCat). In order to illustrate the individuality of the Bronzer identity, I will look at the history of the Bronze over the course of its five-year life and lay out some of the functionality of the website and explain how the community developed.

Nancy Baym divided her book *Tune In, Log On* into different parts in order to deal with her research subjects as an "audience community" and as an "online community." One of my goals here is to look at the Bronze as an online audience community without having to separate out these aspects of the interaction. Indeed, I feel that in attempting to resist the trap of the real/virtual binary, it is vital not to separate the online and audience aspects, as if watching television (or consuming any form of media) is automatically a discrete activity unconnected with online social activity or, for that matter, social activity in general. While media reception has sometimes emphasized the idea of isolation via the consumption of media (a lone viewer staring into a screen, deprived of human connections), it is also possible for media to be the focus of social activity. The common ground for an online audience group is the text around which it forms, although participation over time may end up having little to do with the text. In the case of the Bronze, the audience aspect usually ranks second beneath the group's self-identification as a unique community where television preferences became secondary to being a member of the group.

Baym's theoretical approach looks at her respondents as a "community of practice," by which she means the focus is on "the communicative patterns of participants rather than on the media through and in response to which members
coalesce" (5). The practice approach to studying a community looks at the actions of the group (whether these are physical actions or activity played out in a virtual environment) as a way to reveal the community's underlying structure (22). In this chapter, I am adopting a similar approach to looking at the Bronze as a community of practice but I am looking at the practices of the group through the lens of the community's history both online and off. In Chapter Four, I will delve into greater detail regarding the daily practices of posting and participating.

In the case of the Bronze, which had regular face-to-face meetings that occurred at the same time every year as well as spontaneous face-to-face gatherings in various locations, the community's practices cannot be restricted only to online activity. I will examine in detail a few of the regular offline gatherings and their impact on the community. My desire in attempting to escape the real/virtual binary does not mean I wish to privilege the "real" or face-to-face elements over the virtual elements of the Bronze in some kind of backlash. The offline component of the Bronze was important but it is only part of this story. What occurred in the virtual social space on a daily basis is also a significant part of the history of the community. Many elements of the online interaction came to be ritual elements, meaning they occurred regularly and were part of the virtual routine that provided order to the days, weeks and even months as the community's membership ebbed and flowed over the course of five years. The details of these rituals will be the subject of the next chapter. For now, I highlight the "online" portion not to isolate online from offline but to delve deeply into the idea of online and offline channels being intertwined together, working parallel with each other as a
community forms and changes over the course of five years. I especially wish to point out the impact of regular offline interaction on the online sphere.

To provide a broad context for the community and the development of the on and offline channels, I will first briefly describe the website and the community that grew up on the linear board. To explain the Bronze, I must explain the basic history of the entire phenomenon, including the television show, in order to thoroughly locate the website and the community within the specific time, place and cultural context which influenced the group's development.

WEBSITE DESCRIPTION

On March 3, 1997, a television show was spun-off from a less-than-successful feature film about a teenaged girl chosen to kill vampires. Joss Whedon, who had written the film's screenplay, had been dissatisfied with the way the feature film handled his premise and took the reins of the dramatic television series intent on retelling the story in his own way. The premise of having a teenager transformed into a warrior against evil was based, by Whedon's accounts, on the desire to invert the usual horror movie cliché of a teenaged blonde girl being chased into an alley and killed by a monster (Whedon). In Whedon's story, the teenaged blonde girl is chased into an alley and kills the monster herself. The television series *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* starred Sarah Michelle Gellar, a former soap opera actress, and began life on the then two-year-old WB network².

The drama, with a popular young actress and an well-respected creator (Whedon was nominated for an Academy Award for working on *Toy Story*), was a mid-season
replacement for The WB, airing its 13 episode first season from March until May of 1997. The show became an instant critical darling, though its ratings were never high because the networks (the show moved to UPN in 2000) on which it aired did not reach nearly as many households as the major networks. Despite being low in the Nielsen ratings for the entirety of its run, Buffy was an extremely popular and influential show, spawning a spin-off (Angel) and a number of similar shows (Dark Angel) and launching several careers. Additionally, Buffy has been a source of seemingly endless fascination for academics, with multiple books about the show being published over the last several years and an entire academic conference devoted to Joss Whedon's creations. Because Buffy has been so thoroughly dissected by many other people, I have no need to venture into any kind of analysis or discussion of the show, especially given that the text of the series is irrelevant to my interests except where certain events from the series impacted the online community. But the fact that the show aired on a network that had generally low ratings resulted, especially during the first two seasons, in the audience being relatively limited. The limited audience in turn meant the population of the online social space was similarly small, which affected the development of the online community.

The show's official website also began life in March of 1997. Created and maintained by a company called Ultimate Television (UTV), the website was originally at www.buffyslayer.com. The site was designed by a young man named James Lamb, who became known as TV James in the Bronze. In addition to the character biographies and links to merchandise for the show and the network, the website featured an interactive area collectively called "the Bronze," a name taken from the nightclub
featured on the show during the first three seasons. The area included a chat room, hosted by UTV, a threaded message board, and the linear posting board.

Originally based on a guest-book, the posting board offered visitors to the website a place to leave messages much as a physical guest-book would,

One other thing about my interaction with the Bronze was that the Bronze was two places in the beginning. Actually there were 4 boards at the very beginning, when we were at UTV, and this helped in these 4 boards were very different. The first was the generic posting board bronze it was a guestbook type program that was just accelerated to be a posting board that was free forming. It was linear. There were no threads or anything like that ('stina)

In threaded message boards, a post with a particular topic appears and all messages pertaining to that topic are linked underneath the first post. Subjects are segregated into these threads, restricting the conversation (to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the local conventions). The linear posting board had no such segregation. Users did not even have a topic line available to put on top of their posts. The only identifying meta information accompanying posts was a name, date and time index and IP address, with an option to include an e-mail address (See Figure 1).
Figure 1

Posts were organized temporally, with the most recent posts appearing at the top of the page.

It was weird because the way the board was structured you would almost read everything in reverse. For some reason I never skipped to the bottom and read from the bottom up which would've put everything in chronological order, because somehow it just seemed that wasn't the way you did it. If you found a discussion you would follow it all the way back to the beginning but in along the way you would get in reverse what everyone was thinking. It was an odd way of following the conversation but you got used to it (shehawken).

Two of my respondents invoked a strange-but-effective corporeal example to explain the way this format worked,

Or a bathroom stall. I know it's kind of crude but it's the same sort of thing. Somebody will write something down, and then somebody else writes something underneath that, and somebody writes underneath that. It's the same sort of concept. It works on the same sort of principle. And
some people go back to the bathroom stall to see what someone else has said about what they'd written previously (angelgazer).

Another poster, MCat, referenced her college experience:

I went to an Ivy League school that was largely free of traditional vandalism (though we had plenty of indigenous/creative vandal activity). There were only a few bathrooms on campus that had any type of graffiti on the walls, and these few were known as active forums, frequently updated, often topic-specific, and occasionally quoted in the campus news. I thought of the Bronze as being like one of these bathroom walls.

The community was clearly defined (like a university affiliation, or micro-defined like a departmental affiliation), with unique points of reference/relevance, and the dialogues were open to all, revisited by many, and you sometimes had to wait for a response.

The posts in the Bronze were otherwise unorganized, meaning that following any particular subject of conversation could prove problematic at times when the board was especially busy. Many of my respondents likened the Bronze to a physical wall of messages, much as they referred to entering and exiting the Bronze as if it were a physical space, once again utilizing real world references to explain how the board functioned.

The format of the board is a crucial factor for the way the group dynamic developed over time. The fact that all topics were being discussed in one place, that everyone was posting in the same place, without having different threads (or rooms, to use an analogous structure from chats and MUDs), meant that every poster was exposed
to every other poster. Certainly people were selective about who they interacted with, and it was possible to avoid a topic by not reading posts relating to it all the way through. It was even possible to avoid another poster by not reading any posts under a particular name. However, skipping past a post is not the same as never seeing it. Unlike a forum with blocking technology, or a "kill-file" as one can have on a mailing list, all posters still saw the names and conversations of all the other posters as they scrolled through the board. I believe the lack of blocking technology provided a great deal more exposure that lead to a greater sense of common identity and recognition than would, or perhaps even could, have been created had the board been a threaded message board. Contrary to the criticisms leveled at online social activity, which argue that it is easy to avoid people with whom you disagree online, in the Bronze, all users were together in one place, and while selective reading could be employed to steer clear of undesired contact, the contact was reduced but not eliminated. Over the passage of time, even other posters you were avoiding were still familiar names and presences. In other words, they were undesirable for you, but they were still part of the group.

By the time I discovered the posting board, in August of 1997, the linear board had been expanded to include two other boards of the same format, but with different purposes, the 411 Board and Starbucks.

The second board was the 411 board. That was the board where people would give brief info about themselves. They would say where they were posting from, or what their interests were or how they got there. People didn't post there very often... It was more a demographic board. The third was called starbucks at the time. It was kind of a poetry corner, fanfic
corner, that was where people would post songs and stuff like that ('stina).

The "411 Board" was used for posters to share information about themselves, including geographic location, hobbies, and especially other interests such as other television shows or books. The 411 Board existed to keep people from having to repeat the same information in the main board over and over, and also to allow Bronzers to seek out others in the same area. Local face-to-face meetings were already occurring by August of 1997 and became more frequent over the next several years. After a change in maintenance companies in 1998, when the URL was changed to www.buffy.com, the 411 board was gone and private Bronzers took over the task of maintaining information, including the "Who's Who of the Bronze" started by Chrissy and the Location List, maintained by ValMichael.

Another board had been created at the www.buffyslayer.com site, called "Starbucks," which existed solely for fans to post fan fiction (original stories written about characters from a television show, movie or book, etc.) or, in some cases, original writing. This content was kept strictly off the main board for legal reasons. From very early on, Whedon and some of the members of his production staff visited the posting board to interact with the fans⁴. Because members of the writing staff visited the board, fan fiction was expressly prohibited there to protect the writers from any legal ramifications; should a piece of fan fiction be posted and a future episode be aired that bore any resemblance to the story, the writers could potentially be sued. Over time the close relationship between Bronzers and members of the show's production staff had a heavy influence (both positive and negative) on the development of the community,
including events that occurred at the regular offline gatherings known as Posting Board Parties.

During 1997 and much of 1998, the Bronze was a small community. Statistics are difficult to come by, but the board in 1997 was split into two 12-hour sections and was fairly easy to read in its entirety in a short amount of time. A few hundred regulars (at most) provided the bulk of the visible discussion and activity, and although new members were arriving constantly, the board was relatively intimate\(^5\). Within the Bronze, far more people posted from work than from home, having net access only thanks to their jobs. In the years following 1997, home computer sales skyrocketed and online service for the home similarly exploded. The increase in popularity came with increased problems that were not quite as looming in 1997.

Two of my respondents (AKABecker, RTBS) recalled an event in the fall of 1997 that illustrates the different nature of online social space then versus now. Alyson Hannigan, the actress who played "Willow" on the show, was a fairly regular visitor to the Bronze in the early months. While in the process of moving to a new apartment, on the last day before she moved, she posted her expiring home phone number on the Bronze and left her answering machine hooked up to record messages. The idea of any actor or actress on a television show posting her or his home phone number on a public internet forum seems ludicrous today. The danger it would present to a person's privacy and security, even if the number was being disconnected, would be significant. Fears of identity theft and fraud are integrated into our use of the Internet now, requiring firewalls and personal software shields to protect us from hackers intent on stealing our information. At the time, while unusual, Hannigan's decision did not seem quite so
risky. The small size of the Bronze and the feeling of intimacy with each other – a feeling which bred a sense of security – translated to Hannigan feeling comfortable enough to take such an action. A number of Bronzers did call and leave messages, including **RTBS**, who called so quickly after Hannigan's post that he actually spoke to her directly on the phone before she could set up the answering machine. This example also highlights the multiple communication channels employed (in sometimes surprising ways) within this community, and the way in which other modes of interaction were brought into play with the message board. These other modes became especially important for sustaining the social network five years later when the Bronze was closed down due to changes with the show's production.

*Buffy* debuted in March of 1997. The show ran regular seasons (September to May) for six more years, ending its seventh season in May of 2003. The Bronze, however, had a shorter life than the series. At the end of the fifth season, in 2001, the show changed networks from The WB to UPN. UPN was the other fledgling television network, though it had fewer affiliates and thus even worse ratings than The WB. Because Warner Brothers was paying for the maintenance of the [www.buffy.com](http://www.buffy.com) website, when the show left The WB, the website was closed down, which signaled the death of the Bronze. Even without access to the maintenance companies' records, it was clear from the amount of traffic as well as elements like "Shout-Out Lists" that the population of the online community grew exponentially over the course of five years⁶. Accurate accounting for the actual population is made difficult to establish due to turnover; any number of regular posters disappeared with or without notice due to life changes such as new jobs, returning to school, marriages and children. However, many
of these people did not simply disappear into the ether, never to be heard from again. It was not uncommon for old faces to appear from time to time, particularly at the start and close of a television season. Additionally, even without direct participation in the online forum, many posters maintained personal relationships with their Bronzer friends through e-mail or other channels, pointing once again to the idea of an online group being much like an iceberg, with a good portion of the significant activity being out of direct sight.

During the five years the show was on The WB and the Bronze existed, the website went through one major overhaul. In the spring of 1998, the network changed web companies from Ultimate Television (UTV) to Apollo Interactive. A major crisis ensued online after this announcement was made. Letters and petitions were sent to the network and the producers in order to preserve the existing functionality and structure of the online boards. "The widespread panic when the powers that be wanted to turn the Bronze into a threaded board. That threatened to destroy the community; it was like the end of the world as we knew it" MCat recalled. This campaign was successful, although certain alterations resulted from the switch. The original UTV designed board had blue and white text on a black background. The Apollo version of the Bronze retained the black background but had tan-colored text. The 411 and Starbucks boards were removed. The key to the fear and the resulting protests was concern that the linear board would be crippled or removed, which did not happen. The linear board survived the switch to the www.buffy.com site, and Bronzers carried over their daily routine fairly seamlessly. It is worth noting that this switch occurred in the early spring of 1998. The Bronze was barely a year old at this point in time, but the community had
become established and connected enough to mount a massive campaign to protect the board during the change. Also, in a way the community had solidified completely in February 1998, with the first Posting Board Party.

AXE MURDERERS AND CHILD MOLESTERS

As mentioned previously, I found the Bronze in August of 1997. At that point in time, thanks to the 411 board as well as the small size of the community, people were already meeting at face-to-face gatherings across the country. This was especially common in larger metropolitan areas, for obvious reasons. Upon finding the board, any new poster could look through the 411 board (and later the Location List) and see if any other community members were nearby. The Los Angeles area Bronzers quickly became known as the SoCal (Southern California) Bronzers, encompassing both Los Angeles and San Diego. In New York City, the posters adopted the nickname "Gotham Bronzers" (one of the New York City posters was an avid Batman fan). Psyche recalled her first face-to-face gathering, remembering that she had been able to look at pictures from other gatherings and "see that they [the other attendees] looked normal" before attending. Her first group function was the Gotham holiday party in December of 1997 which was, "not as scary as I thought it would be." Small local or regional gatherings were sometimes regular events where posters gathered to watch the new episodes of the show, or in some cases Bronzers gathered because another Bronzer was coming in from out of town. It quickly became common for anyone who traveled to seek out local Bronzers whenever they visited a place.
Meeting Bronzers face-to-face presented challenges other than geography. Time and again, my respondents told stories of dealing with parents, spouses and friends who ranged from derisive to alarmist when they learned about the Bronze. Part of the difficulty lay in the television show itself.

When you have to explain it to somebody who didn't know anything about well it's just a whole bunch of fans of BTVS, a TV show that only a minority of people have watched and a majority of people thought was bunk, you know, crap. Way after the Bronze was started people started really respecting the show, which was after it started going downhill (Missi).

