A Tart Point of View:
Building a Community of Resistance Online

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> I believe that to envision gender (men and women) otherwise, and to (re)construct it in terms other than those dictated by the patriarchal contract, we must walk out of the male-centered frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are (re)produced by the discourse of male sexuality...(Teresa de Lauretis, 17).

Introduction: The Evolving Discourse of Virtual Community

Since it's earliest days, the Internet has been not just a tool used for communication and research, but also a site for community building. Because it allowed easy communication over great distances, the internet has allowed many people who might never have met to connect in safe (because virtual) and often anonymous environment, leading to development of many communities that involve some level of role-play, if only in using a name other than that connected to one's physical identity. Some of these virtual communities have become sites of resistance in which members of a marginal group can (re)construct their identities without being constrained by the dominant culture. Teresa de Lauretis felt this was necessary for women when in 1987 she wrote *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction,* from which the above quote is taken. Now, fifteen years later, when many groups including women are using online communities for this purpose, their activities are shaped not just by the already existing structures they seek to escape or subvert, but also by the dynamics of virtual community.

While the anonymity of many virtual communities offers safety for experiments with identity, the effects of anonymity have not always been benign. Many scholars have considered how online social behavior differs from that carried out face-to-face or on paper, often concluding that online communities promoted a more fragmented identity in users, and were more prone to fragmentation themselves. On the whole however, most have posited the web as a combination of tool and locale that will allow disenfranchised groups to form stronger communities and speaker with stronger voices. This utopian view was prevalent until the early 90's, and then began giving way to a more complex understanding that is still developing today. David Bell offers a comprehensive summary of theoretical development in his introduction to *Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards: Cyberculture Studies 1990-2000*. He notes that in the late 90's more attention was focused on groups that were marginal in terms or race, gender, or sexual orientation, but suggests that cyberculture should be considered in ways that consider not just discourse, but also access and design. I take this approach in the following paper, in which I explore the functioning of the unusually successful online community

that has grown up around a monthly e-zine called Sequential Tart. I draw on a variety of theorists in considering this community, but also try to let the Tarts speak for themselves by including numerous excerpts from different segments of the community.

Sequential Tart: personal and historical backgrounds

I stumbled across Sequential Tart in late 2000, and read several issues before finally posting a reply to some article or other—I don't even remember what it was. Soon after, I was contacted by one of the Tarts, Jen Contino, who asked if I'd like to write for them sometimes. Since then, I've written articles and reviews for Tart most months, and have had the pleasure of meeting and socializing with several of the Tarts at the 2001 San Diego ComicCon. At the same time, my professional and personal commitments don't allow me to keep up as regularly with online discussions, and as an academic, I have the unfortunate habit of interpreting everything. Thus, I experience Sequential Tart, like most things, with a sort of double vision, looking from both the inside and the outside. My discussion reflects this doubling; I discuss Sequential Tart and the women who participate in it –- theTarts-- as an observer, but also as a Tart reflecting on her own experiences.

Sequential Tart, has defined itself as stated below—an epigraph that appears at the top of every issue:

> **sequential tart (si-kwen'shel tart) n.** -- 1. a Web Zine about the comics industry published by an eclectic band of women; 2. a publication dedicated to providing exclusive interviews, in-depth articles and news, while working towards raising the awareness of women's influence in the comics industry and other realms. (www.sequentialtart.com)

In fact, the topics covered are now far broader than comic books, including film, television, music, books, events, and a variety of cultural phenomena ranging from Olympic scandals to a grandmother's feelings about her first computer. But, to understand Sequential Tart's longevity and success, we need to start at the beginning.

Sequential Tart began in 1997 after a group of women who all belonged to another email list were "ranting about the sexism in Wizard magazine and how we didn't like their extremely limited coverage of the [comic book] medium" and how "we just couldn't find a magazine about comics that we liked to read, one that talked about the kinds of comics we were reading, in the way we wanted to see them discussed" (Keller, 3/26/02). The women agreed that stereotypes about what kinds of comics women were or ought to be reading were at least partly responsible for this lack; the male dominated industry assumed women preferred cute and fluffy comics, while some feminist voices

railed against violence and sexual content, which they largely ascribed to male tastes. From the start the women who formed Sequential Tart criticized not only the industry, but anyone, including women, who tried to pigeonhole the female comic-book readership. According to Katherine Keller, a founding member, they were:

> sick and tired of being told (as it were) what kind of comics women liked or would/should like. We weren't reading a damn one of them. We were sick of hearing about SIP and Bone. Fuck that. We were reading Preacher, and Hellblazer, and Invisibles, and Starman, and we knew a lot of other women who were reading (and loving) the same comics. We liked violence, blood and gore. We didn't like "nice" books. (Keller, personal email 3/26/02)

