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It’s Not Just Technology That Makes Our Village Grow

Posted on February 1, 2009 by Editor

By Pat McGregor

Editor’s note: Pat McGregor and Glee Cady, writing partners, have worked for us at Interface for some time. We were shocked to hear from Glee that Pat had been stricken with a serious condition, which threatened initially to end her mobility if not her career. As Glee created, or facilitated an electronic support community to rally around Glee, we were struck by this very caring and effective use of the Internet, and asked her, along with her rigorous personal and care-taking work, to think about writing about the experience for us...

As you may have heard, my partner in crime, Glee Cady, has been hospitalized since August 17, 2008, with a severe Staphylococcal infection of the spine. After several months of intense back pain, she collapsed one afternoon when two vertebrae in her back gave way under the disintegration caused by the infection. Rushed to the hospital, it was discovered that the bone fragments were compressing her spine, along with the damage done to her system by the long-term infection. She’s had grueling surgery and recovery, and the Internet community has rallied—there are two private email lists on Yahoo! for her (one for news only, and one for discussion about what help can be given her, scheduling visits, etc.) and we are using a calendaring site so folks can see when good times to visit are. The mailing lists she regularly reads, some professional and some related to hobbies and authors, are also right there supporting her—keeping updates, sending cards, letters, getting her favorite authors to sign things to send to her, and so on.

When this first happened, and the vanilla email list her sons and daughter-in-law compiled grew to over 100 people in a couple of days, one of our newer (less than five years 😊) friends was impressed at how fast the news spread around the world, and how many people felt personally touched by her life.

When he mentioned it, one of the dinosaurs on the list (like Glee), said in a private comment to me that when Glee’s husband Frank [1] had cancer in 1990-1992, we did the same thing,
although we were using different tools: BITNET [2] (IBM’s Because It’s There email Network) and LISTSERV, uucp [3] (email through Unix), and other email systems to link together. Frank was an employee of Merit Network, as were Glee and I, and was working on the NSFNET [4] project. He was in the University of Michigan Hospital for quite some time before his death, and because the hospital was very advanced, it had a network connection in his room so he could work, share email, and be connected to the world. I personally feel strongly that the ability for us, his friends, to be in contact with him on a daily, casual basis, to share jokes and job problems and love with him, helped him so that he lived much longer than any of us had expected. Then, after his death, Glee’s global friends, cancer support groups that she discovered (who were new to using e mail but swiftly getting used to it), and others whose life she and Frank had touched, took care of her and her boys through their grief, her decision to move back to California, and their building a new life there.

Then, a year later when Brendan Kehoe, [5] author of Zen and the Art of the Internet, [6] went into a coma and incurred brain damage when his car was hit on the morning of December 31, 1993, the network rushed into action for him. For those of you who don’t know, Brendan is a legendary figure among Internet historians. Not only was he one of the people who helped create gnu [7] compilers as a part of the Free Software Foundation [8] project, he was a computer consultant at Widener University when he became an underground hero to the new college network users. He created a guide to the Internet for the students there and put it on the net. Soon it was being used as the canonical documentation for users wanting access to all the different services available on the Internet. When the major publishers finally figured out that real people wanted documentation on the Internet, Brendan’s book was one of the first to hit the checkout stands. People who might never have even thought of using the Internet could do so because of Brendan. Families started getting their grandparents and other seniors computers so they could stay in touch via email. Senior centers and daycare centers started “penpal” programs. And none of this was easy, because it was in the days before web browsers really took off and we used acoustic modems. But the important thing wasn’t the technology—it was the connections made possible. [9]

At any rate, I was working with Brendan at Cygnus Support (a GNU software support company later purchased by Red Hat, [10] the folks who have a version of Linux out), and when he was in this amazing injury, people all over the world wanted to know how he was. We used LISTSERV email lists with hundreds of names on them, and we used his profile (his entry in a directory listing about individuals on a particular Unix system). We would put daily updates in his profile, and people could use a utility called finger [11] to see what was going on. To do it, anyone on a Unix system or with an Internet interface could type “finger Brendan@cygnus” and the latest update on Brendan would be printed on their screen.

From all over the world, people sent notes to Brendan and his mother, contributed funds for his care at the specialty hospital, and did all sorts of things that he and his family needed.

Today we have better tools to organize caretaking, donations, send messages, gifts, and do all
sorts of things for our friends, even when they are friends we only know from virtual space. There are care sites, support sites, places like PayPal where you can set up donations, flower companies where you can send flowers from one country to another, and so on. When I’ve visited Glee I’ve seen beautiful cards, flowers, and gifts from people she’s known since the late '90s but has never met in person.