Godeater recalled trying to explain the Bronze to his friends by starting with the show and receiving an incredulous response, "Buffy? You watch a show called Buffy?" Lady of Buffdom also said her explanations sometimes became halted before they could really begin, "People tend to either get stopped at the Buffy part ('You watched that show with the stupid name?') or at the online part ('Just how big a geek are you'?)." The twin stigma of being a television fan and someone who spent time socializing online burdened many of the members of the Bronze, especially those with friends and family who did not share their interest. The cultural stereotype of the Internet or computer geek sometimes proved to be the harder of the two to overcome. "People generally have a negative impression of interaction on the Internet, I think. People would think that we Bronzers are nuts or just loveless geeks with no lives, and that couldn't be further from the truth" (Cosmic Bob). Many of my interviewees spoke of having to defend their social activity in a variety of ways, including mentioning that the Bronze played host to
VIPs from the television show (*loki*) or stressing the intelligence and attractiveness of the other community members (*willa*) as a way of putting off the image of the socially inept, ugly and unkempt "nerd" spending countless hours staring into a computer screen with no outside life.

Another objection was frequently raised by family members worried about safety. Again, the stereotype of the Internet as a predatory space full of risk and unseen criminals waiting to pounce, an image that has been hyped by the mass media, came back to haunt Bronzers attending gatherings. *SarahNicole*'s father's response was typical, "You're doing what? You're meeting who? Where? They could be axe-murderers." *Hollyn*, an American student who spent a semester in London, remembered arranging her first meeting with some of the British Bronzers in a pub, "My classmates were extremely worried I was going off to the pub with axe murderers, so five of them came with me." When discussing traveling to Los Angeles for her first Posting Board Party, *Missi*, who was a teenager in 1999, said that at the time,

I didn't get to go [to the PBP] in 1999 because I was 16, and what was I going to tell my parents? Going to go to LA to meet people that I met on the internet? And in 99 and 98 that was still so taboo because clearly these people were going to be child molesters. I only got away with it in 2000 by lying my ass off. I had moved from my father's house to my mother's house. I told my mom I was going to visit friends in LA and she bought it and I went. It was the truth, I was going to see friends, but it's not something you can explain to people who don't understand.

Some Bronzers have found it easier not to explain to anyone how they met their friends,
I never tell anyone outside the Bronzer community about 'us' or what we've done and who we've met. I find it easier that way not having to worry about someone looking at me funny for meeting people from the internet... I don't think someone outside our realm would understand our friendship and loyalty to each other (Cate).

While some people had reservations about safety themselves, as Psyche did, some others remembered being concerned about how comfortable the situation would be, trying to maintain the conversational style that many had found so interesting online. "It was a little weird at first," willa recalled. "But you'd already talked to these people."

The television show, in these cases, could become a steadying influence offline as it was sometimes the central thread in the online forum. "You could hit that awkward silence and then just throw something out about the show and suddenly you're back on track. That was a real comfort zone" (godeater).

Interestingly, though the respondents recalled some personal anxiety, most of the strenuous concerns about safety came from friends and family who were not involved in the community. By the end of the first year of the community's existence, face-to-face meetings were common, and pictures of the gatherings were available, and no bloodbaths had occurred at any of the gatherings. "Nothing bad ever happened. Ever," Polgara emphasized, speaking about the specter of physical danger, assault or lunatics wielding axes. No such criminal activity was ever known to have happened during a Bronzer gathering, though emotional upheaval was certainly in evidence, both at the parties and surrounding them.
THE POSTING BOARD PARTY

During the fall of 1997, two men, Occido and Blade, the Vampire Hunter began discussing holding a larger gathering, "so that all these people could meet, who had become friends on this posting board" (AKABecker). The party was announced ahead of time, so that anyone from the Bronze could make plans to attend. This event was the first Posting Board Party (PBP). A small group of volunteers formed a committee to plan the event. Held in Los Angeles in the hopes that some of the show's cast and crew who were active members in the Bronze could attend if they chose, the party was held on February 14, 1998. Approximately 100 Bronzers and guests attended the party, along with a good portion of the cast and crew, including Joss Whedon. Even though the party had been organized in Los Angeles with the intention of drawing some of the production staff, "nobody was expecting anything, and all these people showed up" including Joss Whedon, the show's creator, much of the cast and several members of the production staff who had been participating in the community online (AKABecker). The large scale of the PBP made the event an important moment in the community's history, but the presence of the VIPs made the weekend a watershed. I was one of the attendees that weekend, and I recall Fenric observing the night before the actual party that "this is going to change everything" for the community, because a division was being created between those who were at the party and everyone else. Attending the first PBP became a marker of status within the Bronze, indicating longevity within the community as well as centrality. A multitude of my respondents mentioned the PBPs either as part of their favorite memories of the community or simply as markers of time. Shehawken's memory of the 2000 PBP is typical,
First time I went to LA for the PBP in 2000, it was great because it was all of these people I knew but had never met and they were from all over the world and all over the country and they were all in one place. So you would turn around and look at someone and think ‘I don’t really know them’ and then you’d catch sight of their nametag and it’s like ‘OMG it’s’ like ‘I’ve talked to you forever! How are you?’ and everyone was always glad to see one another. It was great.

Fenric’s words about the power of the party to affect the community were prophetic in other ways; unfortunately the PBP quickly became a source of division as much as it was a chance for the community to meet every year. Who controlled the party, deciding what direction it should take, quickly became a hot-button issue. Tensions flared and fighting broke out on the board and off over who was allowed to go (the size of the party was limited for price and security reasons), leading to arguments about how to define who was and was not a Bronzer.

Somewhere along the line the PBP stopped being about the people and started being about the cast and who was going to be there and what was going to go on. People got really angry about that, and I got really angry about it (Missi).

Additionally, the original volunteer committee was taken over by one member, Morbius, and incorporated into a not-for-profit company. The party became a charity event benefiting the Make-A-Wish foundation, which announcement set off a storm of controversy within the community. Leather Jacket’s negative memories of the Bronze centered around the PBPs:
One of the posters hijacked the Posting Board Party and turned it into a big charity event with corporate sponsorship, high prices, overcrowding, dreadful food, and celebrity VIPs, so what was supposed to be a chance for the fans to get together, where the people who worked on the show could come if they wanted, became a VIP circus where you could see the stars of the show, usually from a distance because they were all hiding in the VIP lounge drinking free alcohol. But you couldn’t carry on a conversation with your friends because it was too dark, too loud and too crowded.

A number of Bronzers were incensed that a gathering intended to be for the community had been in their view hijacked to serve what were perceived to be the personal ambitions of a small group of people. This division lead to extensive flame wars online every year during the run-up to the party. "You would come home from a day at work or a day at school or a day taking care of your kids, and your happy little home online was now a war zone. And you'd better pick a side," so god eater remembered. The second year of the PBP's existence, there was a "walkout" of the Bronze in protest,

The PBP walkout from 99, when we all got really pissed off about it and people just walked out, they left the Bronze. I think it was before the PBP got incorporated and a lot of people got pissed off then, but before that, the cost was going up, the demand to go was much higher, people weren't getting in, people who by rights, I guess, by seniority, weren't getting in. People were fighting about it. It was terrible because it really affected a
lot of people in ways. Who knew it was going to be that important to people? Up until the last one it was still that important to people. Despite the in-fighting, the PBPs were enormously popular events and always well-attended. Even those who objected to the decisions regarding the parties traveled to Los Angeles simply to take part in the weekend. "It was never about the actual event that was going on, when people got together in real life. It was just meeting up and doing everything else and then there was this thing people would go to later" (godeater). In 2003 the last PBP was held, a few short months before Buffy ended its seven-year run on television, and a full two years after the Bronze had been closed.

Though the PBP continued successfully for six straight years, in 2001 an alternate party was set up during the same weekend by Kristen on behalf of the Bronzers who were dissatisfied with the corporate nature of the PBP. The alternate party was dubbed Caritas, which was a name used for a nightclub on the Buffy spin-off show Angel. Caritas was a public event but no VIPs were attending, meaning the outsiders seeking to take advantage of the PBP system were not likely to interfere. The guest list, as with the PBP, was limited for price reasons. Caritas was successful in that it was an attempt to provide a different atmosphere than the more formal, more hyped PBPs, "cozier, no VIPs so you didn't have people swarming up to people," as AKABecker described it. The parties in general were mostly an excuse, "a chance to get ourselves all sassied up and go out dancing and have a good time with our friends" (loki).

In 2004, with the PBPs and Caritas over and Buffy off the air, two posters, Allyson and Artemis, who ran an event-planning business on the side, organized the
Wolfram & Hart Annual Review (a name also taken from the spin-off show). Also a charity benefit, this event attracted a VIP presence (and the requisite attention from non-Bronzers) as the PBP had. Held during the same weekend as the PBP customarily had been, just after the television show Angel had aired its 100th episode, the party was held days after the announcement that the show was also ending its run that season. The Wolfram & Hart party thus became by default the last major Bronzer gathering.

The PBP's and other parties in Los Angeles were not the only major gatherings for the community, nor were they the only ones held at the same time and place each year. Moriah organized a Halloween party in Las Vegas every year for several years that included a costume contest. The Vegas party was strictly for Bronzers. No VIPs were ever invited much less attended, leading the Vegas gatherings to have almost by default a more intimate, relaxed air. "Chicagopalooza" (a name obviously adapted from the Lollapalooza music tour) was a gathering in the Chicago area held during the springtime for a few years, and July for many years brought the annual Sweltering July Buffy Weekend. The SJBW, as it was called, was always held on a late July weekend, although the location of the party moved around considerably. These formal events were announced ahead of time, and open to any Bronzers who wanted to attend. The singular aspect of all these parties, including the PBP's, is that they were recurring events held roughly the same time every year. Spontaneous gatherings also occurred, of course, but larger events announced ahead of time could be planned for, allowing Bronzers who lived all over the globe (a significant population of Bronzers lived in the United Kingdom with a few as far as Australia and New Zealand) to make travel arrangements early. Additionally a number of Bronzers were young people like myself,
who were either still in school or just past it and not overburdened with financial resources. Large gatherings often found Bronzers sleeping four, five or six people to a single hotel room to conserve funds. The key, however, was having time to plan for the event, in order to save money. The reliability of the events lent a rhythm to the year in the Bronze that supplemented the ebb and flow of the television season that also influenced the activity in the community. No data currently exists against which to compare and discern whether the number of regular, large-scale gatherings in the Bronze was unusually high, though the community appears even without broader context to have had an extremely crowded social calendar.

The frequency of these gatherings had an impact on the community. *Psyche*'s story about seeing pictures of people is indicative of the effect continual face-to-face meetings had for newcomers. Common practice after a gathering of any size was for people to upload pictures to websites to share with those who were unable to attend. The ability to see photographic evidence of the "normalcy" of other Bronzers provided a sense of security and stability for new posters. Within the community, people were known to each other, creating a safety net so that as time passed, it became likely that someone, somewhere had at least met a particular Bronzer or spoken to her or him on the phone, reducing tension and fear about face-to-face meetings for members of the group. This internal support also helps explain why genuine fears regarding attending gatherings often came from external sources. Bronzers themselves felt they knew one another through speaking to each other every day and participating in a community where people were meeting each other all the time. *Chrissy* eloquently summed up the cumulative effect of the ongoing face-to-face encounters, "People were meeting offline
in person, so you knew there was a certain level of honesty that was pretty much required if you wanted to participate in the community." I will discuss expectations of honesty in Chapter Five, but it is worth noting here that the offline interactions fostered trust within the collective group. While this use of offline activity to promote trust might seem to hark back to the binary and put more weight on the idea of face-to-face meetings and reinforce the notion of face-to-face interaction being more "real" than online interaction, to conclude such a thing is pushing too far. Bronzers did not speak of their online friendships as being not real unless they were validated by face-to-face contact. The realities of a dangerous world, as well as the social awkwardness of spending time with people were assuaged by knowing that people were gathering safely and enjoying themselves immensely, but Bronzers did not look upon their offline gatherings as anything separate from the whole of their community. They moved effortlessly from online to offline meetings, each feeding back onto the other to reinforce their social relationships and sense of collective identity. "Those weekends when everyone was together, it was almost like that place, that restaurant or that lobby, that became the Bronze" (loki).

CHANNEL-SWITCHING

The bigger, more formal gatherings are easier to research, for the obvious reason that more people attended them, allowing for cross-referencing among responses and so forth. Also the larger gatherings tended to produce more widespread results, due to that many more people being collected in one place. It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the smaller meetings or dismiss them as not being as influential. I am not only
referring to the local gatherings that occurred when people who lived in the same geographic area had more intimate parties, but also to impromptu dinners as well as one-on-one friendships. Some local groups met to watch new episodes of the show every week. Some held monthly dinners. Aside from regular gatherings, when a Bronzer came to a city from out of town for whatever reason, it became tradition early on for the local members of the community to take the visitor under their wings for dinner or entertainment. RTBS recalled his first face-to-face meeting with a Bronzer in his hometown, a poster named Big Al who was visiting the city on a business trip, "I remember we said how really weird this was, having had tons of conversations in the virtual world, and here we are, drinking beer and eating Mexican down at Nacho Mamas."

Chronicling this kind of interaction is next to impossible in terms of rigorous academic study for the exact same reasons general human social interaction is impossible to quantify, but the fact that it occurred regularly and constantly for Bronzers is significant.

In the previous chapter, I discussed at length the idea of boundaries existing between online and offline spaces. I introduced the idea of a continuum of communication rather than a binary construct where one side is virtual and the other real, and explained that the binary breaks down because people move between the one and the other. The continual face-to-face encounters that occurred between Bronzers were the examples in practice that show how the separation between online and offline breaks down, but they also can be used to illustrate the idea of the continuum in practice. Bronzers switched communication channels with great ease and without disruption. In discussing research approaches to online groups, I introduced the
metaphor of an iceberg, where the online forum is only one small part of the whole, the easily visible part. If we identify the online forum, in this case the linear message board, as one channel, the Bronze existed in multiple virtual channels that included the chat room on the original site, e-mails (both private and small mailing lists for local groups) and messenger programs. A Bronzer with close ties to a personal social network within the community could post in the Bronze itself and e-mail and message with friends all simultaneously, thereby utilizing multiple computer-mediated channels to maintain social activity at the same time. This view itself is more complex than the usual restriction of online social activity to what can be easily seen, i.e. the public message board, and yet this view still restricts the model to only computer-supported channels. For some Bronzers, the practice of channel switching encompassed more than just the technologically mediated options. For those Bronzers who lived in larger urban areas or had close friends from the community in their immediate geographical area, it was not unknown to spend a day at work posting, e-mailing and possibly messaging with other Bronzers, then leave work and meet some of those same friends at a restaurant for the evening. For these people, there was no perceived separation between these channels. Bronzers moved fluidly and easily from one mode of communication to another and back without any sense of disruption.

My intention here is to emphasize the idea of multiple channels being utilized to sustain relationships, including those formed online which move into offline venues. It is critical, however, not to overreach with this idea. I do not claim that all online social groups behave in this manner, or that all people who form close relationships with others virtually follow this pattern of behavior. While face-to-face contact and channel
switching were common in the Bronze, even in that community they were not universal. However, face-to-face interaction developing with friends found through online venues is a fact for a portion of the population. Scholars have not focused much serious attention to the progress of virtual relationships into offline realms; there is no easily accessible data regarding how often this occurs. But reviewing the research into online social interaction, references crop up in many of the major works, including in Baym, Kendall, Bakardjieva and Sunden and stretching back to Howard Rheingold discussing meeting his friends from The Well. It is telling that, over and over, comments indicating that face-to-face meetings occur within groups whose primary meeting place is online are thrown out by scholars as an aside, rather than the focus of the research. The repetitiveness of this approach suggests that possibly researchers recognize that the walls established to contain online social interaction to online social spaces are not, in fact, solid, and that people transition between different communication channels more easily and more often than our current research is willing, or possibly able, to encompass. That so many references appear across a broad range of studies suggests to me that a new approach is needed when we think about online groups. Instead of isolating the easily visible and recordable virtual evidence and attempting to parse meaning from such an incomplete portion of the whole, we need more in-depth, ethnographic studies of online social groups, including much more research into the use of multiple channels (online channels as well as offline ones) to sustain relationships. In an online social group the key word is not "online" but "social." Wellman and Gulia put this more succinctly, "People do not neatly divide their worlds into two discrete sets: people seen in person and people contacted online. Rather, many community ties
connect offline as well as online. *It is the relationship that is the important thing, and not the communication medium*” (182, emphasis mine). To put it more simply, "When I go visit them, I don't think I'm going to go meet these Internet people, I think I'm going to go meet my friends" *(PDR)*.