This kind of complaint has been raised by women before in regards to film or other cultural products, claiming a position not only distinct from male stereotyping, but also far more complex than that described by some earlier women resisters. The embryonic Tarts recognized that merely rejecting a male dominated genre was not the answer, as this did not solve the problem and would further deprive women of the enjoyment many experienced through comic books. Rey Chow has commented on the effect of this response, arguing that because the idea "image-as-feminized-space," breaks down when we acknowledge that women enjoy some of these images as well, we must shift our focus from the "moment of production to the moment of reception" (Chow, 19, 20). Sequential Tart began by doing exactly this, by focusing on the responses of women readers they opened a dialogue in which problematic representations of women can be discussed without denying or outlawing the enjoyment women experience reading comic books. Thus rather than rejecting or eliminating comic books themselves, they reclaim and redefine this artform. In addition to creating their own space apart from, yet intersecting the world of fanboys, the Tarts also promote women taking control of the way others respond to and interpret real women as icons or objects. An effort at this reclamation can be seen in Illustration 1, which shows an early cover of Sequential Tart, from November 1999:

Illustration 1. Each month's cover is a comic book artist's vision of a Sequential Tart. Note the realistic physical proportions and tough persona.

Or as Katherine Keller succinctly put it, "instead of just bitching and pissing about how much we were dissatisfied with the current state of comics journalism we decided, WTF, let's do something." But tackling this reclamation is easier said that done, and plenty of groups and websites devoted to empowering a subaltern group have come and gone over the years, as have numerous magazines and websites devoted to comic book culture. Sequential Tart's unsusual longevity was recognized at the San Diego ComicCon in 2001, at which the Tarts were invited to present a panel on how they had survived for 4 years already—an eternity for online communities and journals. The continued survival and growth of this enetrprise can be traced to the way Sequential Tart manages its relationship to the "real" world, and how it defines and maintains its own borders.

Entering the Land of Sharp-Tongued Women

As the 'zine developed, the Tarts have made several choices that distinguish their community from other similar sites. Most of these choices boil down to emphasizing accessibility and recognizing and respecting commitments outside of Sequential Tart. The most important and explicit goal for all Tarts is encouraging other people to read and enjoy comic books, and promoting this agenda is behind most policy decisions. For example, from the beginning Sequential Tart portrayed itself as professional site, including a masthead listing credits and contact information for the staff and all writers. In addition to providing this basic information, the Tarts invite readers to contact them by providing a link in every article for readers to click if the wish to respond. Those who choose to respond are then asked if they would like their response printed in the next issue. Not only does Sequential Tart print every response in the "Going Postal" section, authors of of the article in question write back. Frequently readers will be invited to write for Tart after this kind of interchange.

Maintaining such permeable borders is in part responsible for Sequential Tart's success in the unstable world of online communities. The Tarts allow any women who is interested to write for them, regardless of whether that woman's preferences in comic books match anyone else's or not. This openness might lead to the 'zine becoming huge and unwieldy if not for effective guidelines developed by the editorial staff about article length, number of articles in each section per month, and the frequency of contribution required of staff writers. Further, staff members generally participate in ongoing discussions via an internal bulletin board system (BBS) about what articles are in the pipeline and what kind might be needed or wanted, thus allowing the volume to be managed more easily. So far, all of the articles and reviews submitted can be accomodated, though some might appear a month or two later. If Tart continues to grow, a different approach may be required, but the Web makes this issue much easier to deal with than would be possible for a printed journal because there are no printing costs. By inviting any and all women reading comic-books to contribute, Sequential Tart avoids the pigeon-holing they originally complained of, and as more women think about what they might say in an article, more women begin to evolve more thoughtful responses to comic books as a medium.

Sequential Tart is not open in the same way to male writers, and this sometimes provokes immediate hostility among men when first they hear of the policy. However, men are not excluded, rather they are invited to participate through several explicit channels. Both men and women working in the comic book industry are interviewed, reviewed, and invited to design covers for each month's issue. Because they the 'zine focuses on reception of comics rather than production, the Tarts rarely will

address a comic book or a creator unless they like that series or that person's work. Tarts for the most part ignore the comic books they don't like, because no one has time or money to waste on them. Focusing on what is liked and ignoring what is disliked represents a typical online behavior; with so much information to choose from, most people choose not to spend time on what doesn't appeal to them. This un-apologetic subjectivity makes creators who are invited for interviews in Sequential Tart willing and even eager to participate, knowing that they are entering "friendly territory."

Men are also invited to participate in other ways; one of the most interesting being the "Re-Directed Male" column. This monthly column features articles from men, usually regular readers of Tart, who wish to contribute their expertise and opinions. Probably deserving its own separate paper, it plays with gender issues in such an interesting and complex way: men are invited to write for this column, just as women are for the rest of th'zine, or they might, after following Tart for awhile, simply ask to submit something. A man choosing to write for Sequential Tart finds himself in an intriguing position. He knows the editorial staff are all women, the readership, while not all women, is interested in women's perspectives, and he, as a man singled out to participate, is in the spotlight. In other words, he is in the same position most women are forced to assume in other comic book journals, if not in life generally. This is not to say that all topics must focus on women, but rather that the writer must think about women as the audience, and himself as the subject of their gaze.