And that is the point of this article, rather than just a history lesson about “how it was before there was mud.”

We are building communities with the Internet, and have been since the very earliest days.

**How do we do it?**

In April of 2006, I wrote an article in this journal about the difference between some blogs, MySpace, and other communities. [12] The key, decided the folks I was discussing this with online, was that the Internet was a tool for real conversation. One woman said:

*Some places, like [this one], seem to be much more designed around a group of people interacting with each other, and the [postings] resemble diaries. Other places seem to be designed around a content creator pushing a stream of articles to the world, and the content creators will use them as a pulpit to espouse a view.*

*I think communities can form and be facilitated by both types of blogs. However, [this one] is much better at either forming a community (by having a bunch of authenticated [13] people rendezvous at a particular spot), or facilitating existing communities (mostly what it does for me, since a significant chunk of my friends from a few different communities hang out here).*

*I don’t think communities are really driven by the posts, or the content creator making articles. Communities are driven by the conversation in comments (like we are doing now!)* [13]

People who were just using Internet tools to publish content, rather than invite real discussion, aren’t building communities.

[This is the point, I think, where I mention that Interface invites comments at the bottom of all of our stories. We can have a real discussion about these things here, rather than just reading it and wanting to argue with the authors. 😊]

While I was doing some research and thinking about this article, I spent a great deal of time thinking about communities not only for social groups, but also, say, for communities in other ways. While I was at Intuit, the architects and engineers were creating communities of interest so that they could share development discoveries and build not only better, but also faster and smarter. For them, an online community space would be ideal if it enabled that collaboration,
both in quality of engineering and space for creativity. While I was thinking about this, I ran across an excellent essay by Michael DeHaan, [14] who is an engineer for Red Hat software in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was speaking of enabling the community participation that makes the open software development system so strong: the creation of collaboration space where serendipity occurs.

When you open up things and allow community participation, you never know what you’re going to get. Lots of interesting features and ideas can appear—ideas that you never imagined, just by allowing other people to expand upon your ideas or designs. This may mean collaboration or integration with other software—or this may be in terms of adding features you didn’t think were originally possible or within the scope of what you set out to do. Things can take on a life of their own. You are enabling the butterfly’s wing-flap effect to occur and who knows how many software applications or people you might affect. You don’t know what you are setting in motion, but the creation of this energy is hugely important to encourage future innovation.

The challenge to be posed to all projects is to create those architectures of participation—it requires in many aspects being somewhat less of a developer, but we need to do more than this. The success of free software is based on getting as many people engaged in it as possible. [15]

So how do we connect this to people, rather than software? Let’s head off in an entirely different direction. We won’t talk about software, or taking care of people. Let’s talk about—writing fiction.

**NaNoWriMo**

No, that’s not baby talk. Every year for the last 10 years, people have taken up the challenge of the National Novel Writing Month or NaNoWriMo. [16] (We geeky people [17] just love our acronyms!) Here’s the description from the web page:

National Novel Writing Month is a fun, seat-of-your-pants approach to novel writing. Participants begin writing November 1. The goal is to write a 175-page (50,000-word) novel by midnight, November 30.

Valuing enthusiasm and perseverance over painstaking craft, NaNoWriMo is a novel-writing program for everyone who has thought fleetingly about writing a novel but has been scared away by the time and effort involved.

Because of the limited writing window, the ONLY thing that matters in NaNoWriMo is output. It’s all about quantity, not quality. The kamikaze approach forces you to lower your expectations, take risks, and write on the fly.

Make no mistake: You will be writing a lot of crap. And that’s a good thing. By forcing yourself to write so intensely, you are giving yourself permission to make mistakes. To forgo
the endless tweaking and editing and just create. To build without tearing down.

As you spend November writing, you can draw comfort from the fact that, all around the world, other National Novel Writing Month participants are going through the same joys and sorrows of producing the Great Frantic Novel. Wrimos meet throughout the month to offer encouragement, commiseration, and—when the thing is done—the kind of raucous celebrations that tend to frighten animals and small children.