Focusing on the social ties rather than the medium makes it easier to consider what happened after the Bronze closed down in 2001. I have explained that the community maintained social ties, including the final PBP and the Wolfram & Hart party as well as other smaller public gatherings. Intimate relationships and friendships, as well as the small number of marriages or long-term romantic relationships, certainly survived the closure of the Bronze. However the overall social networks, though not nearly as tightly knit as they had been during the five years of the Bronze's official lifespan, remain functional. The alternate websites, such as the Bronze Beta⁸, which were established in 2001 after the closure of the official Bronze website, remain online, though the population has shifted over time. Some of the e-mail mailing lists still exist as well, but social ties between Bronzers seem to rest on person-to-person contact in a grassroots, word-of-mouth style. When news regarding a Bronzer is told, others will repeat it to any other Bronzers they know, either via face-to-face contact or sending e-mails to the relevant people. By 2003, when I was beginning to solicit potential respondents for interviews, the news was passed in through an ad hoc social network, rather than a centralized community with a main meeting location as it had been prior to 2001. When the history of the community is traced through the website, as I did earlier in this chapter, the closure of the [www.buffy.com](http://www.buffy.com) website in July of 2001 appears to be the end of the Bronzer community. When the community is looked at as a social group,
it becomes far easier to understand that the group's history is a complex and ever-evolving collection of relationships that may never reach a true end.

1 The term "fan" is itself becoming a contested word in some academic circles, with certain researchers pointing out that "fans" are not typical audience members, and that perhaps a more nuanced understanding of "fan" and "viewer" is needed, as well as audience research that takes these distinctions into account. See Gray and also Siapera for examples of this discourse.

2 The WB and UPN networks were launched in 1995, as part of an effort by two major Hollywood studios to gain entrance into what had been a closed world. For much of the history of television in the US, three networks had dominated all of broadcast television (ABC, CBS and NBC). In 1986, Rupert Murdoch's Fox Company became the first to successfully challenge the "Big Three" networks and create a fourth, though it took nearly a decade, until the 1994/1995 television season (traditionally September to May), for Fox to begin broadcasting material seven nights per week. In 1997, when Buffy first began to air, The WB network was struggling to gain viewers enough to sustain itself.

3While the entire interactive area of the website shared the name, for my purposes here, when I refer to The Bronze I am referring only to the linear board portion of the online forums, as that was where my respondents (and myself) were most active and most of the community-building events occurred.

4 One of the "urban legends" of the Bronze was that it was by Whedon's request that there was a board with no threads because he did not like the format, hence the creation of the linear board that became the Bronze. Whedon certainly disliked threaded boards and found them difficult to follow, but the actual decision to create the linear board had come from TV James, who had similar feelings to Whedon.

5 One of the ongoing problems of all online research is that there is almost no way to determine how many people are reading a web page without leaving a comment short of having a site counter tracking unique hits. There are no statistics available to provide such information for the Bronze.

6 I will explain "Shout-Out Lists" in detail in the next chapter, however, Fenric's List, which became the standard for all Shout-Out Lists, took four separate posts to hold by July of 2001 and contained over 1200 names.

7 This is my own personal recollection from that weekend. The quote was confirmed via e-mail.

8 www.bronzebeta.com, a privately run board that provided a refuge after the Bronze was closed down.
My day is defined by routine. My alarm goes off in the morning, and I get up. I eat my breakfast. I drive to campus and walk to my office and turn on my computer to check e-mail. I work, I use the Internet to avoid work. I teach and read, and at the end of the day I go back home. Most people who work for a living follow a vaguely similar pattern. This pattern is the mundane stuff of "real life" for many people. Unchanging routines that beat out a rhythm to every day, or at least every workday. One of the celebrated parts of weekends and vacation days is the lack of routine, the freedom from patterns that revolve around going to work in order to earn a paycheck.

When people speak of "real life" or RL in an online space, are these routines what they think of? The IRL prefix is frequently used to differentiate the activities people are engaging in online from what they do when not at a computer, or, in the cases of those who work in offices, what they should be doing on the computer that they are avoiding. The employment of a separation between online activities and offline life presupposes the idea that online activities, especially online social activities (as opposed to information gathering, which is a less frivolous pursuit and can be treated as "work" or at least as less wasteful), are less valid, less normal than "real life" – a "real life" comprised of daily routines as described above. Arriving at an office building and collecting a cup of coffee from the break room before sitting down at a desk in a cubicle to work is "real life." Frittering away time talking to people online is not. The online social space is liminal and outside the framework of the office building, the
coffee maker or water cooler, and the corporeal world where face-to-face interaction occurs, and so is automatically treated with suspicion, derision or merely as irrelevant.

The previous two chapters have rather thoroughly broken down the idea of the liminal area known as cyberspace being utterly removed from the corporeal realm. People cross from one to the other seamlessly, and in the case of the Bronze they socialize in multiple channels with ease. However, the Bronze as a social outlet, whether the interaction is occurring online, offline or everywhere, supposedly still remains a vacation from "reality." Henry Jenkins' influential book *Textual Poachers* concludes with a chapter called "My Weekend-Only World," named after a song composed by a fan describing the escape from "real life" presented by science fiction conventions. Online social activity, especially fan-related activity such as the Bronze nominally was, is assumed to be part of this "weekend-only world." Weekends are removed from the daily grind, vacations from "real life." The separation is between hard reality and pleasant fantasy, as discussed earlier, a distinction rooted in our society's desire to keep empirical reality separated from both faith and fantasy. The Bronze certainly provided an escape at times from the dullness or oppression of work. "I can remember times looking away from my computer and being surprised that I was still in my office, because that's not where I was in my head. In my head I was in a completely different place that was way better than my office" (*Jaan Quidaam*). The nearness of the Bronze, a simple mouse-click away, provided a constantly available source of social interaction throughout the day, in a place where anyone could pretend, play or simply think about something other than (although, in times of conflict, not necessarily more pleasant than) work.
I am not putting forth the claim that the Bronze did not act as an "other world" compared to the "real" one. Nor am I attempting to claim that the liminality of online spaces is irrelevant, or that the social aspect of the community and willingness of the members to play and perform to entertain each other was not a hugely important factor in the growth and level of involvement of the members. However, as with the easy transitions between meeting online and offline, I believe the Bronze was deeply integrated into "real life" for a number of people. Instead of existing as a separate location, an island of escape far removed from the corporeal world and the drudgery of routine, the Bronze was woven into the patterns of those daily routines, and the community developed ritual elements of its own. What I am suggesting is that the online social space was co-present with "real life" routines, instead of being blocked off from day-to-day life. Rather than journeying to a liminal space of escape on a special day of the week, Bronzers could transition from one to the other quickly, several times a day, in much the same way they switched between communication channels.

To examine this idea of routines and integration, I want to look at some specific details of what actually occurred online. In the previous chapter, I sketched the history of the community as a broad timeline. Now I turn to a close examination of the details of daily patterns of behavior within the online social space and how the community mimicked offline routines as well as used ritual practices to cement social ties among members. Before turning to these details, however, there is another consideration at work in the day-to-day functioning of the online group. The timing of the Bronze's existence, from 1997 to 2001, had a great impact on the development of the community's online habits. One of the aspects of online research that has yet to be
deeply investigated is the influence of one online format on another and the possibility of cross-pollenization of practices from different formats. So, first I wish to talk briefly about the variety of online forums and their idiosyncrasies, as well as the ways in which they may have impacted each other.

SYNCHRONOUS, ASYNCHRONOUS, AND HOW TO PLAY CHARADES IN A TEXTUAL ENVIRONMENT

Many of the existing case studies of online groups center around two particular formats: mailing lists and MUDs. Mailing lists are e-mail lists individuals subscribe to that exist to serve specific interests. Thousands of individual mailing lists exist, dedicated to particular subjects, ranging from motorcycle aficionados to dog owners to soap opera fans, the latter of which were the subject of Nancy Baym's *Tune In, Log On*. In some cases, mailing lists can primarily exist to share information, a phenomenon catalogued by Rheingold and others, where the subscribers come together to seek and share information on a given topic with each other (see Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 17-18). Knowledge sharing is one way to gain social status within the mailing list group. Because of the time lag, mailing lists can frown upon using chatspeak (i.e. "NE1 want 2 chat?") abbreviations, and e-mails can be long and detailed. Unlike a chat room, where time is of the essence, e-mails can be read at leisure and thus held to a higher standard of grammar than using chatspeak. The FAQ or general rules of "netiquette" were catalogued by McLaughlin, Osborn and Smith (in Jones, *Cybersociety*)¹ and have been cited in multiple places as examples of online social norms; sometimes these rules are cited to prove that social norms in fact exist online,
contrary to the "wild frontier" metaphor so often invoked when writers discuss the web. E-mail lists are an asynchronous form of communication, meaning there is no real-time dialogue taking place within a single window, although it is certainly possible for e-mail exchanges to go so quickly they appear to be almost in real time. Usually, however, mailing list messages are delivered to a subscriber's inbox and the subscriber reads the messages well after they were written and sent. Additionally worth noting, mailing lists provide more control to the subscriber regarding who they read. "Kill-files" can be used to screen out messages from addresses belonging to subscribers deemed undesirable. They also allow much greater ease of lurking (reading without posting) than most synchronous formats. Subscribers are not required to participate to receive messages. The Bronze shares some of the same characteristics of a mailing list, particularly the presence of untold numbers of lurkers.

MUDs and MOOs are the other most common subjects (to date) of published online social research. Originally standing for Multi-User Dungeon, a format created for role-playing style interaction, a MUD is a synchronous format where conversations take place in real time, as in a chat room. Unlike chat spaces, which are often featureless virtual rooms, MUDs are organized worlds with landscapes, rooms and objects that can be manipulated by the users and where registered players choose a character or avatar and can give that character a physical description. MUDs also allow for the simulation of physical action. Commands such as "emote" cause text to appear as if describing a physical action taken. For example: if I were to go into a MUD and want to express being tired and wanting to rest, I would type, "emote: DarkLady sits
down on the couch and sighs," which would appear to others without the prefix "emote:" and would be read as describing an action my character is taking within the world of the MUD.

The Bronze was not a MUD and did not have separate commands for talking versus doing; however, the capacity to "emote" was translated in the message board format using html italics tags. To convey the same description of action in the Bronze as above, I would simply put the words in italics tags so that they would appear, DarkLady sits down on the couch and sighs. Bronzers adapted to the message board format and created a social norm within the community to enable the capacity to describe action that mimics the capacity as it exists in the MUD format\(^4\). In this way, Bronzers were able to "play" in the online environment, including games like charades, which would seem at first glance to be a game that would absolutely require physical presence.

While information sharing can (and does) occur in any kind of format, MUDs, like chat rooms, seem geared towards a social purpose more than mailing lists. Lori Kendall pointed out this tendency towards social uses and the feeling of shared space in Hanging Out In The Virtual Pub,

synchronous forums–those that allow for near-instantaneous response (including the various chat programs and MUDs but not including e-mail lists and newsgroups)–can provide a particularly vivid sense of 'place' and of gathering together with other people. Rather than merely viewing a space through the electronic window of television, many people feel that
when they connect to an online forum, they in some sense enter a social, if not physical, space (5-6).

Kendall is suggesting that the idea of a description of a space as well as the understanding that multiple people were sharing a particular location at the same time generated a greater sense of camaraderie between participants than could be achieved through asynchronous methods. The argument is that synchronous communication replicates the feeling of being physically co-present with others that one feels in a bar, a restaurant or some other geographic location that is shared as a meeting space. This type of comparison of a comfortable, sociable online space appears in my own research repeatedly, when the people I interviewed likened the Bronze to a coffee shop or a party (though sometimes with conditions, including "the Bronze could be really boring at times"5). I have mentioned previously the tendency of Bronzers to speak of their online home as a space with its own geography and to talk about inhabiting it virtually the same way they inhabit brick and mortar buildings. Additionally, this is yet another example of geographic, face-to-face locations being invoked to explain the workings of an online space, and further, in this case, to justify the comfortable feeling associated with the online social space by comparing it to a pleasant offline counterpart.

The Bronze combined features of mailing lists and MUDs, and Bronzers were adamant about maintaining the distinction between the message board and a chat room. "You could walk away from it and come back, where a chat room, if you're in it, you're stuck and you kind of have to pay attention. [In the Bronze] you didn't have to pay attention all the time," as Opus described the forum. The Bronze existed for fans to talk about Buffy, to share opinions and information about the show and anyone involved
with it. In this way, it was a group dedicated to a particular topic, as with a mailing list. However, unlike an e-mail list, the Bronze was treated as if it was a physical space, one based on the namesake nightclub on the show (a place with a bar, a stage, lots of couches and chairs and many shadows). Over time, Bronzers developed running jokes about other features of their virtual world, including a place called "the lurking corner" where people disappeared to when they expected to be gone for a period of time, as well as the "Utility Closet" which, had it actually held all the items that were supposedly stored within it, would have been the size of a small house.

The Bronze did not have objects for the users to interact with written into the code of the website, as with a MUD, but members of the group invented objects such as the Fount of Employment created by Leather Jacket, in which people who were seeking new jobs asked to be dipped, rather like a christening, for good luck, that were fair game for anyone to use once they were described as being present within the Bronze’s landscape. Daily rituals surrounding arriving and departing the Bronze helped shape the sense of place, as described in the Kendall quote above, and also supported the social atmosphere of the message board. At the same time, enormous value was placed on good writing and well-thought-out posts, which could become very long during complicated debates. Chatspeak was discouraged and "newbies" (new posters) were subject to severe ridicule if they attempted to use chatspeak within the Bronze.

These examples have been brought up in order to highlight two points regarding the Bronze. First, that bulletin boards, although they have existed longer than MUDs, have to this point not been thoroughly examined by scholars in the same way mailing lists and MUDs have been. Second, and far more importantly, the Bronze incorporated
features of other formats into the way the group functioned. Bronzers borrowed conventions from other formats which existed in 1997 when the site went online. In fact, MUD use has declined sharply with the spread of bulletin board systems (BBS) on the Web. BBS programs are available to download and are far easier to create and maintain for novices who do not understand computer coding. (It is quite likely that as time passes, more research will appear surrounding Web bulletin boards, given the lag time involved in researching and publishing, particularly in the academic world.) But MUDs were more popular in the early years of the Bronze, as were mailing lists, suggesting the likelihood that these other formats influenced the development of the Bronze through community members who were familiar with the conventions in other formats and adapted them to this new format.

I am not arguing that MUDs, mailing lists, chat rooms and bulletin boards can be compared equally. Too many differences exist between the specific formats, and just because all of them exist online does not create sufficient grounds for ignoring the differences when comparing different types of forums. As Nancy Baym forcefully observed, "conceptualizing all online communities as a single phenomenon because they share a medium is like reducing all towns, cities and villages to a single phenomenon because all of them are built on earth" (201). I see the influence of online formats on other formats as a heretofore unacknowledged facet of the development of online social spaces and one that deserves more attention from scholars.

Having exhausted the topic of cross-pollenization, I wish to turn my attention to the particulars of the Bronze. While I have no desire to entangle myself in a debate over how to define community, I wish to point out that within the ongoing debates about
what separates a community from a more generic group, the idea of communal identity recurs regularly. One of the ways a group of people forge an identity is through ritual, including the ritual use of language, as well as using language and shared history as a form of indoctrination. Additionally, there are ritual practices that are a frequent marker of participation in a group. Ceremonial rites in religious and civic life are used to mark the acceptance of a child into the adult world. Membership in a group can be gained by completing tasks or engaging in practices along with other members. Online groups are no different from offline groups in this fashion. "Newbies" to online organizations go through a period of adjustment as they learn the customs of a new group. Familiarity with the behavioral expectations and language helps strip away the stigma of the "newbie" over time. Interestingly, this is yet another example of how participation in different types of online forums can have a cumulative impact. A newbie to a bulletin board group may recognize signatures from an e-mail list and deduce that they serve a similar function. The spread of such elements across different styles of online discussion space can separate a net-savvy newbie from someone completely unfamiliar with the Internet. The Bronze had many different elements combined from various places, as I have suggested, as well as a multitude of practices with their own unique slant that helped define the group as a distinct community.