This dynamic might be expected to cause discomfort, however, the generally encouraging attitude prevailing among the Tarts seems to more than assuage any anxiety among both men who write or who are interviewed for each issue. This welcoming attitude sets Tart apart from many other online communities in which flamewars and competition over insider status create an exclusionary tone that is no less unpleasant for being virtual. Rather than trying to break in to that exclusive club, Sequential Tart invites comic book readers, creators and publishers to come out into a friendlier and more open community. But ignoring what is not interesting and having explicit channels for contributions might suggest that in fact the Tarts do regulate the views presented in the same manner they themselves criticize. Looking back through conversations among the satff does reveal discussion on how to handle certain topics, but the Tarts are largely to avoid contention because readers and writers are self selecting. Occupying a marginal space in a culture that is itself marginal (comic books) does assure a certain amount of commonality in constituents.

The friendly and open might seem at odds with the original goal of raising awareness of women's role in the comic book industry and critiquing stereotypical representations in the books themselves.

However, a positive approach does not mean being uncritical. While reviews tend to be friendly and enthusiastic, articles written in Sequential Tart can be biting, ironic, or even regretful when considering comic-books, creators, or publishers who persist in stereotyping women, gays/lesbians, people of color, or men in some way. Consider Illustration 2 below, which pokes fun at the hyper-developed breasts women now sport in many mainstream comics. It is humorous, but also makes a real argument about the illusionary, or perhaps delusionary proportions many artists assign to female characters. Lisa Jonte, the author of the article and creator of the images, frames her critique as the findings of a committee charged with studying the mutagenic effects of environmental disaster on super heroines. The dry humour of her report is capped by the stinging mockery of the following footnote:

> While some heroine's breasts are merely abnormally large, some are so distorted that they appear to have become separate entities from their host bodies, with an all-round cleavage that suggests that said breasts are in fact completely detachable. This researcher witnessed a pair of the aforementioned "balloon" breasts as they broke free of their minimal restraint and wafted gently heavenward. After several moments of frustrated calling, (in which the breasts did not return) the owner, one Vengeancia, was forced into pursuit of the truant ta-tas ("Bizarre Breasts," *Sequential Tart* 7/01)

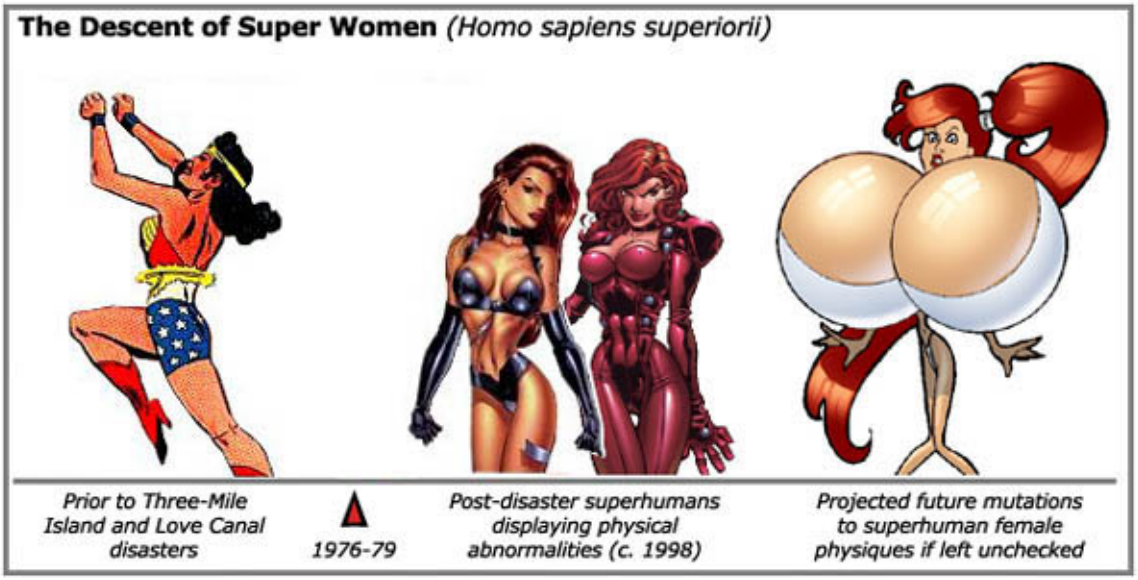

Illustration 2. Here we see the realistic proportions of Wonder Woman contrasted with the strangely proportioned figures in the center, which also appear in a real comic book. Wonder Woman #166 by Ross Andru and Mike Esposito. Š and TM DC Comics, Inc., Avengelyne: Armageddon #2 by Scott Clark. Š Extreme Studios. Future Heroine by Lisa Jonté.