In 2007, we had over 100,000 participants. More than 15,000 of them crossed the 50k finish line by the midnight deadline, entering into the annals of NaNoWriMo superstardom forever. They started the month as auto mechanics, out-of-work actors, and middle school English teachers. They walked away novelists. http://www.nanowrimo.org/eng/whatisnano

(Pat says: I ran into NaNoWriMo via friends in the medieval history group [17] I belong to. There are a lot of published writers in the medieval group, and not only in fantasy or fiction. But you'll find, if you ask in any group you belong to, that almost everyone wishes they could write a novel. NaNoWriMo is a way to do that. Set a time, set a limit, set butt in chair and hands on keyboards.)

The first year, July 1999, NaNo happened in the San Francisco Bay Area. 21 people wrote. A few years later, it settled down into November. This year, the preliminary stats are 119,301 authors signed up for NaNoWriMo. That’s a 17.5 percent bump in turn-out from 2007, with 101,510 writers. Of everyone registered, 21,683 won. That’s an 18.2 percent win rate [18].

1,643,343,993 words were officially submitted to the site. That’s more burgers than any franchise sells in a day, or a huge dent in our national debt if it were only dollars. And twenty thousand and some people did it. Now, as my son (and the intro above) says, some percentage of it will be crap. But Amazon books and CreateSpace, an Amazon.com Inc. owned company, is generously offering every NaNoWriMo 2008 winner a “free proof copy” of their 2008 manuscript. [19] And Amazon thinks enough of the NaNo process that they have a contest in which some number of books (last year it was between 3 and 7) will be published by Penguin. And there are a lot of people who get the books they write published, after polishing and rewriting and so on.

How does this relate to Glee, and communities, and taking care of one another? It’s one enormous circle, and I think it’s pretty amazing.

Jennifer Crusie [20] and her husband, Bob Mayer, who write pretty terrific books, have a mailing list of fans that Glee belongs to. The participants are her cherished friends for many years, and I asked to be added to the list when she became ill so I could keep them posted on her progress. The participants send “Cherry Vibes” to anyone who is ill, needs help, or just is having a rough time. (They call themselves the Cherries because of the bright red cherry on the cover of one of Jenny’s books.) People all over the world belong, and some of those folks belong to other groups that Glee belongs to. So when I post an update on the Glee news list and to the Cherry list,
pretty soon the information is spread in a global network. I’ve gotten personal mail from someone in Australia who is sending “Vegemite Vibes” and people in Central Europe, and one very nice person in Argentina. They have taken me (and my various trials and tribulations) in, and taken care of me, too. And some of them have sent Glee some pretty amazing and wonderfully silly gifts to keep her spirits up.

Many of the folks on the Cherry list are writers, published or budding or would-be. I mentioned to Glee that I had formally signed up for NaNo this year, and she said, “Do you belong to the Cherry list for the NaNos?”

Well, I didn’t, but I joined, and that community helped me get 52,000+ words on disk, despite having my house robbed, computers and car stolen, and other trifles that occurred during November. We had sprints (who can write the most words in a half hour) and other competitions (“I’m thinking of a number between 1 and 1600 – the winner mentions some form of drinking alcohol closest to this number”), and all sorts of silly prizes. I won an oven mitt with a cherry motif. I wrote 10,000 words in one night while I was at my sister’s house for Thanksgiving.

And I also found a woman on the formal NaNo website whose email matches that of one of my nephews’ girlfriends—and she lives in the EU! But she is a NaNo “winner,” with almost 70,000 words, and I now will know more about her when we meet at Christmas than many of the other relatives there, because we’ve shared novels.

So, yes, those of us on the Internet can respond fast and usefully when there is a need. Nowadays we have better tools; we can send money to the Hurricane Katrina victims via the Red Cross website rather than writing a check and finding a stamp. We can do telephone bank calls to voters in swing states from home using a database interface on our Candidate’s website. We can arrange for a midwifery PAC action in another state using a mailing list.

But we’re still just meeting and being supported by people via one basic tool; a computer network combined with lots of other computer networks. And I think that, of all the things that the Internet has brought us, is the most important.

Have a great New Year!

**Endnotes**

http://www.heyecckpress.com/poetry.htm


[4] NSFNET: A Partnership for High-Speed Networking

“While the 1986 NSFNET had given the research and education community a taste of what was possible with connectivity to a high-speed backbone network, the leaps in capacity and reliability offered by the new NSFNET backbone service proved to be popular beyond even the partners’ wildest dreams. The growth of the Internet worldwide, of which the construction of the NSFNET in the US played a major part, can only be described as “phenomenal.”