A DAY IN THE BRONZE

Social groups develop rituals and specialized language to help cement the ties between members and allow members to screen outsiders by testing their knowledge (Donath, in Communities in Cyberspace, 39; Kendall, 51). The Bronze developed
certain patterns of daily life and an enormous amount of specialized language over the course of five years. The language of the Bronze was, rather haphazardly, gathered as part of the book *Slayer Slang*, though the premise of that book was to focus on the way in which the television show had influenced language use by creating a lexicon of words that had grown from the show. A portion of the specialized language used by Bronzers came from the show; tagging the appendage "-age" onto the end of nouns, such as "sparkage," "flamage," etc., began as a quirk of dialogue on the series and spread quickly to the online group. But much of the specialized language revolved around rituals within the community and was developed by Bronzers picking up each other's speech patterns and slang and sometimes by spontaneous jokes that became part of the Bronze lexicon.

While the original board from 1997 "turned over" every 12 hours – meaning the posts built up from 12 a.m. to 12 p.m., Pacific Time, every day and then that board was archived and a new, empty board appeared – by the time control and maintenance of the website changed hands from UTV to a Apollo Interactive, in the spring of 1998, traffic on the board was already spiking due to the show's popularity. In short order, the boards archived every four hours, beginning at midnight on the west coast. (Archived boards were always available on the website for one week and then erased, which helped make it possible for users to be absent for days and return and catch up on what they had missed.) To prevent spamming the board (overloading it with short, pointless posts), a four-post-per-hour rule was implemented. This rule was not enforced by any technological method or even by a moderator. Posters were on the honor system. In fact, the Bronze had very little oversight, particularly after the turnover to Apollo
Interactive. Though an emergency contact existed should something serious occur on the board (e.g. hacking of the site's code, egregious abuse or posting of illegal materials such as bomb-making instructions), there was no moderation or oversight from the maintainers of the website. The community policed behavior amongst themselves, a topic I will delve into in Chapter Five. Even though the servers housing the board were at the network in California, and even though the website existed in "cyberspace," the geography of the users and the patterns of their physical lives impacted the rhythm of the Bronze.

Regular posters on the morning boards, from 4 – 8 a.m. Pacific Time, were known as the Coffee Clubbers. This phrase was started early in 1997, representing the large number of Bronzers who had internet access at work but not at home and who stopped by the Bronze in the morning as they arrived at work. Some Bronzers would not only have coffee in "real life" at their desks but also enter the Bronze and virtually order a cup of coffee at the bar within the Bronze. Certain morning rituals became established for many of the regular posters. Some opened their first posts of the day with "SO [Shout-Out] Lists" of greetings to friends (See Figure 2).
Some put their signatures in the first post, though the use of full signatures on every post was discouraged in order to keep volume down (another use of the original website's 411 Board was to post signatures when they became excessively long). Signatures were an idea adapted from e-mail. Most e-mail programs allow for a certain amount of text to be added to the bottom of every message. Professionals use their signatures to include contact information. Others use quotations, links, or other information that provides a brief indication of their personalities. In the Bronze, signatures usually included membership in various clubs started by Bronzers (some serious but most tongue-in-cheek), such as "Buffy, Eh?", a loose organization for Canadian fans, the XDC or "Xander Dance Club" named after a character on the show, and the Buffyatrics, which was for older members of the Bronze who chafed under the assumption by news outlets that *Buffy* was a show for teenagers. Other personal notes were also included in signatures, such as in-jokes shared with particular friends, and
certain relationships could also be identified, such as membership in a Bronze online "famlet" (an appellation for a virtual family, "sislet" or "kidlet" being possible adaptations used to identify specific relationships). Examples of all of these can be seen in my signature, which is reproduced here as text. I formatted the signature to create the visual effect of an incline, but my visual arrangement was unique; most posters simply built their signatures up over time without regard for visual display:

XDC #10
PDC #19
BLRQ #112
PWCJC #16
'stina's lapdog
Toaster Troupe
Miguel's Stalker
Fandom Dennis
Jane Junkie #13
CharlieX Protector
Deputy Quote Girl
Little Willow Protector
survivor of the Evil Vortex
DISGRUNTLED BRONZER
Geezer Emeratus, Buffytratics
Ramblin Roadmaster of the GRS
Soul Restorer Extraordinaire - Ret.
Amber is a Hottie, and a Goddess!
Official Palm Reader of the Bronze
Superstar Twin (the one on the left)
only LadyJack knows I'm Wonder Woman
Leader of the Roswell Take Over Adventures
I shot the Wookie, but I did not shoot the Deputy
Honorary Member of (and CIA spy on) Buffy. Eh?
bec's kidlet and sislet to Lovely Poet and RobynTSH
Member of the "Look, ma, I've been impersonated!" Club
"I like DarkLady... she praises me the best." -- Jane Espenson. 3/23/00
Founder of FAME: Frustrated AOL Members. If you have AOL, you are one of us.
Founder of Chris and the Cupcakes: The Very UnOfficial Chris Beck Postingboard Fan Club
Dance Partner of CharlieX, Leather Jacket, Erestor, ?, Decay, and Opus, the Bronze Dance King!

Within the signature are nine Bronzer clubs, including Chris and the Cupcakes, dedicated to the show's composer Chris Beck, and FAME, which I founded during a particularly frustrating period using my AOL account (both of these were tongue-in-cheek efforts intended to entertain, not be taken as serious organizations)\(^7\). In addition to the formal clubs there are many informal groups, including those who had been
impersonated by a troll on the Bronze at some point, my "famlet" group through which I was connected to a large number of Bronzers indirectly, the Toaster Troupe, which will be explained later, and my roles as a "stalker" and a "protector" of various other Bronzers. Most of the rest of the signature is made up of private jokes between myself and one or a few people. My signature is fairly representative of the mix that existed of types of participation and interaction, yet it also is rooted in my first few years of being a Bronzer. Over time, "older" participants often stopped bothering with signatures just as they stopped adding names to SO lists because the process grew wearisome or too complicated, except for Fenric, who continued to collect all names of new posters he could find. For comparison to my signature, it is worth examining a post from Psyche, who began posting in the Bronze at roughly the same time as I did. This post is from 1999 and contains both her signature and her Shout-Out List (see Figure 3)
If viewed as a way of cementing identity, it makes sense that after establishing her or himself within the community, a Bronzer would no longer need to work so hard on maintenance of position within the social order by compiling lists of connections with other community members to offer proof of participation and acceptance. Longevity and presence would be enough.

Two long-standing morning traditions sprang up around two particular posters who took it upon themselves to start every day with an invitation for others to participate. ValMichael posted as The Birthday Gnome every morning, identifying any Bronzers who had birthdays that day. He compiled an extensive list as years went by, to the point where often the greetings were for Bronzers who no longer posted. Other Bronzers copied the names from the list and said happy birthday in their own first posts of the day.

Another poster, deadguy, started every morning with deadguy's Question of the Day (QotD) [See Figure 5], which was always an open-ended question related to the
television show. Others answered, using the question as a way to generate "on-topic" discussion in the Bronze. On-topic meant the discussion was about _Buffy_ in some fashion.

**Figure 5**

Deadguy's QotD were an institution on the Coffee Clubber board; the time stamp on the above post shows it was posted at just five seconds after 4 a.m. (West Coast time) or immediately after the Bronze had archived the 12 a.m. to 4 a.m. board. Deadguy's QotD posts were usually the first or one of the first posts on the Coffee Clubber board every day during the work week.

Early on in the board's development, it was communally decided that the Bronze would not be a forum where off-topic conversation was prohibited. This consensus was not reached peacefully or overnight. Bronzers dating back from 1997/1998 refer to this conflict as the Topic Wars, a series of heated arguments where the pros and cons of allowing off-topic discussion were fiercely debated. Many discussions about the nature and future of the Bronze's development occurred over the course of the five year period, but the Topic Wars were an early iteration of this discussion. 'stina recalled her motivations for being involved in the on-topic side,
...we kind of felt the Bronze itself was more for on-topic discussion. We were very aware that everybody out there had e-mail, AIM and ICQ, other communication methods for non-topicky posts and we certainly exercised the non-topicky posts on those methods. And when we came back in there was quite a bit of a discussion about what the purpose of the Bronze was and was it an on-topic discussion board or was it something for more casual conversation. At the time I was very, very adamantly a topic person and I very much felt that the on topic posts were necessary for it to be an inclusive community.

In the end, the sociability of Bronzers meant that off-topic conversation was accepted but efforts such as the Question of the Day were made to introduce subjects related to the television show, to keep the board accessible for newcomers. Had this "War" gone another way, the development of the Bronze would be quite different. Elizabeth Reid, in *Communities in Cyberspace*, discussed the difference between being "disinhibited" and "uninhibited" while discussing the false assumption prevalent in many critiques of online social activity that online forums lack rules of any kind and observed, users experience a redefinition of social inhibitions; they do not experience the annihilation of them. The social environments found on MUDs are not chaotic, or even anarchic. There is indeed no moment in which users are not enmeshed within a web of social rules and expectations (112).

A number of my respondents mentioned that one of the best parts of the community was the ability to "talk about everything under the sun" (*Opus*).
The 8 a.m. – 12 p.m. board generally wound down the Coffee Clubbers as Bronzers on the West Coast arrived to work and settled in for the day. The Bronze was most active during the work hours across the United States, as the majority of Bronzers were in the US, and large numbers of them posted regularly from work (Kendall, 25). A drop off of activity was always witnessed in the late afternoons as people left work for home. A shift then took place. While some of the Coffee Clubbers posted from home as well, a smaller group that only had internet access from home began to appear and take over the evening hours. I was part of this group for much of 1997 and 1998, as my job did not allow for internet access at work. Finally, when the day ended on the West Coast, and the 12 – 4 a.m. board opened, L.O.S.E.R.S. began.

L.O.S.E.R.S. was an acronym invented by one of the show's writers, Ty King, who was an avid poster for some months. The acronym stood for "Lovers Of Sleepless Evening Repartee-athonS". This was the quietest board of the day, so the four-post rule was relaxed. The community supposedly attempted to keep the explicitly adult conversations off the board during the day. In the earliest days of the Bronze, there were a handful of exceptionally young posters, aged between 13 and 15, including Sage, SWMF, and Little Willow. The presence of younger posters and the fostering of community meant there was an effort to keep the board "family friendly," which more or less came to mean that if a poster got too graphic, especially with sexual references, in a post, someone might "shout" (post in all caps) at them, "FAMILY BOARD!" though this objection was often a joke among friends more than a genuine warning. During the L.O.S.E.R.S. board this expectation was relaxed, "Nobody got 'Family Board!'-ed as much," during L.O.S.E.R.S. because fewer young people were present
(godeater). The international flavor of the Bronze's population was another feature of L.O.S.E.R.S.,

It involved being sleepless and talking a lot. People in Australia going about their regular day and people in the US being in the middle of the night; none of the posting limits applied so you could post as much as you wanted. To be a L.O.S.E.R., all you had to do was stay up all night at least once and post so it was very open to anybody (SarahNicole).

L.O.S.E.R.S. eventually became less focused on the night owls, students and small contingent of Australians who were the majority of its early population as the show became popular in Britain, and while L.O.S.E.R.S., started at 12 a.m. in Los Angeles, it was 8 a.m. in the United Kingdom. Still, the overnight board was generally sparsely populated and slow until the early morning hours on the east coast brought a new day and the next Coffee Clubbers board.

The rhythm of the day in the "real" world thus strongly influenced the pacing of online interaction, with the two realms rising and falling in tandem during the day, as well as during the week. Weekend boards were much less structured and, especially during the early period when home internet access was more rare, usually much quieter than weekday boards. In a sense, when Bronzers were home over the weekends, they were breaking from their workweek routines by also breaking from their place of escape from the workweek. The routine encompassed "real life" drudgery as well as the Bronze.
METHODS OF POSTING

The four-post-per-hour rule was intended to prevent spamming. Long before that rule was implemented, however, the norm of the Bronze was to collect multiple responses into one post to conserve bandwidth. Unlike a mailing list, responses did not need to be mailed individually addressed to different people. The sense of shared space in the Bronze was different from the lack of spatial connection on a mailing list. One of the most common ways of describing the board among my respondents was to compare it to a physical wall,

The Bronze is like a large gathering place, kind of like a coffee house, except that it can hold an almost unlimited number of people, and you can’t actually see or hear each other, and you have to bring your own coffee. You communicate by writing messages and "tacking them to the wall" (except the wall is organized by date and time). And you can read any of the messages that anyone else has tacked on the wall and reply to those (Leather Jacket).

Rather than get five different pieces of paper and write up a single response per piece of paper, Bronzers would collect five responses in one post.

The actual act of participating in the Bronze, at least during periods of time when nothing exceptional was happening (i.e. no VIP visits or games), was not necessarily a discrete action but a recurring pattern of actions over the course of a period of time. Most Bronzers had the website open in a window and periodically maximized the window and refreshed the board, then scrolled down to the last post they had already read and read upwards (newest posts appeared at the top of the page). The composition
frame for making new posts was always at the top of the page above the messages; however, many people found it easier to use a text editor such as Notepad to make notes as they scrolled. In this way, a person could collect multiple responses within one post easily. The text was pasted into the appropriate window, posted, and then the person could go back to whatever other task she or he was doing and later return and repeat the process.

Sherry Turkle, in *Life on Screen*, talks about cycling through real life and MUDs by opening and closing Windows (13), introducing the idea of a rhythmic nature to online interaction, although Turkle herself does not pursue this idea. Because the Bronze was just one open window on a desktop, it fit into the structure of the workday (or evening at home for that matter) without interfering with other duties. "Escaping" to the Bronze was periodic, rather than definitive. "The Bronze was the online place to hang out during the day to talk to friends about any subject" (**Cosmic Bob**). "Hanging out" in the Bronze was something that could occur while at the same time Bronzers were legitimately working or doing other things. As noted, the concept of multitasking, which participation in the Bronze is based on, is one that exists outside the real/virtual binary because it allows for a person to be present in both environments at once, sustaining different activities simultaneously, all while remaining one person. In this case, a Bronzer is both at her or his job or home computer, engaging in other tasks, and also socializing with a large network of friends at the same time. **Angelgazer**, one of the rare Bronzers who never had Internet access from home, described the Bronze, "To me it was a place to hang out while I was at work and not busy doing other things."
Within posts themselves, in order to indicate you were addressing another Bronzer, html bold tags were used to highlight the name of the Bronzer you were speaking to. It was also customary to bold all Bronzer names in your post, out of courtesy (my signature, shown previously, and this text in general illustrate this custom). The bold, italic and underline html tags were the most commonly used. Some html tags were not allowed, such as the blink command. Also not in wide use were color tags. Along with the Topic Wars, the so-called Color Wars marked the first year of the Bronze's existence as the group thrashed out how the community was going to function. Nessim Watson described this kind of conflict as "structuration" or "the process by which the structure or rules of the community [are] formed from the continual interaction of individual participants" (in Jones, *Virtual Culture*, 116). Watson also points out that this method of establishing group rules comes from within the functioning members rather than being imposed from the outside. As the earlier discussion of the Topic Wars suggests, Bronzers engaged in a few major and a number of minor "structuration skirmishes" in the process of establishing what constituted the group's rules. The use of the word "war" to describe these conflicts may seem excessive, but as Jan Fernback observed,

> Once controversy arises within the community, emotions are stirred, moralistic rhetoric is employed, the collective personality is asserted, and the controversy revolves no longer around the issue *per se*, but around the integrity and character of a local activity itself. Members of the community must believe in themselves, their collective personality, by downgrading their enemies and asserting who 'they' are (41-42).
Conflicts over use of html codes in the Bronze were in fact conflicts about the community and the community's future, although they appeared to be focused on the behavior of individuals. Additionally, as new generations of members appeared, the process of settling on acceptable norms for group behavior was either repeated or in some cases renegotiated, depending on the circumstances. While some conventions, like the use of the color codes which I am about to discuss, became hard and fast rules, much of the Bronze's social structure and parts of its rule system were always in a state of flux, and of discussion about flux. SarahNicole explained that she was drawn to the Bronze early in 1998 as a scholar when she saw a discussion of the nature of the Bronzer community and debate about what the group should be and how it should govern itself:

After "Phases," [episode from the second season] was the first time they advertised the site on TV. I saw that and thought "I'm gonna get me a hat that says Buffy on it, and I'm gonna get my Dad a t-shirt and make him wear it." ... The first night I went there, I was writing my dissertation and I had been reading a lot of state constitutional conventions, particularly from 1859 Wyandot, KS. And people still laugh at me when I say this but I'm telling you, the night I went to the Bronze, they were already having discussions about who was in, who was out, who was a Bronzer and who wasn't. Some of this was related to the fact that the first PBP, some of it was other stuff that I at the time didn't really understand. The language being used was very similar to these delegates in 19th century Kansas talking about who had the right to be a Kansan, who could be a member,
who could belong to this new community they were purposefully forming.

