

Physical Evidence

Consonant Enigma

Issue 1



Communities Form Around Nuggets

Chris Garcia

Communities form around nuggets. This is obvious when you look at the Gold Rush towns. These were places of conflict, as any Jack London or Bret Hart story will tell you, but they were communities with participants who were strongly invested in one another. They formed smaller communities when they discovered that simply being bound to the same piece of land wasn't enough. They formed temperance groups and quilting bees and drinking societies and marching bands, each around tiny nuggets of interest.

Contributors:

- Abby Blackfox
- Chris Garcia
- Simon's Flower
- Andrew Trembley

Staff:

- Editor : Kristina Kopnisky
- Associate Editor: Simon's Flower
- Associate Editor: Abby Blackfox

Science fiction fandom grew up around a nugget. It's hard to say exactly what that nugget was, but the most popular theory with any sort of verification is the letter column of those Hugo Gernsback magazines of the 1920s and 30s. That nugget led people to write not only to the magazine but to each other. Eventually clubs were formed. These clubs had logos and even started publishing their own magazines, what we would today call fanzines. As years rolled by, people gathered to talk, to play games, to wear futuristic costumes and to sing. These were cons.



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Welcome

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Consonant Enigma. The aim of this zine is to discuss the psychological, social and humanities aspects of all things fandom. In this issue we are focusing on the temporary physical places that fandom creates for itself. Next issue, to be released around 26 October 2007, will look at the creative forms of expression that folks of fandom use. My goal is to publish an issue once every three months.

I am thrilled to be able to bring you articles from Chris Garcia, Andrew Trembley, Abby Blackfox and Simons Flower. Chris has worked up a great piece about how fannish communities form. Simons Flower writes about her experiences at Phoenix Rising. Andy Trembley discusses parties and their role in a convention community. Abby Blackfox writes of the pitfalls that can undermine a renaissance faire guild. I hope you enjoy reading these as much as I did.

To receive either a soft or hard copy of this or future issues please email consonantenigma@gmail.com. Plans are in the works to have a PO box address by next issue. In exchange for an issue I request one of the following: in kind trade, a letter of comment, an article or pictures that can be used in future issues (please contact me before submitting this material), or if you would like a hard copy I request funds to cover the cost of production and post.

Phoenix Reflected

Simon's Flower

When I arrived in New Orleans, my first thought was not about Phoenix Rising, the convention, but a phoenix rising in the form of the city. There could be no other place to host a convention dedicated to Harry Potter with themes of rebirth and redemption, coming as it did only 20 months after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

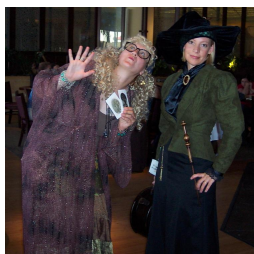
That said, I knew I was there for a convention when I encountered two people dressed as Lucius and Draco Malfoy, complete with the signature platinum blond hair and dark robes. Earlier in the day, the people I was there with had seen someone dressed as the evil Lord Voldemort walking down Canal Street. By midnight, after many more people were there a night early for the convention, the hotel knew it was playing host to some decidedly odd people. Amusing to those there for Harry Potter, the hotel was also hosting a convention of military medical staff. The men in uniform looked upon us in robes with alternate amusement and disdain.

I've been to conventions before, but never one for which I was intimately a part of fandom. My Harry Potter CV includes writing nearly 100 fanfics (beginning in March 2003), participating in many fic fests on Live Journal and co-founding and running a website dedicated to Harry and company. Every other convention I've attended, I've been a fan on the fringe. For this one, I was at the heart of it and it made all the difference.



There is a special bond between two strangers who've never met in person when it's discovered you've been communicating online for one, two, even three years via an alias. Suddenly, though you've never met this person before, they can be your closest friend. By the closing breakfast on Monday, I'd met so many people I'd only known virtually that I, with my famously horrific memory, can't remember them all. Despite not remembering them all, I'd have to say that meeting them was the best part of the weekend.