Note that in the footnotes mentioning "Vengeancia," Jonte, herself a professional illustrator, takes aim at Scott Clark, creator of "Avengelyne," for being so poor an artist. Rather than commenting directly on the inherent sexism of Clark's illustration, Jonte makes the argument that the proportions he represents are not only unreal, but can only be the product of an environmental disaster, which makes the world of his comic series dystopian in way Clark probably didn't intend. Thus we see another example of the Sequential Tart revises the response to representation of women in comic books.

In the excerpt below, Rebecca Salek makes this critical move explicit when she comments on *Wizard Magazine's* list of ten greatest comic book heroines, arguing against their interpretation of what a great heroine is:

> But — why only mainstream characters? Why only spandex-or kevlar-clad super heroines? Why only current characters? And why are they all white (with the exception of Cassandra Cain)?
>
> ***
> There are other kinds of heroines besides super heroines. Police officers, for instance. Comic books are filled with strong female police detectives — not to mention private detectives. Space ship captains. Spies. Archaeologists. Witches. Elves. Goddesses. Angsty teenagers. And ordinary women who struggle through the pain and joy and uncertainty of everyday life.

In the above passages Salek addresses the basic and obvious problem of racial exclusion, but perhaps more importantly, she points out a lack that may not be so obvious to casual comic book readers, and that is the poverty of storylines built around women. By focusing only on busty white super heroines, Wizard sends the message that no other women are at all interesting. In fact, by this measure, no real women are interesting or worth our admiration. By this standard, nothing that real women might actually do deserves to be chronicled; strong admirable women exist only in fantasies. Salek goes on to consider how this contemporary Top 10 List does not even reflect the minimal progress made by the mainstream comic book publishers in representing women and people of color:

> There are other heroines besides white heroines, even at the mainstream publishing houses; the presence of Cassandra Cain on the list attests to that fact. No black or African-American women? Doesn't Storm (Marvel) deserve more than an honorable mention, in this case? Are comics so white-biased (historically, even unconsciously) that there are no credible Native American, Hispanic, African-American or other contenders?
>
> The answer seems to be an unfortunate yes. Historically, the protagonists were all white men, while white women filled the role of sidekick/Girl Friday/ girlfriend-in-

> peril. The industry was slow to respond to the critiques of the Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements. It was decades before characters of other ethnicities began to play a major role in comics. Women remained window dressing, for the most part...
>
> Nine over-bosomed super powered white women, and one Asian teenager.
>
> You've come a long way, baby.
>
> ***
> So, I'll end the article this way, instead. I want you all to do something for me. Everyone who reads this article — draw up your own list. Send it in to Tart. Send it to Wizard. Send it to every comic or pop culture or art list to which you subscribe. Share it with all your friends. Get a conversation going. Talk about these characters, these women — what you like about them, what you admire, why they are important to you. The more conversation, the more debate, the better. The louder the conversation, the more attention it will attract, and The Powers That Be will take notice. They'll notice just how important these characters are to us — and treat them with more respect and dignity. Give languishing characters a second chance. Maybe even invent a few new role models for our daughters (Salek, Sequential Tart, April 2002).[1]

This article was posted along with the rest of the April Issue, on April 1, 2002. By April 10, 68 responses had been posted on the Tartsville BBS offering a wide array of admired heroines, and sharing what individual posters liked most about them. This public BBS serves to strengthen the community around Sequential Tart by helping readers to connect with each other and with the Tarts themselves—a distinction that is often quite blurry.

Adventures in Tartsville

The BBS makes an important contribution the Sequential Tart community in the way it allows even greater complexity in discussion, fostering a polyphonic rewriting of women's place in our culture. However, this BBS, like many others is filled with people who may never have met, may not know each other's real names, and often don't know each other's genders, races, or ethnicities. We might expect that here at least some of the negative effects of online communication might be seen. However, the strength of the Sequential Tart community shows itself in enforcing courteous and productive interaction even around the most sensitive topics. For example, in January 2002, a poster who goes by the name Zackman started a thread at about 7:00 AM called "Blowing Women up in Movies," in which he begins:

> Looking back at movies like Bad Boys, Last Boy Scout, & Art of War, as well as some horror movies, I somehow began to ask myself this question:

[1]The full text of this article can be found at:
http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/mar02/art_0302_3.shtml

> Wouldn't it be logical(?) if women victims in the above mentioned movies get, er, raped by the bad males, instead of being bludgeoned with a foot-long hammer, mowed down by an Uzi, or being blown out by a .45?
>
> Why "logical"? Consider the equation; the bad guys are, well, guys, and the people playing victims mostly women. I'm beginning to wonder whether these bad males have enough, er, "balls" to do something beyond just shooting away women. Otherwise, I have this conclusion: either a) they're trained professionals or b) their sex lives are SOOO screwed-up. B) sounds like perfectly good answer.[2]

Zackman then invites others to comment. By noon, two other men and one woman who post regularly had asked if he was thinking about where he was posting this message, if he was seriously advocating more rape in movies, and whatever he was trying to ask, to please clarify. All three of these posters made it clear that they were prepared to take issue with the question and with Zackman, but all offered him the chance to explain, and one said that rather than go on, she'd let others do the "thumping." At this point posters are already showing better manners than is usual on many BBS systems, and that is recognized by the moderator who posts just after 12:00 PM.