The Bronze was obviously a little less formal than that, or a lot less
formal than that, but that's what they were doing, they were forming a
community. And that's how I saw it from the beginning.

It would be fallacious to suggest that any group of people that has an argument about
the nature of the group's dynamic and structure qualifies as a community. However, one
of the recurring themes of communities seems to be a self-awareness of the existence of
the group as a unit, and that awareness leads to debate about group identity and
practices. The Bronze, in this way, was no different from any other group struggling
with self-determination and attempting to establish practices or customs to govern the
group in the future.

As previously mentioned, members of the television show's crew interacted with
the fans on the Bronze quite frequently. In addition to Whedon himself, several of the
actors and some of the crew, including Chris Beck, the composer, Todd McIntosh, the
make-up supervisor, and Jeff Pruitt, the stunt coordinator, were semiregular
participants. The show's writers in particular were frequent visitors, partly, no doubt,
because multiple fan clubs had been started in honor of the writers9. All these people
were considered VIPs and their names were protected by the site's code, so that only the
person with the password could use the name. Unsuspecting trolls attempting to
impersonate the VIPs found themselves severely mocked, as the board code addressed
ttempts to use the protected names without the passwords by identifying the false posts
with names such as "Delusions of Grandeur."
The VIPs were also given the color codes to the Bronze, where the ordinary text was first blue and then tan against a black background. In the fall of 1997, a number of Bronzers had figured out the color codes on their own and began to experiment with them. This caused a massive controversy among Bronzers which lasted for days, as people argued about who should be allowed to use color in their posts. Eventually, the consensus came down strongly that even if Bronzers knew the color codes, they should refrain from using them and reserve color posts for VIPs. Posting in color in the beige text was easy to spot, meaning it was be easier to identify VIP posts when scrolling quickly. A few posters consistently refused to acquiesce to the group consensus and some left the board entirely at that point.

From the fall of 1997 until July of 2001, color codes remained solely the province of VIPs (when they could remember how to use them; many of the VIP posters were not highly technically literate and often they forgot codes and passwords, leading to long, draw-out "is this really ____?" discussions). On the last day of the Bronze, July 10, 2001, the color rule was cast aside along with posting limits and nearly every other behavioral restriction that had been established in the previous five years. It was an ironic twist that after five years of ongoing effort and sometimes fierce struggle to enforce the rules which had been determined over many long battles to govern the standards of behavior, the members threw out the very rules they fought to protect. The final archived boards are a chaotic mess of colors, part of Bronzers' collective last act of defiance against the shutdown of their home. They also virtually demolished the board with sledgehammers and shotguns in the spirit of "no one can have this place but us" in a grand virtual theatrical/improvisational play known as a WITT (see Figure 6).
WITT was a form of performance and entertainment that openly engaged in fantasy and play within the context of the online group. Much attention has been paid by scholars to issues of performance and deception in online social spaces and the risk supposedly inherent in trusting a person you cannot see. Again, this is a concern rooted in the real/virtual binary, and in the next chapter I will look at how the Bronze dealt with performance as well as play and the risk for deception.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EVERYDAY

For all that it provided a refuge from work or school or life in general, The Bronze was not a weekend getaway or a vacation spot. The community was not the result of isolated moments or events. Even the face-to-face gatherings, detailed in Chapter Three, while they were integral to the development of the community, did not make up the bedrock of the community. Daily interaction, week after week, for months...
and years, occurring in a virtual environment was the central, shared part of the group that bonded the posters together. The Bronze was a part of every day and the everyday.

The danger of describing the Bronze as integrated into a daily routine is the risk of the experience being devalued precisely because it was so much a part of a regular day. Something that occurs every day is not unique or special; it is mundane and unremarkable. Following such logic, the Bronze was something ordinary and relatively unimportant, but for my respondents, the Bronze was anything but unimportant. Certainly, these people were still so closely tied to the group that they heard about the research and were motivated enough to participate, suggesting a level of self-selection in the respondents. A poster for whom the Bronze was an unremarkable experience would have vanished into the ether of the Internet long ago, likely without leaving traces. Such a person would have little interest in participating in an interview, if she or he could even be found. An untold number of people appeared in the Bronze and either lurked without ever speaking or participated for a short time and then departed. For all my participants, the Bronze was important enough that they wanted to speak about it. I do not believe that the vast numbers who have not remained involved undercut the purpose of my research, as I am making no pretense that the Bronze was representative of the online experience. But if my goal is to discuss the possibilities, to hold the Bronze up as an example of what can occur, the significance of my respondents is that there are many of them who still feel such a deep attachment to the community, years after it closed, and who all discussed at length what they received from the experience of being a Bronzer.
Nearly all of the respondents mentioned their personal relationships with other Bronzers as the most important and most memorable part of their participation in the community. When looking at the community as specifically a fan community that gathered around the central text of the television show, this is a rather singular result. What long-term Bronzers recalled as being important to them was not their relationship with a television show but their relationships with each other.

It was just a place to go. Without the people it wouldn't have been the same. I feel bad that I don’t say the show was the most important part but I don't think it was. I mean talking about it was but the people that you met there and the other discussions you had were more important to me than whether or not the shopkeeper was dead (amberlynne).

Over and over, they told me the friendships that had developed through the community were enormously important to them. Several cited the freedom from geography provided by the Internet,

It was an easy way to meet people who had common interests and you found others, people from all over the country, from all over the world that you'd never have met staying in your own house... You didn't realize your best friend lives in Seattle, because how would you have found that person? (loki)

Repeatedly they spoke about finding friends they "never would have met otherwise" (amberlynne) from different backgrounds and in some cases different countries, who for reasons of class or social status or other interests they would never have encountered in a social setting (godeater).
Unbelievable people, just the ability, the creativity, the intelligence. The ability of people to make you think. People of so many diverse backgrounds. People you would never ordinarily consider because of your social status or where you live or how you live or what time of the day you get up, just all sorts of reasons you would never talk to somebody.

You're talking to people because a lot of the constraints of being a person are taken away. You just talk to somebody because what they had to say was interesting and you want to follow up or you want to tell them they're full of shit or you want to tell them that yeah, they're going in the right direction, but this kind of negates that, or you want to pull out graphs and charts and say, I'm right and you're wrong! But the people are just unbelievable and they keep you wanting to come back ('stina).

When they spoke of "meeting" people, it is worth noting, Bronzers were not referring only to face-to-face meetings. The idea of "meeting" or "knowing" people from the Bronze is all-encompassing, meaning spending time conversing in the virtual environment for certain and possibly having a face-to-face encounter at some point in addition to regular online contact.

The sense of comfort was another aspect of the relationships which recurred in many interviews, with several people describing the Bronze as "home" (amberlynne, OzLady and Psyche to name three) and many of them invoking comparisons to extended families, such as LadyJack, who suggested that a "family" would be there to offer support in less-than-ideal times,
It felt like a family to me. You had your crazy parts of the family you weren't sure you wanted to admit a relationship to, and then you had some really cool people. It was a place where you met all these people and then people started traveling around and being like, "Hey, I'm gonna be in this state!" and you met all these people. It was such a great atmosphere and I think it saved a lot of our lives being able to go somewhere that someone could understand that you haven't been able to sleep for two days and you're up screaming and crying and life just sucks and you just want to rant and rant and rant.

When recalling her move from Boston to Los Angeles and her welcome by the Bronzers in her new city, Allyson described it as, "a nailed-together family." Willa also invoked the same relationship when talking about moving to a new place, "It was like instant family. Someone to tell you where the grocery store was, and what neighborhoods to avoid. We already had a support structure." While this sense of closeness should in no way be taken to suggest that conflicts did not exist, some of them very deep, or that all Bronzers were quite this intimate with each other, the repetition of the home and family themes suggests a deep emotional tie to the community that had a strong effect on the participants.

Nowhere are the powerful emotions evidenced more strongly than when my interviewees discussed the closing of the Bronze. When Buffy changed to the UPN network and the Bronze was closed, in July of 2001, "that just killed the whole thing" (AKABecker). Though I mentioned the anarchic spirit of the final day, when all the rules were tossed aside, on the actual day of the website's closure, the future was
uncertain. Bronzers were at the time lobbying certain people at the production company and UPN regarding the website the new network promised to create for the show. Joss Whedon posted to the community with the explicit promise, "There will always be a Bronze." The closure of the website, in other words, was not understood to be the end of the community at the time. In certain respects, though the board closed down, the community survived, as evidenced by the continuing social contacts and the fact that the Posting Board Parties persisted after the closure of the actual posting board. However, the official community was finished as of July of 2001. "Everyone splintered. It's called the great diaspora of Buffy, of the Bronzers," AKABecker recalled. The community never fully reformed around a central gathering place again.

A great deal of bitterness lingers over the closure of the Bronze and the utter failure of the new UPN website, which failed to support the community so badly that virtually no "original" Bronzers used the website for more than a few weeks.

It was the end, and it was an unfortunate end and I still feel betrayed by that. I still feel like… and I think a lot of people would say well, you really have no right to feel betrayed. You're using them, they're using you, they're giving you a posting board to make you a better fan, you're watching their show. But there were some promises from people in important positions that they'd keep this website up and running until the end of the summer and they didn't... And we never had a place to go after that, and the dissolution of that Bronze, it's hard. It's a drag to think about it. It's people who I miss, who I'm not sure how to get, well I'm pretty sure I can get back in touch with most of them, if not all of them, but the
dynamic that's created when you have a bunch of people in the same room? I don't know how to get that back. And I want it back. I mean there's a reason we have parties instead of calling each other on the phone, you know, one at a time and say I'm drinking a lot of beer, woo hoo! and I'm listening to music in the background! There's a reason we all do this in the same place at the same time. I miss that. (Jaan Quidaam).

Several respondents expressed anger specifically at Whedon for failure to keep his promise, such as RTBS, "I was disappointed in some people and I'll come right out and say it, in Joss, who promised things would stay the same even though they were going to another network and that promise wasn't kept. I think if anyone had the power to keep that promise it was Joss." Allyson spoke of the feelings of resentment for the producers and production company, "Mutant Enemy didn't care enough about the fandom who had supported the show to provide them with a message board." Many of the members of the Bronzer community felt they had been integral in helping support the show for five seasons, including the early period when the show was largely unknown, leading to a personal sense of bitterness over the closing of the Bronze. When combined with the loyalty that logically binds people who considered this community as home and family, the vehemence of their anger regarding the closure of the virtual space makes sense.

Going further, I want to suggest that the routine nature of the Bronze, the "everydayness" of participation, is perhaps another, less acknowledged, factor in the emotional response to the loss of the community. Integration into the everyday may have made the effect the community had on individuals stronger, especially considering
the length of the life of the community. Consequently, the attachment of the participants to their online "home" perhaps made the grief when the community was closed more intense – something that had been routine and familiar and comforting was removed. Again, the Bronze is not a representative situation, and I will not propose that all or even most online groups have this same impact on members. Unlike a more fleeting experience with a social group, or an online forum, many Bronzers were long-term participants in a community that had, in relative terms, a long life of five straight years. RTBS posted in the Bronze on the very first day it opened in 1997. AKABecker, 'stina, Leather Jacket, Cate, Cosmic Bob, MCat, EverDawn, godeater and Psyche, as well as myself, all began posting during 1997, meaning ten of my 28 respondents had been involved with the community for seven years by the time they were interviewed and had maintained enough contact with the group to become involved with the research. Certainly, so many years of emotional involvement is a primary factor in the feelings of loss and anger that were in evidence when speaking about the Bronze, and the attachment to this particular community was doubtless a bigger motivator than simple habit. However, it remains possible that the sense of identification and comfort was partly inspired by the routine nature and sense of constancy provided by the online group.

One aspect of online communities that has been sadly overlooked by academics is the question of time, particularly length of involvement or even length of life for the online group. Because the Bronze had been closed for two years when I began to conduct interviews, my respondents had the advantage of considering their experience as a whole. I will not speculate how their comments would have differed had I been
interviewing them within two years of the start of the community, but I assume that their perceptions may have been quite altered over that time. Research into online groups needs to pay more attention to temporal considerations when dealing with involvement in an online group, because if the results of my research from the Bronze cannot be generalized to apply to other formats such as chat rooms and mailing lists, research results from a group that only exists for a few months even on a bulletin board system also cannot be generalized to apply to a community as long-lived as the Bronze. Lisa Nakamura, in her landmark book *Cybertypes*, spoke about "identity tourism" in terms of people masquerading as a member of another race or gender while online. The field is already slightly overcrowded with new terminology, but it is worth considering the idea of "tourism" on the Internet versus the concept of a "resident" of an online group. A resident implies a long-term commitment to a place, a more considered and intense involvement than a simple tourist will feel. At the risk of introducing another binary (tourist/resident), which is not my intention, I do maintain that length of time is as important a consideration as elements like the format of the forum, the purpose of the forum, and the population that inhabits the forum when doing research. Identity tourism and the idea of performance of identity, and masquerade, feature heavily in Chapter Five.

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1 The McLaughlin, Osborn and Smith study catalogued the rules for Usenet, which is not a mailing list but a news group, which operates slightly differently than e-mail lists. However, the Usenet FAQ remains the most often-cited example of "netiquette."
2 See Elizabeth Reid for an example of discussion of social rules online being different but still existing.
3 Wellman (1999) and others have discussed the concept of "free riding" (gaining the benefits of a group or society without contributing) with regard to lurking. One of the continuing problems for scholars dealing with online spaces is how to deal with the presence of lurkers. Because they do not speak, there is no record of their reactions or opinions on the visible part of the group. Also they can be difficult to locate, let alone interview, because of the very nature of their involvement.
This same technique is sometimes used in e-mail as well, however, not all people allow HTML tags in their e-mail, so it is more common to witness the use of asterisks, brackets or lines being used to mark off part of the text to connote action, i.e. "sits down on the couch and sighs" (because the e-mail is from me, I do not need to identify who is sitting down).

Godeater when invoking the party metaphor, observed, "Party makes it sound exciting but I've been to some really boring parties and the Bronze could be really boring at times."

In a MUD or MOO, an object like the Fount of Employment would actually become part of the site's code, where in the Bronze such objects existed solely within the imaginations of the users.

The other formal clubs are Buffy, Eh?, the Buffyatrics, Jane's Junkies (for fans of the writer Jane Espenson), the XDC (Xander Dance Club), PDC (Professional Dream Chasers), BRLQ (Buffy Real-Life Quoters) and PWCJC (People Who Crave Jonathan Cameos – a fan club for guest actor Danny Strong).

Sherry Turkle made reference in 1984 to "lusers" – a nickname for M.I.T. computer users in possession of a log in for the university's computer network. There was never an indication from Ty King or any other Bronzer that they had heard of this nickname, or that it might have influenced the creation of the Bronze L.O.S.E.R.S.