I attended many of the scheduled presentations and talks, co-presented two of them, and attended some of the evening events. Yet, what I remember now are the midnight movie showings. Prior to each, the coordinator of Phoenix Rising gave an interactive discussion about each movie. Then the movies were shown. Think Rocky Horror Picture Show crossed with Mystery Science Theater 3000.



The first night, when "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" was shown, was a low-key event compared to the following nights. The second night was "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets" and things became much more rowdy, not the least of which was due to the fact more than half the people attending were drunk as skunks after having attended Storyville that evening and drinking for free thanks to MTV sponsorship. "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban" on the third night was the most well-attended, loudest, and most fun. As this seems to be the favorite of most people, the conference room was packed and everyone had something to say to the screen. By the last night, when "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" was shown, most people were winding down and subdued compared to the previous nights. There was a pall of closure over the event since the closing breakfast was the next morning. We'd all be leaving in less than 24 hours.

Despite the movies being shown at midnight, the convention was really about the books. "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," the final book, would be released in two months. Speculation about what might happen, whether Snape was an evil git or reluctant good guy, whether Draco Malfoy would be redeemed or stay a fugitive bully, and whether Harry would ultimately survive, was rampant. Heated discussions between opposing factions could be found anywhere on the convention floor, the least of which was Sunday afternoon when a panel discussion "Snape: Friend or Foe?" was held in the main convention hall.

Never again will that sense of anticipation, of being on the edge of something final, permeate a convention. I reveled in the time I was there, in the snapshot of fandom offered there. I was fangirled and fangirled others. I felt a part of everything and that's lasted through the weeks that have followed straight up through the release of the final book.

I can't wait until the next convention.



Party Life

Andrew T Trembley

What makes a convention a convention?

By that I mean “What makes my kind of convention different from other kinds of conventions and shows?”

My kind of convention doesn't bring in “professional” management to run the convention. My kind of convention doesn't pay a salary to its staff. My kind of convention doesn't exist for the monetary enrichment of a few folks.

My kind of convention is a community effort, a build-it-yourself affair. It happens through the efforts of dozens or even hundreds of volunteers. Sure, there's management, they might even do this sort of work in a professional capacity by day, but at my kind of convention they're just the head volunteers. If they're lucky, they get their registration costs refunded. If they're really lucky, they might get some of their hotel expenses refunded.

There are even people who you'll never see on the staff list, who get reimbursed or credited for nothing, but who contribute in countless ways to the convention.

There are the costumers who spend months building masquerade entries and give up a significant portion of their convention in meetings and rehearsals ensuring that you've got something to watch on Saturday night.

There are the fanwriters and photographers who submit material for the newsletter, even though they're not on staff...

...and there are the party hosts.

My introduction to convention fandom was Minicon 28. Back in the early 90's Minicon was a very general general SF convention, and it was a great party convention. It drew around 3,000 people each Easter, and overflowed the Radisson South Minneapolis. Every poolside cabana hosted an open party on Friday and Saturday night. Most corner suites hosted an open party on Friday or Saturday night. You could easily choose between three-dozen parties (not that the choice itself was easy).

Even without the parties, Minicon would have been a great convention. The parties just added fun and absurdity on top of what official events provided. Posters advertising “Amalgamated Spleen,” “The Operation,” “L. Ron Hoover's Church of Appliantology,” “Wheasels” and “Toast” let you know where to find silliness and a good time.

Some were just folks in a room with drinks, snacks and interesting conversation. Others took the time to redecorate their rooms. The craziest turned their rooms into events unto themselves (like the weasel races).

It set my expectations for years to come. How could I not go to other conventions?

Minicon had a major influence on other conventions in the upper Midwest. Small conventions in the 400-member range often sported 6-10 parties a night. Conventions half that size might still have half a dozen parties a night.