“It was pretty much an unmanageable child,” says Ellen Hoffman. “I think back then we all had hopes that it would grow the ways that it did, but none of us believed that it would grow so fast.” Hans-Werner recalls working in an environment where “something that was brand-new and totally up-to-date in the morning was completely out of date by the afternoon. That happened pretty much on a day-by-day basis, because we moved so fast.”

“The statistics Merit provided on use of the NSFNET backbone are by now well-known, but still every bit as astounding: 19 billion packets per month processed in September of 1992, a growth rate of approximately 11% a month. Over 6,000 networks were connected to the NSFNET backbone service in 1992, one-third of which were outside the United States. Use of the network was also evolving; the share of network traffic devoted to electronic mail and file transfers was being overtaken by newer information storage and retrieval applications such as Gopher, Archie, and Veronica.”


[6] First (and free) copy of Zen and the Art of the Internet,

[7] The GNU Project was launched in 1984 to develop a complete Unix-like operating system which is free software: the GNU system. http://www.gnu.org/,
http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html

[8] Also known as the “Open Source Software” movement. Open Source Software is developed and put into the public domain so that others can use and improve their own projects from it. For example, there are many free versions of Linux, compilers, indexers, text management systems, and other kinds of software in the GNU library. The Free Software Foundation (FSF) is a 501(c)3 donor supported charity founded in 1985 and based in Boston, MA, USA. The FSF has a worldwide mission to promote computer user freedom and to defend the rights of all free software users. http://www.fsf.org/

[9] acoustic modem – a modem that converts electrical signals to telephone tones and back
again. modem -from a combination of MOdulate and DEModulate) electronic equipment consisting of a device used to connect computers by a telephone line;
http://www.thefreedictionary.com/acoustic+modem accessed 7 December 2008. At the time we’re talking about, a 9600 bits per second (bps) modem was very expensive: most people had 1200 bps equipment. As a comparison, if you are reading this over your home cable modem, the data is coming to you at 128,000 bps; a 1200 bps modem would be 107 times slower. You could read this line character by character as it appears on the screen, rather than having the whole page appear at once. And if anyone picked up another phone in the house, interrupting the signal, the transmission would have to start over again from the beginning. Comparison Chart courtesy of Livingston, at http://www.livingston.net/html/chart.html Accessed 8 December 2008.

[10] RedHat enterprises, https://www.redhat.com/ “What began as a better way to build software—openness, transparency, collaboration—soon shifted the balance of power in an entire industry. The revolution of choice continues. Today Red Hat is the world’s most trusted provider of Linux and open source technology.” From the corporate website, accessed 7 December 2008.)

[11] For those of you who’ve joined the Internet audience since 2000 or so, remember that many of these Internet functions were thought up by single male Internet geeks in college. Some of the names and capabilities would not have either these names or even be allowed in this politically correct, privacy conscious world.)


[13] People whose identity is reasonably established. Since LiveJournal allows you to block anonymous commenters, or to prevent anyone who isn’t registered as your friend to comment, you have a reasonable control over who joins in your conversations.


[17] Not all computer geeks started out that way. I have a BA in English/Journalism, and was on my way to a career (or at least an MA) in Creative Writing/Medieval History when life interrupted. For more information on this society, check us out at http://www.sca.org

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25 THOUGHTS ON “IT’S NOT JUST TECHNOLOGY THAT MAKES OUR VILLAGE GROW”

Editor
on February 1, 2009 at 4:41 PM said:

Poster Name: Pat McGregor
Message: Two notes: I see that without Glee checking the draft of this, there are a couple of “grammos” that make me groan. Oops! Glee started back to work part time on Monday, Feb 2! She’s now walking with the help of a walker, something some of us never expected in September 2008. But she had the iron will to get it done, and she did! best, and thanks to everyone, pat

best basketball shoes
on January 30, 2014 at 2:49 AM said:

Whats up very nice website!! Guy .. Excellent .. Amazing .. I’ll bookmark your blog and take the feeds additionally? I am glad to find numerous useful info right here within the post, we need develop more techniques on this regard, thanks for sharing.

.. . . .

nasze miasto
on January 30, 2014 at 7:11 AM said:

nice work, i enjoy reading your post. Retain the good work.
naija social network
on January 30, 2014 at 11:37 AM said:

Hi there, Sorry to your extended comment Thanks for sharing your article, following time can you write about wart removal products. Also is there any proven property cure for skin warts? Can you suggest me some? I live in Canada. Please dont forget that some stuff may perhaps not be available in my area. That may be why suggest me general things that will be found everywhere. Also would you recommend buying wartrol online? is it not dangerous?