Pam Bliss, the moderator, responds in a way that shows awareness of her position both as moderator with certain responsibilities and as woman who has a personal reaction to the topic. She posts first as Moderator, "Pam B" and then as a regular member, as "Pam Bliss." As Moderator, Pam simply lets everyone know that she is watching the thread closely, and that so far it looks ok, but she also asks "Please be careful with this one, ladies and gentlemen." In choosing that particular phrase, Pam models a scrupulously polite tone, and reminds posters that they, as "ladies and gentlemen," should make courtesy a priority in this thread. In her next post as regular member, Pam announces the removal of her moderator hat and then enters the discussion with a refinement of Zackman's question that helps move talk in a more academic direction:

> I too would welcome a discussion of violence against women in entertainment films, particularly the point Zackman only alludes to--the use of violence against a woman as the event that "triggers" a plot.

Pam then goes on to explain how a rape scene would affect her differently than the other violent plot devices she might see in an action movie:

> Rape, on the other hand, is a part of every woman's inner landscape. I know women personally who have been raped, and it's something I genuinely fear. I'm sure the majority of women feel the same way.
>
> While I'm sure it's possible to make a serious, thoughtful film about rape and its

[2]The full text of this discussion can be found at
http://www.sequentialtart.com/community/Forum4/HTML/000331.shtml

> consequences and attract a sizable female audience, its use as a plot point in a cheesy big budget entertainment will not have the same effect.

Once Pam has responded, several other women posted as well, offering their own thoughts and raising further questions for Zackman about his intent in posting the question, until finally a poster going by "Rose" posts a lengthy comment as a woman who has actually been raped. She goes back to the original point about rape as a plot device to motivate male action, and points out that in that scenario, not only is a woman raped, but then she is put in the position of feeling responsible for escalating violence, and is also infantilised since men must step in to act for her. After Rose has posted, Zackman finally replies that he didn't mean to startle people, but that he had been watching a movie in which violence against women was the mark of villainy and had been bothered by it.

Once Zackman established that he mean to ask a serious question, several more women posted, giving thoughtful replies about how rape and violence operate in action movies and sometimes in comic books. During this segment of the discussion, they also wonder about his assumption that any "real" man would rape, given the opportunity, and point out that it is very insulting to men, finally asking if any of the men participating do feel insulted. At this invitation, discussion shifts from the question to the way it was posed; several men admit they were so angry initially they had to cool off before posting a reply. Again, choosing to wait before replying is unusual, especially on boards related to comic books. Stephen Geigen-Miller however says that he wasn't insulted, because he assumed Zackman was a troll, but having realized the question was serious, Stephen offered a clear rebuttal of the assumptions underlying both Zackman's question and the answers he proposed. Finally, in one of the first hints of real temper in the thread, Stephen says that "I may have been mistaken - Zackman seems genuinely sincere, and troubled about this issue. In a way, that's unfortunate, because while not offended as a man, I am now offended as a writer."

This shift in tone is reflected in all of the subsequent messages; while most posters are still talking primarily about the issue of women being raped as a plot device, they all also comment briefly on how they reacted to the question, and on Zackman's manner of asking. The thread peters out after one more post from Pam, praising everyone's good and courageous behavior. Most striking here is the way numerous posters, all of who were upset to some degree by the original question, offered replies that not only were thoughtful, but quite candid in exposing views for which they might be attacked. While online communities sometimes do foster more openness, this tends to occur more in terms of personal revelations that cannot really be argued with, rather than through considered statements of opinion on controversial topics. The willingness of participants to speak openly reflects the trust these people have for the community as a safe place, and also the deliberate

fostering by moderators of the belief that everyone there is well-intentioned and reasonable.

Not all provocative thread titles elicit so serious a response, but even the lighter discussions reflect this trust in the community. Recently, Mike Norton began a thread with the question "What is the deal with you women!?!?!?"[3] This thread first inspired several humorous replies until someone, in that vein, said "everything in our purses." After that comment, 70 messages were posted detailing what people carried in their purses, wallets, or pockets, and what motivated them to choose one of these options over the others. Though this thread remained light in tone, posters did not hesitate to reveal personal details such as sexual preferences and physical imperfections during the exchange. For example, in response to the original question of "what's with women," one male poster replies "this is why I date men." His trust is rewarded in only receiving gently humorous replies that deliberately misunderstand which question he answered. Because many people on the Tart boards post using their real names, this willingness to reveal personal details must depend on some other quality of the exchange than safe anonymity. In all of the fora associated with Sequential Tart, readers and writers seem to feel welcome, respected, and safe. I believe this feeling is linked to the way the Tarts manifest their own identities through the 'zine and the BBS.