I went to a Worldcon. There were a lot of parties. I even helped with one. It was the kick-off promotional party for CremeCon (“Where fandom rises to the top!”) at ConAdian. We had cow-themed decorations. We served Milwaukee-themed foods. I made Irish Cream malted milkshakes with Irish Cream whipped cream. It was a lot of fun.

Parties were a huge part of my convention culture. After almost a decade of this, I moved to the west coast.

I was surprised to find out that there weren’t as many open parties at west coast conventions. I was surprised to find out that the open parties usually closed before 3 or 4 in the morning. Parties were still a big part of convention culture, though.

Then I started going to other genre and media conventions. I learned that furry conventions had some open parties, but have many more large private parties. I learned that anime conventions, even fan-run anime conventions, didn’t have any party traditions and had little nightlife beside the dance. I learned British conventions adjourned to the pub instead of parties, because food and beverage sales paid for their function space, not room nights.

I learned that I really liked furry conventions because the community spirit was strong there, and that I liked anime conventions less, because the “do it yourself” spirit rarely extended beyond the convention staff.

Kevin and I also started hosting parties ourselves.

We started hosting parties with the A.C.R.O.N.Y.M. gals from Southern California, and after clearing up some misunderstandings, started hosting multiple parties. The first “Den of Propriety” was fun, as was the first “League of Evil Geniuses” party.

At the 2002 Worldcon, ConJosé, Kevin and I were landlords for “The Costumers’ Suite,” a five-day hospitality suite where costume groups came in and ran parties during the convention. We learned a lot more about decoration and setting a mood from the Klingons who ran “Mara’s Bar” and the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild who ran a Faerie Tea Party. Our parties during that weekend were probably our last “un-designed” parties.

In the intervening years, we’ve built up a pretty strong gang of folks who host with us and make the party happen. We’ve collected a great deal of décor to make the Evil Geniuses party more and more interesting. We’ve developed strong relationships with our local conventions and with other party hosts.

We’ve served a lot of sparkling wine to a lot of people



We’ve created an institution that people look forward to every year. You can too. Throwing a good fannish party is a great way to make new friends and a great way to contribute to your convention. If you like a good party, plan a good party and host a good party.

“What makes my kind of convention different from other kinds of conventions and shows?”



Communities Form Around Nuggets (continued)

Fandom, like anything, evolved, became more complicated. Tendrils would lash out and ensnare something new. Some fans who had an interest in singing songs which were parodies of known tunes banded together, calling their stuff filk and went off and put together their own zines, started their own conventions, began their own awards and traditions. Some fans found Japanese animation and formed another new fandom. Others discovered anthropomorphic art and literature, comic books, feminist science fiction, primitive arts. Many discovered all of them and lived in multiple worlds based around different nuggets that chipped off the same initial founding principal.



I am a fanzine fan. I'd say we consider ourselves the oldest, perhaps the most pure form of science fiction fandom. Our nuggets are things like The Comet and other fanzines that were written before there were conventions. As I understand it, in the days before I was born, fanzine fandom was barely named. We WERE fandom. We were the mainstream; the definition of a fan had at least something to do with fanzines. The identity of fandom itself was tied to fanzines and those that created them.

With the great influx of new fans in the 1970s, this changed. Fanzines began to lose ground. Many new fans came in through Star Trek, through Star Wars, through media fandom, which was a fandom created around a different nugget altogether. This had two effects: it caused long-time fans to complain and it lessened the importance of fanzines. The con was the thing now. Conventions became the focus of fandom far more than fanzines. While the World-Con and the major regionals had always been important, after the great influx, they were the most important aspect of fandom.



Fanzine fandom began to define itself aside from fandom itself in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was obvious that fanzines were getting less attention. Their nugget was the love of fanzines, something that a lot of new fans did not share. While not completely divorced from the mainstream of fandom they once dominated, it is fair to say they held themselves somewhat separate.

Let us come now to the new century. Fanzine fandom has lessened in numbers, partly through the high cost of creating zines and partly due to the aging of the creators. Therefore, the impact on the mainstream of fandom is lower still. There are a few younger fans who have chosen to take up zining: myself, a young Brit named John Coxon and the Science Fiction / San Francisco crew, but for every Espana Sheriff that arrives, another zine leaves.