While I have not made a formal study, the intense affection for the writing staff of Buffy within the Bronze community seems to me to be extremely rare, even within television fandoms known for deep devotion to detail. The heavy emphasis in the Bronze on good writing and the willingness of Bronzers to play with language may have been a factor in the development of fan clubs for the show's writers.
CHAPTER FIVE – CONFRONTING DECEPTION AND POLICING BEHAVIOR

CONTAINING RISK ONLINE: EMOTICONS AND THE SUPPOSED ABSENCE OF CONTEXT

If there is an obsession within media coverage of online social spaces, it is the supposedly inherent risk of deception in all virtual environments. Mass media outlets have produced a number of scare segments about Internet deception as well as the very real threat of identity theft and fraud. These two issues are not synonymous; identity theft involves a specific type of crime where a person's information is used for illegal gains. Deception in a virtual arena can sometimes lead to crime, such as pedophiles using websites to seek out underage victims, cases which may or may not involve face-to-face contact. But the fear of being deceived by an online friend is more pervasive than the limited statistics of actual criminal activity involving identity deception might suggest. Researchers harp on the differences between textual interaction online and face-to-face contact by reminding us that, "Exclusively textual communication precludes certain conversational cues that allow nuanced expression in face-to-face encounters" to cite Kendall's example (112). The lack of visual and auditory cues in online social activity is presented over and over as being a crucial and determining factor in why online interaction is inherently less reliable and more dangerous – and especially "less real" – than face-to-face activity. The emphasis on lack of the usual face-to-face information also points back to the difficulties of applying existing theory regarding interpersonal communication to online interaction.
When the limiting factors of virtual interaction are mentioned, most scholars insert an almost obligatory reference to "emoticons," or paralingual elements used online to convey some of the cues that would be present face-to-face. Facial expressions are re-created by using keyboard characters such as the colon and a parenthetical mark: :) and :( indicate moods in a shortcut fashion. Emoticons can be used to convey an entire message or to reinforce meaning if the writer is unsure her or his tone is clear. These tools are almost always cited as a way for Internet users to make up for the lack inherent in textual communication. The underlying assumption is that words alone are not sufficient for conveying thoughts and feelings in social discourse with others in a virtual environment, though I have noticed no broader attack on the written word for being inadequate to convey thoughts and feelings in any other form in which it is used. It would certainly be a surprise to most professors of literature to discover that words are inherently insufficient and require a sad emoticon to explain Anna Karenina's feelings before throwing herself in front of a train :( . Joking aside, this criticism is centered on interactive channels and serves to underscore the deeply embedded perception that virtual interaction is automatically less real because of the lack of face-to-face contact. I have already addressed the misguidedness of this assumption at length. If people are behind all social interaction in any channel, it is foolish to dismiss any single channel as being "not real" because it occurs in a mediated environment. The effects of the interaction are genuine enough, or can be, regardless of the communication channel. I do, however, understand the source of the impulse behind the repetition of the litany of differences between face-to-face and virtual interaction. Researchers are operating blind in some ways when dealing with computer-supported
social interaction because no other template for this type of mediated interaction exists against which to compare online social activity.

Without any other form to use as comparison, researchers of online interaction seeking referents must fall back on one-to-one interaction as it occurs face-to-face. The constant references to emoticons are a marker of the struggle by scholars to adapt what they know of interpersonal communication between people to a virtual environment. But in the absence of supporting information, such as discussing how a receiver interprets tone of voice or facial expressions, possibly researchers are unsure how to proceed when their only data available are transcripts of words typed onto computer screens. With no other evidence to add to an empirical study, it becomes difficult to conduct traditional analysis into interpersonal communications online. Also, because there appears to be no more depth than just those words, it becomes seductively easy to dismiss these interactions as being shallow, transient or casual. This is reminiscent of the assumption that because online communities are easy to join and leave, the actual act of joining or leaving is similarly easy. To assume that because online interaction is just words typed on a machine – words that need to be supported by graphical inserts to convey any meaning at all – the interaction itself is also weightless proceeds along the same fallacious reasoning. What is absent from this approach is context. A straightforward examination of the online space, the "tip of the iceberg" as it were, will miss the supporting information that can illuminate the words from the screen. In this view, ethnographic study of online communities is absolutely crucial to furthering our understanding of how online social groups function. Without the depth and detail produced by deep immersion in a group that is produced by ethnography, we are
hamstrung in our ability to see what deeper currents are at work shaping the visible online discourse for any particular group. Without context, without depth or understanding of what is shaping the group, the risk of misinterpreting words on a screen lends itself easily to the fear of deception.

However, when scholars or media pundits talk about the risk of being deceived online, they are not referring to a conversation between two people where the meaning of the words is unclear. Deception means being completely misinformed about the person on the other end of the conversation – the corporeal human being responsible for the words being typed on the screen. Our inability to verify with our own senses that the person we are conversing with is in fact a brunette as she or he claims is the great risk of virtual social activity. Pictures are no guarantee either, as there is still no way of proving the picture received is of the person with whom we are interacting. This lack of evidence is the root of fears about deception and mistrust online and it ties directly to the real/virtual split. Interacting with someone virtually leaves us unable to assemble our own empirical data regarding the person, a lack of rational proof that strikes at the heart of our Western post-Enlightenment values of empiricism. As previously discussed, the ability to evaluate and test and prove with reason is highly prized in our culture, and social activity that occurs in a space beyond that capacity brings up fears of the unknown and unknowable and leads to the fear of being manipulated by a stranger who may or may not be what she or he claims.

Deception involving gender masquerade has been a frequent subject of Internet scholars, especially for feminist researchers and those in the field of performance studies, such as Sunden, or Lisa Nakamura. The prospect of talking to someone online
who claims to be female but is in fact male is often cited as a major concern, especially in research dealing with online venues used for romantic or sexual purposes. This kind of deception, one that explicitly conceals who a person is in "real life" and creates a false persona, is a strong example of the way in which offline, corporeal concerns feed back onto online interaction. Deception regarding offline gender relates not to behavior within the virtual realm but inconsistency between the persona and the person doing the typing to bring that persona into existence.

An interesting conclusion can be reached if we look for a moment at the idea of "risk of deception" playing out in online social spaces. As I mentioned at the start of the chapter, there is a danger online of becoming a victim of a crime. Identity theft is a genuine threat that requires any savvy Internet user to be careful regarding passwords and releasing personal information. Also, violent criminals such as pedophiles or sexual predators have used the Internet to seek out victims. Both of these examples are legitimate dangers of using the Internet but, perhaps because these are considered crimes equivalent with crimes that occur outside of the Internet, neither of these areas of risk are a major focus for academic researchers. What is focused on, almost exclusively is the risk of being deceived regarding the "true" nature of the person on the other end of the conversation. The great risk emphasized in discussions about the potential for identity masquerade is of being deceived – not a risk of physical harm, or financial loss. Yet the results of identity masquerade, despite being almost wholly non-corporeal, are presented as being serious. It stands to reason, then, if there is a risk of a negative consequence to interacting socially with another person online, the converse must be true. If something bad that might happen is "real," then this means that the
potential for positive results is just as real as the risk of negative ones. Once again, the logic that holds that any social activity online cannot be "real" falls apart when examined closely.

Deception does occur, and I do not deny this fact. In fact, I will recount two cases of identity deception from the Bronze which illustrate the potential consequences for the overall trust and health of a group when a member is caught out in lies regarding her or his offline life. The ability to play with one's identity online has long been a widely discussed feature of virtual social involvement. Tied into postmodern ideas of multiplicity of the fractured self in the postmodern world, the ability to morph one's self into different personae online is a heavily analyzed area of online activity. "The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create," as Turkle observed in 1995. Deception regarding offline truths is intimately tied to the idea of identity play for obvious reasons; if the Internet is treated as a giant field where anything goes and you can be anyone you want, regardless of who you are offline, a place where playing with your identity is normal, then of course the risk of deception skyrockets. Some scholars look upon identity play online as a beneficial element, while others focus on the risk factors for Internet users. As I am not a psychologist or a sociologist, I will leave the debate regarding the relative health of identity play to the experts.

But identity play is an issue that must be addressed by any study of any online group, and as with deconstructing the real/virtual binary and with the idea of multiple communications channels, I believe the answer is lies first in complicating our
understanding of the way online social groups function. I have repeatedly stated that online forums cannot be easily compared. Different forums have different purposes and operate in unique ways that prevent their direct comparison. Additionally, when we look at the risk of deception and the presence of identity play in an online group, we must look at what the expectations of the group are. As with analysis of the text on the screen, we need to contextualize the performance of self that goes on in virtual social spaces for each unique group, rather than assuming all groups accept all forms of identity play. Each social group online has its own set of rules regarding what is acceptable behavior. Nancy Baym wrote, "The social context of an online community is perhaps the single most important influence on the identities constructed within it" (157). Some groups demand honesty at all times; some groups may accept that identity deception is a fact of existence and not prohibit such behavior.

Beyond looking at the complex social formations within a group, we also need a more nuanced approach to the performance of self in online social spaces. The tendency on the part of critics is to write about online personae as being completely fabricated all the time. Online social interaction is presented as a murky, lawless space where you can never be sure of anything about the person you are talking to. Because users can hide behind aliases and avatars that reveal only what they choose to reveal, the sense the critics give is that trust is impossible to build in online social spaces where interaction takes place anonymously.

Judith Donath makes a valuable point that Internet researchers need to start distinguishing between anonymity and "pseudonymity" when discussing the performance of identity online:
In the virtual world, many degrees of identification are possible. Full anonymity is one extreme of the continuum that runs from the totally anonymous to the thoroughly named. A pseudonym, though it may be untraceable to a real-world person, may have a well-established reputation in the virtual domain; a pseudonymous message may thus come with a wealth of contextual information about the sender. A purely anonymous message, on the other hand, stands alone (Donath, in *Communities in Cyberspace*, 53).

Within the Bronze it was generally accepted that while people might joke and play around with elements of fantasy, information shared about oneself was true. The consistency of a Bronzer was taken as the mark of her or his "real" identity as well as a sign of trustworthiness, even when posting under a pseudonym. Kendall notes "people expect consistency of identity in others and may need such consistency in order to build trust" (113). Because people posted every day, for weeks and months, and because of the aforementioned format of the board exposing members to each other to at least a small degree, there was an expectation of honesty among Bronzers, created by consistency over long periods of time. The same person, posting under the same name, earns trust regardless of the fact that their online identity may or may not be related to their given name offline. Again, expectations of behavior and community norms are far more important in the development of trust than the question of "Is that your real name?"
EXPECTATIONS OF HONESTY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL SELF

Within the Bronze, the use of pseudonyms was obviously acceptable, though some people chose to use real names, or nicknames. Posters were not likely to use their full legal names to identify themselves, of course, for security reasons. Despite the easy acceptance of online handles like "DarkLady" or "godeater," it is a mistake to assume that the Bronze did not have a strong expectation of honesty because it allowed for creative naming. The Bronze was a public forum, with unknown numbers of lurkers, and not giving out detailed personal information, such as full names, addresses or phone numbers, was more a matter of common sense safety than secrecy. Ironically, a few of my respondents spoke of the Bronze being the only place they could be honest about themselves. "It was a place where you could be yourself, or what you wanted to be. If you couldn't be yourself, in real life, because of the life you lived, you can do it online," godeater explained, summing up the freedom from constraint often associated with the fluidity of online forums. OzLady contrasted the Bronze to the rest of her offline life,

More so than a lot of other places in my life, I can be all aspects of myself. I can be... smart OzLady, I can be flirtatious OzLady, I can be bitchy OzLady. Really be more of myself, especially in person, because it's not such a narrow group of people. Not that my friends are narrow. I know them through specific ways, from work or from school or from temple. There's a freedom that comes from all these people coming from such diverse backgrounds that means you can explore different parts of yourself. That's very freeing.
What is interesting to note is that both of these quotations speak to the idea of freedom being equated with honesty, rather than the risk of being deceived.

Performance and identity play have different degrees, which further complicates any attempts at generalizing online behavior. A virtual social space where completely fictional avatars are created for the user, such as a role-playing MUD, may involve performance as an inherent part of participation. In such a space, while person-to-person contact between users may reveal details of the user's offline life, the group overall may never know any information about the user other than the avatar. A mailing list, like the one Baym studied, or even the "BlueSky" MUD Kendall chronicled, where people's offline professions and lives, as well as names, were known if not exactly publicized, may demand disclosure of offline information as a way of validating participation.

Some newcomers to the Net appreciate the freedom of online anonymity and mistakenly believe this to be one of the main features of all social groups on the net. BlueSky's insistence on immediate identification may be startling to such people, while the reluctance of newcomers to identify themselves further irritates BlueSky regulars. BlueSky may differ from other groups in its attitude toward anonymity. However, other descriptions of relatively stable social groups on MUDs have reported that people in such groups also have an interest in the offline identities of other participants [Allen 1996a; Cherny 1999; Rheingold 1993] (Kendall, 135).

In Kendall or Baym's chosen groups, deception involves misleading other users regarding one's offline pursuits. In a role-playing group, the avatar of the user which
has no connection to offline life is not considered a deception. In other words, the creation of an online identity is not by itself an act of deception. The context in which that identity is created determines whether the user is deceiving others or not. The community did not consider mild identity play, such as posting names, to be deceptive. The Bronzer community, in fact, encouraged and rewarded creativity with prestige and attention.

As Kendall and others have noted regarding MUDs, some are spaces intended for role-playing games whereas others are more geared towards social interaction without the explicit adoption of roles (Kendall, 122). The Bronze, despite the presence of play activities and the capacity online to be whatever you want because "nobody knows you’re a dog," (Steiner) was a social environment where there was an implicit understanding that participating did not mean performing a false identity. As mentioned, Bronzers played around with aspects of their personalities but generally did not invent fantastic alternate selves they "played" or consciously performed online that bore no relation to their offline lives. "People don't generally make up enormous stories about themselves and what they do," in Allyson's words (emphasis original). Flagrant lying about one's self was frowned upon and the line maintained between identity play and more creative types of play in the Bronze. The community norms held that even pseudonymous posters, if they adhered to expectations, were considered trusted members of the group. Because of the development of trust, trust became extended to newcomers who appeared to be conforming to the community norms (posting under the same name, observing posting limits and not attempting to hack the board's code, and especially contributing to the discourse – entertainment provided status both as part of
play and also as part of discussion), and in at least one case the extension of this trust proved gravely misplaced.

PENLIND

This implicit belief in the honesty of other Bronzers received a shock when a woman named Penlind was exposed as perpetrating a fraud on the community, something one of my respondents recalled as "emotionally, a very intense experience" (Slayerdaddy). Penlind had been posting for several months, and in Allyson's words, "I liked reading her. She was funny. She had a lot of interesting things to say about the show." Penlind's daughter, Cairo, then appeared on the Bronze, supposedly under her mother's supervision. Cairo was upset because she had been playing with her friends that they were vampire slayers and one of her friends told her she could not be a slayer because she was black. Eager to reassure what they thought was a distressed nine-year-old girl, the community rushed to provide evidence that Cairo's friends were wrong. "It doesn't sound believable [now], but it was in context with a lot of believable things," Allyson recalled.

Probably emboldened by this event, Penlind began to discuss her son's heart problems, for which he supposedly needed surgery. Penlind's life story became more detailed and more outlandish, including references to her husband, who was an archaeologist, working at the Sphinx in Egypt. By this time, several Bronzers (all of whom happened to be female) were becoming suspicious of Penlind's history and quietly began to investigate her claims. "The thing about the Bronze that Penlind didn't count on, we have doctors, nurses, lawyers, professors, and all of them knew something
was wrong" Allyson said of the group. "We dove into this woman's background and found that this was not the first time she had fabricated such things," Monique, one of the women who helped with the investigation, reported. The group discovered that Penlind was a former library worker who had been fired from a university library for stealing computers. Former colleagues reported that she had previously fabricated these kinds of wild stories. "Once we had proof, we had to decide which of us was going to tell everyone. We took the sweetest one, the one who had no problems with anyone" (Allyson). The results of their investigation were posted in the Bronze by Margot le Faye, one of the "oldest" and therefore most respected and well-liked Bronzers still participating at the time. MARGOT QUOTE

While many people expressed relief that someone had checked on this woman's claims, a small portion of the community was furious and refused to believe the allegations, not wanting to give up on the fantasy. "People were wrapped up in this story" (Allyson). Polgara observed about the reaction to Penlind's deception, "People had come to accept the Bronze as real. The show was the fake stuff. The characters were fake and the actors were real. The show was fake and the Bronze was real. And someone came along and showed that the Bronze wasn't real." The presumption of honesty that Bronzers had operated under since an earlier incident where a person caught deceiving the community was expelled (a case which I will discuss in detail shortly) had been disturbed, deeply. But the tendency of Bronzers to band together, while it made them vulnerable to Penlind's emotional manipulations, was also what ended up exposing the fraud, and the community drew together again to console each other with the conviction that as a group they "could behave well even to someone even
who was behaving badly towards them" (Slayerdaddy). Monique summed up the experience, "I thought it was neat that we all kind of came together and threw down, you know? We may not love each other... but this is family." Penlind disappeared after the revelation in a fit of supposed hurt and betrayal, essentially confirming that the allegations were true. The experience was considered a painful upset to the normal routines of the community, but the community drew itself together and survived. Other, less dramatic examples of posters lying about their offline activities occurred over the course of the five years of the Bronze's history, but most of those cases were of lesser known members or claims that were far less outrageous than Penlind's.

Interestingly, while several members of my respondent pool recalled either Penlind's case or smaller scale instances of deception, every single one of them mentioned (though some only in passing) the ways in which the Bronze encouraged creative play. A separate class of "make believe" behavior existed in the Bronze that allowed Bronzers to pretend, to tell stories and generally entertain one another that was not considered identity play or deception, and could be indulged in freely without any sense of risk.