Creating a Brand-New Response to the Same Old Person

Sherry Turkle has been a seminal voice in discussion of online personae, and offers one view in her book *Life on the Screen*, in which she discusses how members of a virtual community use the internet to revise themselves:

> 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. What relation do these have to what we have traditionally thought of as the "whole" person? Are they experienced as an expanded self or as separate from the self? Do our real-life selves learn lessons from our virtual personae (180)?

While the work of Turkle and others like her is useful, it describes only a part of the online scene; other models must be considered if we are to have an accurate picture of how life online is affecting our culture. Turkle details the positive uses some people find for fictionalized online personae, but Sue Barnes found a somewhat different situation when she studied a virtual community that formed in 1993, growing out of a political discussion email list. This study looked at a different slice of online life, but the members of that group still maintained a distinct boundary between online life and real life. This distinction led to difficulties after some in the community met face to face and

[3]The full text of this discussion can be found at:
http://www.sequentialtart.com/community/Forum6/HTML/000367.shtml

found that online personae did not match as expected to real personalities (Barnes, in Gibson, 179-181). In that community, before meeting for the first time, several members felt they had to make their physical imperfections clear, mainly concerned about being heavier than other posters might have imagined. Other memebers felt some discomfort when personalities in person did not seem to match personalities online. So we see that while creating a persona can have positive effects, it can also cause anxiety and even a breakdown of the community when the two worlds meet. Perhaps because people have experienced this kind of awkwardness of colliding worlds before, in communities that are kept separate from "real" life, or perhaps because online communities are now taken for granted as a normal part of "real" life, communities that are firmly linked to "real" life are becoming more widespread, and offer a very different and I think more definitely positive example of how online communities can function to empower a group beyond the virtual confines of the community itself.

I am somewhat tempted to conclude that gender differences account for the positive atmosphere on the Sequential Tart boards, but both women and men can be seen behaving badly in online settings, just as both are seen behaving well. So while posters may be somewhat self selected by being those who would come to a BBS run by Sequential Tart, I believe the primary reason this community is so healthy and positive has to do with the lack of anonymity, and with the constant awareness of other members as real people. In fact, after examining many threads, including some which the Tarts themselves regard as examples of bad behavior, I find that in every case members of the discussion work hard to maintain awareness of themselves and others as real people. The behavior most certain to provoke anger in Tartsville is refusal to accept each poster's presentation of her or his own identity. But even when this kind of anger is seen, posters are also clearly trying to diffuse the heat through humor, self-deprecation, and very careful writing[4]. So while gender is not the primary reason for the consistently positive atmosphere, at the same time, it may be that women are more likely to welcome the inclusion of members' real lives that fosters both tolerance and appreciation of individual differences.

Real People Living Real Lives

The Tarts and their readers demonstrate and reinforce awareness of each other as people in many ways in the 'zine. Some of these are deliberate, such as the way the Sequential Tart masthead has been constructed to allow each Tart on the staff to create a detailed persona that is then available for

[4]One clear sign that people are monitoring their own writing for tone is the frequency with which writers edit their own messages after posting them. This happens far more frequently in threads that involve any feeling of conflict between posters.

all readers to examine. Each member of the staff is asked to create a "bio" by filling out a simple online form that requests information on costume, superpowers, sidekick, secret origin, overused quote, etc. thus framing each Tart as a superhero. Interestingly, while everyone has some fun with this persona, they in fact turn out to be quite accurate descriptions of each Tart's real self, in terms of appearance, occupations, and attitudes. In fact, this activity is one response to Salek's point that there are no mainstream comic book heroines who were "Angsty teenagers. And ordinary women who struggle through the pain and joy and uncertainty of everyday life." The Tarts not only promote the independent comic books that contain this kind of character, they provide examples with their own lives, and do it is a way that is fun rather than didactic. The pleasure in this modelling seems to be not in reinventing yourself, but in reinterpreting, and playing with the way readers understand your identity. These personae allow each fact staff member to create a first impression that will enhance rather than contradict later live encounters.

While not all readers visit the staff biographies, in writing articles and reviews for Tart, staff members also tend to refer often to their own experiences and preferences, explaining how these lead to their reaction to the topic being discussed. This way of writing keeps the Tarts solidly visible as real people and allows readers to evaluate whether they generally agree with that writer—and thus how useful the opinion is. Further, in this way the Tarts model a different response to comics and to culture generally, thus demonstrating another view rather than always arguing against the mainstream.

Women at Sequential Tart seem to take a different path than that described by Turkle and Bloom, useful though that path may be. Rather than creating and presenting new identities in the online community, the Tarts rewrite the interpretations made of their real, original identities. The staff biographies allow the Tarts to transform their real selves into superheroines, lest readers have any doubt. A similar tone finds its way into the boards as well, where writers who in other circumstances might be on the cultural fringe, like men who favor handbags or Utilikilts[5], are seen as cool and whose opinions are valued. Transforming interpretations rather than identities allows the Sequential Tart community to change perceptions more directly, to give members a greater feeling of control, and it may be a primary factor in the communities continuing growth and health.