Jesse Thomley
on January 30, 2014 at 6:15 PM said:

I like what you guys are up also. Such intelligent work and reporting! Carry on the excellent works guys I

plotka
on February 1, 2014 at 1:50 AM said:

“Great, thanks for sharing this article post.Appreciate it Once again and again. Terrific.”

seriale
on February 1, 2014 at 2:18 AM said:

We are a group of volunteers and starting a brand new scheme in our community. Your web site provided us with valuable facts to paintings on. You have performed an impressive job and our entire neighborhood is also thankful to you.

food processor reviews
on February 2, 2014 at 8:27 PM said:
It’s enormous that you are getting thoughts from this article as well as from our argument made here.

social network  
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:35 AM** said:

Awesome talk! Thank you so significantly for hosting Great.

best shoes for crossfit  
on **February 3, 2014 at 7:12 PM** said:

It’s an remarkable paragraph designed for all the internet viewers; they will take advantage from it I am sure.

best electric tea kettle  
on **February 3, 2014 at 7:20 PM** said:

If you are going for finest contents like me, only visit this web site every day since it offers quality contents, thanks

rifle scope reviews  
on **February 3, 2014 at 7:41 PM** said:

Hello would you mind letting me know which webhost you’re utilizing? I’ve loaded your blog in 3 completely different internet browsers and I must say this blog loads a lot quicker then most. Can you recommend a good hosting provider at a reasonable price? Kudos, I appreciate it!
band saw reviews
on February 3, 2014 at 9:11 PM said:

Thanks a bunch for sharing this with all of us you actually recognise what you’re speaking approximately! Bookmarked. Kindly additionally talk over with my site =). We may have a link trade arrangement among us.

best robotic pool cleaner
on February 3, 2014 at 10:41 PM said:

I got this website from my pal who told me regarding this website and now this time I am visiting this web page and reading very informative articles at this time.

best espresso machine
on February 4, 2014 at 12:23 AM said:

I don’t even know how I ended up here, but I thought this post was good. I do not know who you are but certainly you’re going to a famous blogger if you aren't already 😊 Cheers!

pressure washer reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 1:10 AM said:

This post presents clear idea in favor of the new people of blogging, that really how to do blogging.

jig saw reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 1:16 AM said:
Hmm it appears like your blog ate my first comment (it was extremely long) so I guess I’ll just sum it up what I submitted and say, I’m thoroughly enjoying your blog.

I as well am an aspiring blog blogger but I’m still new to everything. Do you have any helpful hints for first-time blog writers? I’d really appreciate it.

humidifier reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 2:39 AM said:

Hello, I log on to your new stuff daily. Your writing style is witty, keep it up!

recumbent exercise bike reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 4:22 AM said:

I have been exploring for a little bit for any high-quality articles or blog posts on this sort of house. Exploring in Yahoo I at last stumbled upon this site. Studying this information So i’m glad to express that I have a very just right uncanny feeling I came upon just what I needed. I such a lot for sure will make certain to don’t overlook this site and give it a look regularly.

scroll saw reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 4:36 AM said:

I do not even know how I ended up right here, but I believed this put up used to be good. I do not realize who you’re however certainly you’re going to a well-known blogger should you aren’t already. Cheers!
best induction cooktop
on February 4, 2014 at 8:18 AM said:

If you are going for finest contents like me, simply go to see this site everyday as it gives quality contents, thanks

naija
on February 4, 2014 at 10:17 AM said:

Thanks much for providing persons with this kind of a remarkable opportunity to read important reviews from here. It is usually so superb plus packed with a good deal of fun for me personally and my office peers to visit your internet site minimum Three times every week to understand the new points you have. And indeed, I’m also genuinely satisfied as part of your astonishing tips served by you. Some Two information in this posting are completely the simplest we’ve ever had.

nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:29 AM said:

I and also my buddies came searching at the good tips located on a site and prior to lengthy I had a terrible feeling I in no way thanked the web site owner for individuals tips. All of the men and women are definitely warmed to find out them and have now definitely been producing the most of these things. Many thanks for truly getting incredibly sort as well as for figuring out certain really good themes most folks are really needing to be aware of. My sincere apologies for not expressing appreciation to earlier.

nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:38 AM said:

I could possibly be beating a dead horse, but thank you for posting this!
Greetings! I've been following your weblog for a while now and finally got the courage to go ahead and give you a shout out from Atascocita Texas! Just wanted to say keep up the great job!