IDENTITY PLAY VERSUS CREATIVE PLAY: WITT

As previously mentioned, the Bronze adopted a convention that physical action could be described and understood by using the html italics tags within a post.

It was another opportunity for everyone to define their own environment. Everyone would have a common goal or starting point, the general idea of what was happening, and would build around that. And it was all just
using descriptive language. And there were some people who were very, very good at it, who could really put themselves and other people into their story and make it work and make it work fairly seamlessly with what a totally different person had started with (shehawken).

In addition to posting Shout-Out lists and signatures first thing in the morning, some people "entered" the Bronze every day by describing in italic text how they entered their virtual meeting place (see Graphic 1 and 2), or took action during the course of the day to liven up their posts. While much of this kind of activity was a single person "performing" (in a general sense) within her or his own posts, just as Bronzers carried on conversations with each other via the message board, they discovered they could play together within italics text and create longer running stories with multiple participants,

I wrote a little descriptive like "**LadyJack walks into the Bronze and walks over the to bar and asks for a beer and notices there's a wedding going on.**" It was almost like writing a story but you were writing it for people who were right here. At this point, it's a series, a whole bunch of people writing a story and that allows for the unexpected element, and for things to get crazy and more descriptive because everyone sees it from a different point of view (**LadyJack**).

Such imaginative play is a repeated feature in social forums online, though not as common in more information-oriented groups (again, see Bakardjieva). This kind of creative performance should not be confused with identity play, which is a specific phenomenon of masquerading as someone of a different gender or personality type as
part of the regular online persona. The imaginative work I am describing here was understood to be a performance within the online forum with all identities (pseudonymous but constant) remaining stable, not performance as constant presentation of self – something like a play within a play. The purpose was not to play with your identity itself but to play as that identity. Such performance was not considered deceptive or harmful in the Bronze. Baym noted similar imaginative performance plays within a mailing list and also recognized that members who exhibited skill in this type of performance gained social capital. The ability to entertain and amuse other members granted elevated status to the person for their abilities (159-162). People who were avid participants in creative play in the Bronze were similarly rewarded.

This kind of action description and play within the Bronze became known as WITT, which stood for Whedon Improvisational Theater Troupe, or "italics theater." Most WITTs were small, one-person or one-post undertakings, including entrances and exits. A poster named Cate coined the shortest and most replicated WITT as her exit from the Bronze, posting the word *poof* at the end of her posts to indicate she was leaving. *poof*ing became the most widespread method of departing the Bronze. Other times, a single WITT adventure could encompass the entire board and be carried on for days with dozens of posters participating.

One such WITT became known as the "RTBS Soul Restoration Project," a three-day affair that took place in January of 2001. Based on a long-standing joke involving the well-liked poster RTBS (a Bronzer who had been posting on the board since the very first day, in 1997) and his vehement dislike of the pop singer Britney Spears,
dozens of Bronzers (myself included) became involved in attempting to "rescue" RTBS from suddenly worshipping Spears by restoring his obviously removed soul. RTBS recalled the Project as a "lark" that he still reads when he is having a bad day.

Talk about something that got out of hand real fast... I was going through a lousy time at work and I decided to be a jerk one day and what better way than by saying I now liked Britney. I had people e-mailing me to ask what was wrong... Everybody ended up being involved in this thing...

Some communities have festivals, we had this. It was our way of coming together and having a good time with no real reason for doing it.

The graphic below (Figure 7) is from the first day of this particular WITT, outlining the general purpose of the "Project,"

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**Figure 7**
WITT was part street theater, part "choose your own adventure" style writing, and largely about improvisation (Safarigirl). The bigger WITTs such as this one began with a main goal (the restoration of RTBS, in this case) but tangents were encouraged as more people joined in with their own ideas. Great skill and speed were required in order to keep pace with the contributions of others, which sometimes came simultaneously.

The loosely-constructed rules of WITT held that unless a participant was behaving in a grossly inappropriate way, the other participants could not ignore any contributions (See Appendix I). This could create problems when people with conflicting ideas were attempting to get involved. Group consensus usually sorted out problems of deciding direction for the overall story. Another rule was that the entire WITT could not be ended except by the person who began it or was "in charge" of the story. Other participants contributed to the story without trying to bring it to a close, hence the multiple tangents which allowed for the main action to continue without the risk of compromising the main thread of the story. "You want to further it and have fun with it, but you don't end it," AKABecker explained of joining in with an ongoing WITT.

The Soul Restoration Project and WITTs like it were spontaneous events sparked by one or two people. Games of Charades or Calvinball (a game created by Bill Watterson in the comic strip Calvin & Hobbes, where the only rule was the rules changed constantly with no warnings) sprang up during lulls on the board at random. Shehawken, discussing what he valued the most of his experience with the Bronze, mentioned WITT as part of the comfort factor,

That there was always something going on. You could be there anytime and while you may not know the people who were there at that point,
generally they wouldn't ignore you, unless you were really being stupid. Even if it was dull or there was nothing going on, there weren't a lot of people around, you could usually start something and someone else would always join in with you. You could start playing Calvinball and that would usually start the ball rolling and people would appear out of the woodwork who were there but maybe felt they really didn't have anything to say but now, there's something going on, I can participate in it.

Other WITTs were regular occasions held every year. Narrator oversaw the Annual Thanksgiving Parade, where Bronzers created floats and described watching them parade by. While play and collaborative narrative creation such as WITT are not uncommon in my personal experience, I have found only one scholarly source which has documented a generally accepted practice where the community had a particular name for such play. S. Elizabeth Bird in *The Audience In Everyday Life* discussed an online mailing list for fans of the television program *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Bird described a recurring fantasy-style play within the group known as "Going through the stones" that is remarkably similar to WITT, even though the group Bird is discussing was a mailing list, not a message board. Bird notes that "fantasy can be a collaborative project" in contrast to our usual conception of fantasy being a solitary (or intimate) activity, and in this case is a collaborative project that helped build and sustain connections between a group's members (69).

While WITTs were an important part of the Bronze culture and certainly helped foster a sense of shared space as well as creating memories and experiences that helped bind Bronzers together and establish identities, I wish to note that many Bronzers never
participated in WITTs in any capacity. Even in the middle of the most frenetic play, other conversations continued as if the WITT activity was not occurring. Indeed, it was not uncommon to see people posting their participation in the WITT and carrying on conversations within the same post (See Graphic 1). The distinction was made simply by closing the italics tag and leaving the rest of the post in regular text. This switching from one mode of interaction to another is analogous to Bronzers ability to switch from different communications channels without any sense of dissonance. The ability to pick and choose what to pay attention to is one of the convenient features of online interaction. Ignoring behavior was also part of the community's strategy for dealing with unwanted activity, rule-breaking and invasions by unwelcome outsiders. As with many other online groups, the Bronze had to confront cases of actual deception, times when users openly lied about their offline lives, and in two particular cases users who deceived the community and behaved in a hurtful fashion either towards one person or the group as a whole. Unlike WITT, which was considered an innocuous example of creative entertaining play, when a Bronzer's behavior towards another Bronzer or towards the group became harmful, the community moved to contain and censure the behavior internally.

POLICING BEHAVIOR

During the first year of the Bronze's existence, TV James was an active member of the community and was therefore present to provide a check on unwanted behavior within the Bronze. When management of the website changed to Apollo Interactive, though some Bronzers had contact information for employees at Apollo, none of these
people were as involved in the community as TV James had been. The result was that the community had little recourse when a problem occurred. The official channel of sending an e-mail to an address at Apollo often produced no results. There was no way for the community to bring down any kind of "law" on offenders. It was only through collective action that Bronzers were able to maintain the rules and standards of their community.

Every post contained identifying information underneath the poster's name, including the time stamp as well as the IP address where the message originated. Some of the more technically adept Bronzers had programs that could trace IP addresses to their source; this is akin to dialing *69 on a telephone to locate where an incoming call originated. The ability to check IP numbers helped the community deal with random trolls (anonymous people appearing solely to cause trouble by harassing an online forum) who posted offensive language or spammed the board with unwanted content. Tracing the IP address meant the abuse could be reported not to the Bronze's maintainers but to the company providing the internet access to the person committing the offense. The community's usual strategy for dealing with trolls or unwanted guests was to ignore the behavior, thereby defeating the purpose of the person who is being disruptive in order to get attention, rather like a spoiled child. Bronzers adopted the name of a particular monster from an episode of the show titled "Bad Eggs," a bezoar, for trolls like this and used the slogan, "Ignore the bezoar" when this kind of behavior occurred. Donath sums up the reasons behind the "ignore" response,

Responding to a troll is very tempting, especially since these posts are designed to incite. Yet this is where the troll can cause the most harm, by
diverting the discussion off the newsgroup topic and into a heated argument. Instead most groups advise ignoring such posts, both to keep the discussion topical and in the hope that, if ignored, the troll will go away (Communities in Cyberspace, 48).

Trolls are defined by being outside attackers seeking only to provoke a reaction. Trolls are not "deceivers" in the sense of concealing the truth about their offline selves. As outsiders, they are not expected to behave in that fashion. Strategies for dealing with outsiders disrupting the community were not always appropriate for handling unwanted behavior by actual members of the group. But Bronzers, despite being handicapped by having no official means of redress, searched for ways to fight back against members who proved themselves unfit to participate, as well as against outside forces intent on disturbing or changing the community.

The primary example of a regular member of the community being ostracized was a poster named BigBoy, who had been present in the Bronze from the early months of 1997. One of the more recalcitrant Bronzers from the Color Wars, BigBoy claimed to be a professor at a particular university, and his behavior, while usually somewhat abrasive, had been short of being outright offensive, until one day he flamed (posted a public attack on) another poster named Dreamscape205. She was also a regular from the early days of the Bronze, a female poster who had great affection for David Boreanz, the actor who played the character Angel. BigBoy attacked her in the Bronze on the basis of her love for Boreanz and accused her of liking her fantasy object more than her own husband, among other things. Needless to say, this flaming was deeply
upsetting for **Dreamscape205**. Another poster, **AKABecker**, recalled her reaction with choked emotion,

> Myself and a couple of other people were IMing [Instant Messenger] with her at the time, helping her get through it. She was losing it, crying. She was going to leave the Bronze, leave the Internet... By the end of the day, the board was filled with people begging her not to leave.

**Dreamscape205** was a popular and well-respected poster, unlike **BigBoy**, and the Bronze as a community threw their collective weight behind **Dreamscape** and condemned **BigBoy**'s actions. Having been alerted to this, Ty King, the *Buffy* writer who was deeply involved in the Bronze at the time, researched some of the professional, "real world" claims **BigBoy** had been making and provided evidence that he was not a professor at the university. **BigBoy** disappeared shortly thereafter from the Bronze and, at least to anyone's knowledge, never posted again. "It ended up being one of the first times that everyone came together against someone that was trying to disrupt something. That part of it was the great part, but how he chose to get there, was the worst part" (**AKABecker**).

**BigBoy**'s behavior was what caused the community to reject his presence. At the time the Bronze was still small enough to be able to come to that kind of consensus. Collective action of this sort in response to bad behavior on the part of an established community member became increasingly problematic for the community as time passed and the community grew larger and more fragmented. **BigBoy**'s "crimes," though, were two-fold. His attack on a popular Bronzer was what triggered the response, but he was also found guilty of deception regarding his "real life" activities. Combined, these two
issues were sufficient to cause the community as a whole to reject him. The experience was notable primarily because it was a rejection of another Bronzer, which caused more profound emotional responses than dealing with an anonymous troll.

EXTERNAL ATTACKS

On certain occasions, the community also drew itself together against attacks by anonymous outsiders, one of which occurred in the spring of 2000, during the end of the show's fourth season. At that point in time, *Buffy* was making television history by introducing a same-sex relationship through a major character, Willow. The relationship was built up slowly on the screen and provoked a huge outcry by conservative and religious groups. Unfortunately for Bronzers, it was a known fact that the show's writers and producers monitored the posting board, and conservative church groups told members to go to the Bronze and register their opposition to the introduction of the Willow/Tara relationship. Over several months the Bronze was intermittently besieged by protesters, culminating the night in May when the episode "New Moon Rising" aired, which made the relationship concrete. The entire night the board was flooded with random attacks by outsiders, including vicious personal criticism of Amber Benson, who played the character Tara, while Bronzers attempted to maintain their normal routine. In the midst of the ongoing chaos, Amber Benson read the board and saw the multiple attacks on the show and on her physical appearance in particular, and replied with hurt and anger.

The injuring of one of the actors seemed to galvanize the entire community, although it should be noted that support for the homosexual relationship was not
universal even among well-respected Bronzers. Kenickie, a poster who had become friendly with Benson through off-board contacts, posted a message of support that concluded with the phrase, "Amber is a hottie!" Throughout the rest of the next day and a half, regular posters added this phrase to the end of every post as a way to show that, "these people aren't Bronzers, this is not what the Bronze is about" (Little Willow). The virtual rally gave Bronzers the feeling that they could regain control of their board and helped stifle the attacks.

Beyond online reactions, a poster named Kristen suggested off board sending a toaster to Joss Whedon, Amber Benson and Alyson Hannigan. One of the show's writers, Jane Espenson, had worked on Ellen, the first television show to center on a gay character. In the "coming out" episode of Ellen, a lesbian psychiatrist makes a joke about recruiting enough women to lesbianism to earn a free toaster. Kristen's suggestion was met with great enthusiasm and she collected money from a small group of people who became known as "The Toaster Troupe" and purchased a Williams Sonoma toaster and used the extra funds to have the toaster engraved with the name of the episode and the airdate. The toaster was delivered to the show's offices and later that day Joss Whedon posted his thanks (see Figure 8):
Polgara said that Kristen and some of the other organizers of the Toaster Troupe heard from sources at the show that the toaster remained behind Whedon's desk where it could always be seen until the show ended its run three years later.

The "New Moon Rising" attacks, as they became known, came during a period of time when the board was suffering from multiple problems. The attacks resulted in complications for the gay and bisexual members of the community, both those who had gone public and those who had not. Monique reported that she was told privately by a gay member of the community that the Bronze's usual response to trolls, which was silence, felt in some way like a tacit agreement with the homophobia. When Monique reported this conversation through backchannels to other Bronzers, it resulted in the impromptu "Gay For A Day" rally, where a number of Bronzers, many of whom were straight, addressed the homophobic attackers by simply saying, "I'm gay and I disagree with you" (Polgara). In addition to the struggles with the homophobic attacks, during the month of May that year, Jeff Pruitt, the stunt coordinator, was let go from the show.
In response, he posted a very bizarre "fable" on the Internet and left a link in the Bronze. The fable was a thinly veiled version of infighting and politicking that he alleged was occurring behind the scenes of the series. David Fury, one of the writers, and Joss Whedon both ended up coming into the Bronze to rebut Pruitt's accusations, leading to the show's producer and stunt coordinator "arguing like children in a public internet forum" (Claris). Pruitt had been actively involve with the Bronze for some time, and his firing fueled conflict between Bronzers, some of whom sided with him and some of whom sided with the show's producers. Ultimately, though, the general reaction in the Bronze was to insist that the VIPs take their arguments elsewhere. "We threw them off the board," Claris recalled. "We told them, 'This isn't yours, it's ours. Get out.' It's my least favorite memory but it was also an example of what made us different and what made us a community, instead of a bunch of those scary internet people."

The response to the outside attacks and the VIP infighting show a strong willingness on the part of the group to stand up against outsiders and even members of the show's crew in order to defend the virtual social space against disruption. Events such as the Topic and Color Wars were a different kind of conflict; the Wars were very much internal struggles over the nature of the community. Still, both examples provide evidence of the emotional investment Bronzers had in their community. If the stereotypical vision of online groups as being "easy exit" places held true, the month of May 2000, with multiple serious disturbances, should have resulted in a mass exodus. Certainly some people were driven off by the bad behavior of a few people, either temporarily or otherwise. But were the idea of "you encounter someone you disagree
with, you just leave" a genuine constant of online interaction, Bronzers would have been driven out by the presence of a single troublemaker. Given how many of my respondent pool alone are community members from the first year of the Bronze, it seems that, as I argued, just because it was technically easy to leave the community does not mean it was actually easy to simply walk away. Instead of running when something difficult occurred, Bronzers stayed and fought for their online home.