Virtual communities can fragment when the selves presented online don't match real selves and that split is revealed in a face to face encounter. Problems may also arise if people in the community base their interpretations of others on just a few actions or comments, as often happens during flamewars.

[5]A many-pocketed kilt for men (and women) who would like to wear skirts yet still work in a machine shop or lumberyard. Details at the website: http://www.utilikilt.com/

The Tarts seem to have found away around this by acting socially in ways that parallel their acts as comic book critics. They focus explicitly on reception, and as each defines her own identity, she allows others to do the same. The experience of living on the margin and explaining opinions that don't match mainstream expectations may have taught members in the Sequential Tart community that they can never assume there is only one way to look at the world. Thus when confronted with someone or something they disagree with or don't understand, they will first inquire about what exactly is intended. They give power to others just as they want power given to them, and in doing so, create a community that is far more attractive than those based on competion over who has been there longest, or is most knowledgable in comic book trivia, or what have you.

This dynamic may represent an example of "TechnoVolksgeist" as described by Peter Lunenfeld in his 2000 book, *Snap to Grid,* which he proposes as a way to understand techno or cyber cultures: "the communal sensibility that develops as individuals struggle to form groups with others with whom they share a deep culture" (8). Lunenfeld argues that technoculture genrally has been characterized by a gift economy in which prestige is the most valued commodity; prestige is accquired through the demonstration of programming skill. In this economy, prestige is important because many websites , lists, and other forms of community services are provide through the volunteer work of members, and money rarely enters the equation (7). Sequential Tart fits the definition in so far as all the Tarts volunteer their time and expertise, whether they are writing, doing illustrations and graphics, programming/administration. But as Lunenfeld points out, any commutiy can deteriorate into nationalism or xenophobia, and certainly hostility to outsiders is a familiar attitude in some online communities. In this scenario, members often perform their prestige through flamewars, taunting "newbies," and acting intolerant those technologically inexperienced, apparently having to defend their status constantly.

In the Sequential Tart community, each member does not have to maintain her own prestige, rather the community offer positive reinforcement for all it's members, based on appreciation for good writing, drawing, and programming, but also on behaving in a reliable, courteous, and supportive way. Unlike members of many technocultures, Tarts judge each other based on a holistic assessment which I believe both fosters and is fostered by the integration of life as member of the Sequential Tart community with the outside lives of members. Because the boundaries of this community are so fluid, the attitudes of the community can easily expand into the larger comic book culture.

So, while these women did not create Sequential Tart to explicitly argue against other definitions of women's tastes in or ways of reading comic books, this community has facilitated resistance by

creating a space in which other views are welcomed and given voice, and allowing the views to be heard outside that space. In creating this space and strengthening these voices, the Tarts act to subvert the mainstream of the comic book industry. In her book *Writing a Woman's Life,* Carolyn Heilbrun defines women's writing as subversive whenever they privilege it over interactions with men (44). More broadly, we can define the writing of any group as subversive when members priviledge their own words and stories over that of the dominant group. So whether that Tarts are writing against a male worldview or not, they are choosing to priviledge their own responses to comic books and culture generally, over any stereotypical views that others might try to assign. In his essay "Internet as Town Square," Ringo Ma comments on how this kind of activity is facilitated by Computer Mediated Comunication (CMC):

> CMC is also counter-hegemonic because large scale solidarity among the under-represented can be easily established. Usually members of underrepresented social groups such as ethnic minorities cannot find many "similar" people in their physical environment. On the Internet however, they can locate each other easily and exchange ideas regularly. They can also support each other in their virtual community to confront hegemony (96-97).

Further, because this community has been growing steadily, Tart has in fact caught the attention of the mainstream comic book industry itself and has demonstrated the presence of other potential readers beside young white men to publishers who are focused on the bottom line.

The Growing Influence of Sharp-Tongued Women

Evidence of this growing influence can be seen in the reprinting of reviews and interviews from Sequential Tart on the websites of comic book publishers and creators. For example, the Elfquest website posted a two-part interview with creators Wendy and Richard Pini originally published in Sequential Tart. Elfquest is a venerable comic that has been around since 1977, perhaps the first series to really take off independently of DC and Marvel—who have now reprinted and redistributed them. Allowing two lengthy interviews by Tart Dani Fletcher and then posting those interviews on their own website illustrates the high regard Sequential Tart now enjoys. Dani's interview with the Pinis also illustrates another reason creators are so cooperative with and supportive of Sequential Tart; when Tart assigns an interview, they send someone who knows the comic, and they solicit questions from anyone else on the staff who has an interest, so that unlike the elementary and dull questions that typify interviews in popular magazines, creators enjoy a conversation with interviewers who are already familiar with their work and often with other interviews they have given. The positive response of individual creators has expanded to publishers as well.