In the 1980s, fanzine fandom formed a convention called CorFlu. CorFlu is short for correction fluid, one of the most important parts of creating zines in the days of mimeograph and Ditto. CorFlu was a word that fanzine fans would know, an instant identifier for the subculture. CorFlu made its way through the 80's and into the 90's with a steady attendance.

I did my first zine in 2005. That was also the year I attended my first CorFlu.



Physical Evidence



There are now two types of communities: physical and virtual. The strange thing is this has been true for fanzine fans since they gathered around their nugget. There are often people who knew each other only as names in lettercols. Harry Warner Jr., one of the most important of early fans, almost never attended conventions, but everyone knew him through the fact that he sent two pages letter to every zine. He was a virtual fan in days before computers. Few knew him as a physical entity, everyone knew him as words on paper, no different than those today who only know people as pixels on a screen.



The matter of temporary physical communities gathering from more permanent, or at least more frequent, virtual communities is a strange one. You enter into a physical space, in the case of the 2005 CorFlu, at a Holiday Inn in San Francisco, and there are already expectations. You know from articles you've read who's grumpy and who is a laid-back spirit of joy. Or so you think. You meet that one person you have a blow-up with over the Hugo awards and expect tension. Instead, they greet you like a brother, proud and happy to meet you. The guy you've had fine conversation with through LetterCols and email meets you and gives you a half-hearted handshake at best. These things happen in the physical space, made more real by contact which includes being an eyewitness to their reaction instead of reading their response to your latest work and scanning for exclamation points.

The most difficult part is coming to grips with the signs and signifiers of a group as strongly tied as fanzine fandom. I came in knowing almost nothing but names and writing styles of people. I knew nothing of the traditions of the convention or what I was expected to do. These people also barely knew me. I had only been doing a zine for a few weeks and had been contributing to various zines for a while, but nothing too visible. As far as most folks were concerned, I may well have been an interloper. I quickly found people I knew at least by name. Earl Kemp, a man of 75 years, saw me walking.

"Earl, I'm Chris Garcia" I said, extending my hand.

He shook it, wrapped the other arm around my shoulder and pushed me towards the ballroom.

"Good to meet ya, Chris. Now, let's party."



The difficulty in explaining being on the outside looking in is that you either remain on the outside and are then unable to comment realistically on what it means emotionally, or you get drawn in and are unable to comment on what it means objectively and without fear of reprisal. As I entered that ballroom, I realized I was both at that moment. I was being included, but I was not really one. I was an observer at the same time as being a participant. It was a strange thing, a sensation that could be quite uncomfortable for some, but I understood and enjoyed it.

Like any subculture, there is a questioning attitude towards those who arrive to the party late. I was warmly greeted by those I had dealt with, and while I never felt shunned, I was certainly not gathered up from the reeds. I was allowed to float along and those that I made the effort to interact with, I got a reception from. The induction into the group seemed to be more than just introduction. There was a period of feeling-out. I've witnessed this since and it is really the idea that one must be comfortable with the idea of your presence.

Communities Form Around Nuggets (continued)

Which brings me to the nugget. It's become my belief that every group that comes together around a nugget must feel like every member has a piece of that nugget with them before they can be accepted. In fandom, this can lead to the cries of "fraud" when a new person comes knocking at the door. The Star Trek fans that arrived in the 70's and 80's were questionable. Their nugget began as a television show, but the other nugget was drawn around pulps and paperbacks, and neither group was fully integrated with the other for a long while. The later Star Wars fans faced the same problem. I didn't have this issue. I was a young guy in a room full of folks at least a decade older with far more fan-nish years than I had put in. These were people who lived and breathed fandom, and in particular, they breathed fanzine fandom.



By the end of the weekend, I had met several folks and chatted and gotten a couple of laughs. Good people, every one...at least the folks that I chatted with.