THE EXCEPTIONAL CASE

Attacks from trolls or other outside sources were relatively easy for the Bronze as a whole to address. An outsider was not a Bronzer, and ignoring the activity or identifying it as being the actions of an outsider was usually sufficient to condemn the person. **Bigboy** and **Penlind** were ostracized from the community on the basis of having deceived fellow Bronzers about their "real" lives, after their behavior called them to the attention of the community. These examples are relatively clear-cut, but one of the difficulties with the focus on deception as a primary risk is that it ignores people who do not lie or deceive or even operate under a clearly performed identity but whose behavior becomes unacceptable to the community. How can a group remove a member who has not broken faith to the extent of deception but whose behavior towards other members is hurtful? This issue becomes particularly problematic when the questionable person retains allies within the community.

**Meteor** was an extremely "old" Bronzer in terms of length of time he had participated in the Bronze. A young man in his early 20s, he was in the New Zealand Navy when he first began posting in 1997. His behavior towards the women in the
Bronze was always highly flirtatious. **KitCat** recalled his activity in the chat room as being "harmless and sleazy" in the earlier days of the Bronze. He was not the only person who had difficulty with social skills, and as such he was not considered threatening so much as mildly annoying. He retained a fairly large group of friends through the Posting Board Party in 1999, when he traveled to Los Angeles and began meeting people face-to-face. During that period of time, however, he gained a reputation for flirting heavily with underaged girls in the Bronze, which was the beginning of the community becoming concerned about his behavior. As previously mentioned, there were distinct attempts to keep the posting board nominally family-friendly due to the younger posters who were long-time members of the group. **Meteor** also ran into difficulties with the Posting Board Party Committee the following year, after he allegedly checked himself and his four female roommates, all of whom were in their teens, out of the hotel where the party attendees were all staying, resulting in one of the girl's parents contacting the committee in a panic. Eventually he began to break some of the more serious online rules, including posting private e-mails on the Internet without permission and flaming other Bronzers within the Bronze itself. **Meteor** was also accused of spreading unpleasant rumors about other Bronzers, especially several people connected with the PBP Committee. **OzLady**, one of the victims of such rumor-mongering, recalled **Meteor** as "just so vicious and sick." He was particularly vindictive against people who had been his friends and withdrew from him as his behavior grew more objectionable. **Polgara**, who had been one of his friends, recalled vividly that **Meteor** had attacked her within a post in the Bronze,
We had been friends. We met at PBP99 but through the years he had proved himself to be... not a nice person, manipulative. The kind of person you warn children about before going on the internet. He's the one the horror stories are about. I told him to leave me alone and he sort of casually called me an alcoholic, which was completely untrue. The thing is, the Bronze is made up of at least a thousand people and I don't know all of them. All my friends came to the board and beat the hell out of him [virtually].

Bronzers began to fight with him on the board to defend their friends, resulting in flame wars that extended for hours and sometimes days at a time. Despite the fighting, Meteor remained a presence in the Bronze through the end of the posting board.

If BigBoy was driven out of the Bronze for flaming one person, why was Meteor never expelled? No definitive answer is available for that question. Partly his continued participation was the result of the community having no official way to prevent him from posting. Without support from the actual people responsible for running the board (creating the code and maintaining the servers), there was no way to keep anyone from posting other than group pressure. When BigBoy had been condemned, the community was much smaller. The reaction against Bigboy's attack had been nearly universal. Meteor constantly acquired new allies, even as he kept losing older ones, by charming new posters and allegedly telling them stories that cast himself as a heroic, persecuted figure within the Bronze where the more popular members were conspiring to hurt him. Time and again these new allies learned of his documented behavior and witnessed his actions and turned against him, but with new posters constantly arriving in the Bronze,
the cycle continued. While a number of my respondents mentioned Meteor in relation to some of their worst memories of the Bronze, he was never summarily expelled from the community.

Meteor never physically hurt another Bronzer, as far as anyone knows. Neither did Bigboy, or Penlind. The damage they inflicted was emotional. While issues of fraud could be brought into what Bigboy and Penlind did, since there was no economic or monetary aspect of their transgression, their behavior does not constitute a criminal act. Yes, deception was the key to Bigboy and Penlind, but it was the hurtful actions all three of these people took that galvanized others to react in opposition. The fear of being hurt, not physically, because of the heavy mediation occurring within the virtual social space that provided protection (if sought) from too-intimate contact, but hurt emotionally by betrayal is the driving force behind fears of deception online. For all the stories in the mass media and all the reinforcement by scholars regarding the risk centering on another person's ability to deceive regarding "real life," the ultimate danger, thanks to the mediation of the machine, is almost always to our emotions rather than our physical selves. This is ironic, considering that the real/virtual binary relies so heavily on dismissing online interaction on the basis of it being "just text on a screen" or not being physical – that the heart of the risk is the possible emotional, or non-corporeal, consequences. If what occurs online is not real interaction because it lacks a face-to-face component, then how can online behavior be truly risky when the only danger is to emotions, rather than our bodies? The emphasis on deception proves to be a fairly disingenuous locus of alarm in the face of the real/virtual binary.
We cannot restrict studies of behavior problems online only to cases of identity deception. All three of these examples, as well as the issue of trolls and the hate attacks from homophobic outsiders, occurred within the virtual arena, carried out in text on a screen. From the beginning of this work, I have argued that as scholars it is wrong to attempt to separate online activity from offline activity. The vehement, emotional language employed by my respondents when talking about *Bigboy*, *Penlind* and *Meteor* clearly suggests that the simple words on a screen had potent effects on the lives of many people. Actions taken within a virtual environment can have severe emotional repercussions on the participants, something researchers have been aware of since Julian Dibble recorded the infamous "Rape In Cyberspace." Every time scholars discuss the idea of the Internet providing a "safe place" where people can experiment without "real world" repercussions, they reinforce the fallacy of the real/virtual binary and further embed the idea that online interactions do not carry as much emotional weight as offline social ties. Not only is this sending confusing messages to people who experience deep emotional reactions to virtual events, doing so only continues to deny the complexity of human social groups which exist online and off.

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1 Given that in the earlier years of the World Wide Web male users far outnumbered female users, the risk of being deceived was statistically high. Usage has evened out between the genders overall.
2 Kendall (2002) also makes note of this distinction between anonymity and pseudonymity on pages 260-261, in the book's notes.
3 The full quote, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog," is from a cartoon that appeared in *The New Yorker*, drawn by an artist named Peter Steiner. The cartoon has an almost iconic status among Internet researchers as well as users for summing up the ease of deception online in a humorous fashion.
4 Second to going *poof* was "leaving in a *Ty King* way" – which meant attempting to leave but being unable to pull oneself away from the board. *Ty King*, one of the show's writers, was notorious during his most active period for being unable to shut down the Bronze and go do things such as work or sleep. Instead he would announce he was leaving and then keep posting, leading to Bronzers describing this practice as "leaving in a *Ty King* way."
5 Monique communicated this conversation, removing the names, to a number of people privately, including myself.
Meteor's actions at the Posting Board Party and violating privacy online are my own personal recollection. The specific incident at the party was not explicitly discussed by any of my respondents, though it was confirmed through correspondence on my part. The posting of private e-mails occurred more than once, including an e-mail I had sent to him which he posted excerpts of on a web site and then put the URL of the site up in the Bronze.

Allyson admitted that one of the reasons prompting concern over Penlind's behavior was that the woman might start asking Bronzers to donate money, so the risk of fraud was an element to the investigation.
CHAPTER 6 – WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The Bronze closed down in July of 2001, and though at the time the community believed the closure was temporary, a strong sense prevailed that nothing would ever be the same. That instinct proved correct, as the website created to serve the show during its run on UPN was wholly inadequate to handle the volume of the Bronzer community. The remaining members of the community fractured into smaller subgroups, clustered around various other websites, all of which were privately run. The fact that these other forums were owned by certain people removed the underlying sense of communal ownership that was present in the official Bronze, where the owners were an impersonal corporate entity and the online space and the community were what everyone made of it. The separation into smaller groups and the lack of a central, neutral meeting ground marked the end of the Bronze as a single community with a unique home.

The end of the website did not mark the end of the social networks that had been formed online, however. Even lacking a centralized meeting space, smaller groups of Bronzers remain in contact via various websites as well as more traditional, offline networks of phone contacts and neighbors (though "neighbors" in this sense is expanded to mean people in the same city, not living physically next door). The Bronze community may no longer survive as a singular entity, but the people who were part of that community remain linked to one another, and retain an interest in the welfare of their fellow Bronzers, even
when they have not been seen in many years. Face-to-face meetings and small gathering continue to be held, including a mid-sized weekend reunion of sorts in New Orleans in May of 2005.

The persistence of emotional attachments between these people simply reinforces my main argument, namely that life online is not walled off from the rest of life, and that involvements can, though not necessarily must, spill over the wall in both directions. Whenever the Bronze was under threat, the community reacted across multiple channels of communication to respond. Contact continues to be maintained through websites but also through offline meetings, as well as other mediated forms such as e-mail and phone conversations. Despite the community being closed for five years, Bronzers remain part of each other's everyday lives. None of these claims are universal for all Bronzers any more than they are universal for all Internet users, of course. But the simple fact of this persistence of contact, especially after so many years, lends great support to the importance of online social connections as well as validating the need for more research that follows online connections into offline venues, rather than splitting "real" life into a wholly discrete category from the virtual.

While much more work is needed on relationships that straddle on and offline spaces, it is important that this work be approached cautiously. Due attention needs to be paid to the format of the online space. Bulletin boards, chatrooms and MUDs and MOOs differ so much in format, despite cross-pollenization of behaviors, that they cannot easily be compared. The purposes of
various online groups also impact the way the groups will (or will not) cohere. Additionally, the expectations surrounding behavior in different forums may vary widely. As I have discussed, each community or group has its own understanding of how much honesty is required from members to participate, with different degrees of pseudonymity being considered acceptable. The social conventions of each group also need to be noted, as the definition of unacceptable behavior may also vary widely from one group to another. What would constitute an unacceptable "flaming" of another member in one community may be normal for another.

Lastly, and this is something I have invoked within my own research without discussing it in detail, the issue of time is one that needs a great deal more attention from Internet and new media scholars than it has so far received. In particular, when dealing with online social spaces, time is integral to understanding how online interaction works. An e-mail list functions on a different temporal scale than a chat room, the one being asynchronous and the other not. Different bulletin boards will have different conventions regarding time. Beyond the question of functionality, length of commitment is something that has barely been addressed by researchers. One study beyond my own work, Shawn Wilbur's "An Archaeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, community, identity," has looked specifically at the aftermath of a community which had ended its online life. I had the advantage of beginning my work after the community had closed, but too often existing research delves into the action of an online group without addressing how long the participants have been
involved, or taking into account the amount of time the group itself has existed. This lack is a particular concern when making evaluations about the impact of online interaction on people's overall lives. After all, it is far easier to dismiss the importance of virtual social activity when one does not account for how long a single user is involved with a group.

All of these things impede the process of generalization in the study of online groups, and to my mind, this is all for the better. What is needed in the field of new media is not more brief snapshots of online groups but more close study and in-depth analysis. Ethnographic study of online groups will be absolutely essential to furthering our understanding of the impact virtual interaction may have on individuals. However, this does not mean that broader, quantitative study should be abandoned. In January of 2006, the Pew Internet and American Life Project released a study entitled *The Strength of Internet Ties*. The study was a quantitative analysis of a survey that set out to examine what the Internet is "doing to the relationships and social capital that Americans have with friends, relatives, neighbors and workmates" (i). The study was co-authored by Barry Wellman, one of the leading figures who supports using "community" to describe online spaces. Wellman has argued that people create unique networks of friends, relatives and acquaintances around them that "consist[s] of multiple and separate clusters" of people rather than tightly-knit, interconnected communities or even kinship groups (3). Because people are often geographically separated from friends and relatives, and are therefore unable to meet face-to-face as frequently as they would like, mediated
communications such as the telephone as well as the Internet become important in sustaining the relationships. The Pew Study concludes,

The internet and email play an important role in maintaining these dispersed social networks. Rather than conflicting with people's community ties, we find that the internet fits seamlessly with in-person and phone encounters. With the help of the internet, people are able to maintain active contact with sizeable social networks, even though many of the people in those networks do not live nearby. Moreover, there is media multiplexity; the more people see each other in person and talk on the phone, the more they use the internet. The connectedness that the internet and other media foster within social networks has real payoffs; people use the internet to seek out others in their networks of contacts when they need help.

What the Pew Study refers to as "media multiplexity" is the same phenomenon I explored in detail in Chapter Three, namely that people switch from one communication channel to another without thinking consciously about the changes involved in the form of the communication. My research provides anecdotal and ethnographic data in support of this practice. The Pew Study provides quantitative data from anonymous surveys. Taken together, both the quantitative and qualitative data can be used to provide a more detailed and nuanced picture of what exactly people are doing with the Internet and electronic communications. Most importantly, when research is combined
towards this common goal, scholars will be far better able to consider life online as simply another part of our overall lives, rather than as a distant, exotic space removed from the greater concerns of human social activity.
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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions
Real Name:
Posting board name:

1. Did you have a greeting you used every day?

2. What was the Bronze?

3. When did you start posting and why?
   3A. Was this your first fandom?
   3B. Your first online fandom? If no, how did the other fandom compare?

4. What was your first in person meeting with someone from the Bronze?
   4A. How long after you started posting?
   4B. Was this the first time you met someone from the Internet?

5. How would you explain the Bronze to someone who didn't know anything about it?

6. What is your favorite memory of the Bronze (online, offline or both)?

7. What is your least favorite memory of the Bronze (online, offline or both)?

8. What was the most important thing about the Bronze for you?

9. Did you have a goodbye or sign off?
Appendix B – WITT RULES

ITALICS ETIQUETTE

What you are about to witness is what we call WITT (which stands for Whedon Improvisational Theatre Troupe) or Italics Theater. This means when you read a post in italics, the person is describing actions as though they are happening. Usually one or two people start something (a game of Calvinball, an invasion, a funeral) and other people join in. Sometimes there is a specific goal for a WITT (the recent Thanksgiving Day Parade), sometimes it's just spontaneous (Calvinball). Italics theater is open to everyone. Anyone can participate in an italics theater/game/whatever. The point of WITTs is to have fun and be creative and keep the game going. Thinking on your feet and adapting to changes in the game is crucial.

Following are a few pointers regarding participation:

Do not end the show!

Anyone can participate, but it is bad form for a person to come in and try to end the game/show/whatever themselves. The only person who should end the WITT is the person who started it, unless they publically give up that option. In other words, if the point of the WITT is to catch the Golden Snitch, don't post "GenericBronzer swoops in and catches the Snitch thereby ending the game." The point is to keep the action going by being as creative as possible until the person who started it decides to conclude. The best WITTs leave openings for other people to react and work off what you do. This also means that you cannot kill another participant without his/her/its express permission. Maiming is okay, but you can't actually cause death. Tangents are a perfect way to get involved without mucking up other people's plot lines.

**Side note about Calvinball games: the purpose of Calvinball is to not just score as many points as possible, but to a) be creative and b) make up the craziest rules you can think of. A tip for new folks, if you don't know what Calvinball is from the comic strip, don't get involved. You'll be lost.

Do not drag innocent bystanders into the WITT.

This is a purely voluntary game. It is not acceptable to force other people into a WITT by writing them in. Only Bronzers who are already participating (or your very closest friends who you know won't mind) can be affected. All celebrities, historical and public figures, fictional characters and/or creatures and sundry inanimate objects are fair game.
You cannot ignore the actions of others.

If you join in, you have to accept that other people can then do stuff to you. Obviously, people are writing posts at the same time and all actions may not be accounted for. However, any major developments should be recognized unless they are beyond reasonable (i.e., something that ends the game, puts another active player out of commission, etc.). In other words, if you start running across the Bronze to tackle GenericBronzer and that person then posts that you fall into a vat of Jello, you have to accept that and write yourself out of that situation. Just laughing and saying "You missed me" will result in punishment.

This is a family board.

While there are many discussions pertaining to the show, and other things, that have adult content in them, this is still a family board. That means we try to keep the fun on a family level and avoid obscene content during WITTs. Suggestive is okay, but nothing graphic.

What happens if I ignore these rules and don't play nice?

Well, we'll label you a bezoar and a spoilsport. Often we will react in kind and might tie you to a tree outside a convent (if you're lucky.) Mostly we will ignore anything you say and continue to play as if you are not there.