Recently, many publishers displayed their respect for and trust of the Tart staff during MegaCon 2002. For the first time, Sequential Tart experimented with running a booth, and focused their

efforts (as always) on outreach. The Tart staff gathered and compiled nineteen recommended reading lists divided by genre, each with about 5 titles listed with a brief description and a "if you like X, try Y" tagline. When they contacted the creators of the series to let them know they had been selected, the response was was gratifying; many creators and publishers contributed comic books and graphic novels to be given out as free samples. Editor Lee Atcheson reported afterwards that:

> Creators such as Colleen Doran (A Distant Soil), Terry Moore (Strangers in Paradise), Carla Speed McNeil (Finder), and Alex Robinson (Box Office Poison) and publishers such as DC Comics (Sandman, Lucifer, Starman, The Authority), CrossGen (Meridian), CPM Manga (Aquarium, Dark Angel), Oni Press (Whiteout, Hopeless Savages) and Fantagraphics (The Evil Eye, Safe Area Gorazde) were just a few of the many people and publishers who contributed comics to our booth (Atcheson, *Sequential Tart*, April 2002).

The Tarts' constructive rebellion subverts a genre that is itself often a site of resistance. In the last fifteen years both creators and readers of comic books have become more diverse as women and people of color take an increasingly active role in the industry, but mainstream comic book publishing is still largely dominated by a few big publishers and distributors who generally will only support series they believe will generate sales. Because women and people of color are still often perceived as only a very small fraction of comic book readers, they are not often targeted by the industry. Some creators have turned to the internet as way to breach industry barrier, but stiff face the challenge of attracting readers. These changes have been supported and facilitated by Sequential Tart through reviews, interviews, the BBS, and even through hosting some online comics at the Tart site itself. All of these avenues of communication help to make the work of independent comic creators more widely available, bypassing corporate publishers and retailers, or organizing readers to influence those entities. But all of this positive activity will be restricted to a fairly narrow audience if access to Sequential Tart seems too difficult to potential readers.

Keeping the Door Open

Any online community is bound to affected by issues of access, and Sequential Tart is no exception. Barriers to participation can be both social and technological and while both deserve more consideration than space allows here, the Tarts are always working to help potential readers overcome these hurdles. The active solicitation of articles is a large step taken every month, but the Tarts have tried to make access easy in other less obvious ways as well. The e-zine and the BBS are relatively low-tech, not requiring special plug-ins or software for viewing, which makes them easier for readers to access, and both are easily searchable thanks to a logical interface and a database back-end. Access is also eased for contributors by the addition of online submission forms for reviews that ensure that all pertinent information is supplied, and saving contributors from having to worry

about formatting, while articles are simply emailed to a list dedicated to monthly submissions. Those who only write occasionally often might simply email an article to Jen Contino, who then routes it to its proper editor, saving them from having to interact with the inner workings of the 'zine. Perhaps more importantly, the Tarts do not scold people who are inexperienced with computers.

While many of them are by their own admission rather geeky, they recognize that not everyone has the interest or the money to get very involved with computers. So when people make mistakes in in messages they post or contributions they send, someone typically will explain via email or a message on the BBS the generally accepted way of posting or contributing an article. Most recently, the Tarts tried their first departure from the internet by running a booth at a large national conference at which they distributed flyers and free comic books, and chatted up anyone who came by who was not already a fan of the medium. These efforts at out reach go far beyond what other comic book websites usually try, especially considering that all of the work done on Sequential Tart is volunteer. Because the booth at MegaCon 2002 was so successful, future booths are likely, which will probably lead to even wider growth of the community. In the not too distant future, the Tarts may have to decide whether to continue growing the site, or whether to focus on sustaining and refining the current features, and similar issues may confront the surrounding community. But for now, Sequential Tart seems to have a clear road ahead.

Returning to Teresa de Lauretis, I believe the women of Sequential Tart and the members of their community, male or female, are (re)constructing gender as de Lauretis describes "in the micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances...in that crossing back and forth of the boundaries—and limitations—of sexual difference(s)" (25). Their ongoing work has borne fruit in a community that demonstrates how we can take advantage of the Internet without sacrificing our "real" lives in the process, and that this is not a mysterioous achievement, but rather the result of seeing online life and physical life as parts of a larger whole, a community that exists in the world and on the screen.

As observers and participants in these communities, we have a rich field of study before us. With growth and diversification of the cyber citizenry, people are using the internet in all kinds of ways, moving out of chatroom anonymity and creating communities that allow them to resist the dominant culture both on and offline, by reaffirming their personal identities, rather than masking them. In the already marginal world of comic books, women have used the web to create sites like Sequential Tart to break out of the stereotypes that act as barriers to greater participation. Faith Wilding charges us with our task as observers in her paper "Where is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?" when she says "In

order to disrupt, resist, decode, and recode the masculinist structures of the new technologies, the tough work of technical, theoretical, and political education has to begin." These changes require our attention, and we need to get beyond simply describing and interpreting community dynamics to making our own boundaries more porous. We must bring our theories into the online communities themselves, uniting our own identities as both observers and participants, just as members of the Sequential Tart community have so successfully done.

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