Time went on, I published zines, I wrote letters, I read books, I wrote reviews, I made movies and I had a good time at cons. 2007 rolled around and CorFlu was at my door again...well, it was in Austin, Texas, but that was much easier than Toronto. I had changed. People knew who I was via my writing. I'd met a ton of folks at WorldCon and I'd discovered that more folks via chatting with other folks. I had spent a year mingling in the virtual.

And this time, I was pulled in!



As soon as I arrived, I discovered that people were excited to sit me, chat me up, introduce themselves if we'd never met and take me to task for something I had written about some dirty secret or another. It was different. We shared a vocabulary far more now and my introduction of certain concepts had managed a bit of penetration into the group. I shared markers of recognition. I was a finalist for 3 different FAAn Awards, the major honors given out at CorFlu, and I wore the badges they gave to mark us as such. I could sit down at any place in the ConSuite and I knew that I could hold a conversation with the person sitting around me with no question that I'd be able to keep up. Acceptance in fanzine fandom is best exemplified by the ability to chat knowingly with every one at a CorFlu.

In other words, they finally knew that while I may hold a portion of dozens of nuggets, I also had a piece of the one they hold so dear.

How to Run a Renaissance Faire Guild ... Into the Ground

Abby Blackfox

If you've ever been on the other side of a Renaissance Faire, you've seen the guilds come and go. They start the same: the pavilion is new, the garb is new, the entertainment is new, and the energy is high. Then, inexplicably, it disappears, and former members find their way into other guilds, wearing the look of FBI Witness Relocation Program members when asked why they aren't with New and Spiffy Guild.



Weather and bad bureaucracy killed my guild. Bureaucracy is always a dangerous element in any event planning, and had it not combined with the vicious heat of the California valley, my guild might have lasted. I might have fought a little harder if I hadn't watched guild members suffer heat exhaustion, and then offered no aid. It's a common question amongst the California Renaissance Faires: why are these things held in summer?

I don't know. I think it's insane, yet I still go.

My time as a guild master can be summed up easily. I arranged guild meetings, I helped with garb, and I filled out electronic and real paperwork. I even painted a fancy sign with the guild's name.

It still failed. What did I do wrong? In the years since, I've realized that beating the dead horse known as my guild back to life wasn't worth the struggle. Guilds need every member to work and give input. I didn't have that.

In the world of California Renaissance Faires-- sometimes called Pleasure Faires-- the difficult part of becoming a re-enactor isn't getting the proper garb or taking on a persona. One sometimes only needs to show up in whatever costume can be made or thrown together at home, wear it in as a patron, and play with the established re-enactors. In contrast, some of the guilds-- in particular those brave souls that bring Elizabeth I or Henry VIII to modern tourists-- require auditions, garb approval, acting classes and scripts that must be memorized and recited at regular intervals in the hot, summer sun. These people are truly dedicated.

The average guild-- like the one I had -- needs a theme, a nationality or reasonable collection of nationalities, a background, and a certain number of people. It sounds easy, especially with the popularity of the Pirates of the Caribbean films boosting Faire numbers and interest in historical figures beyond dead monarchs, but it's been done before. Many times, in fact. If you give the old idea a new hook or dazzle the Faire organizer with garb or props, you'll get in. I did, and I had everything lined up until the face of bureaucracy presented itself, and reality set in.

Working at a Renaissance Faire is hard. It is event planning. Compare it to something more people have experienced: your best friend calls and wants you in the wedding party. You leap on the invitation with initial glee, spend months preparing and picturing things in your head. But when the big event happens, something will always go wrong, something will always go unexpectedly perfect, and when it's over, the wedding party collapses into their beds at 3 AM in the morning, exhausted and still drunk. This typifies the experience of a Renaissance Faire uncannily well. The guild master must oversee all of this, and maintain some kind of control on it. Therein lies the rub. If a person can master this, they can master a guild, and do what I could not. I hope they do, because someday I might need another guild to join, as will others.

