SIGIS

IST-2000-26329 SIGIS

Deliverable Number: D04

Appendix 2.1 NTNU 1

The Gathering.
Computer parties as means for gender inclusion

Contractual Date of Delivery to the CEC:	31/7/2003
Actual Date of Delivery to the CEC:	31/7/2003
Author(s):	Hege Nordli
Participant(s) (partner short names):	NTNU
Workpackage:	3
Est. person months:	3
Security (Pub., IST, Rest., or Int.):	Pub
Nature of Deliverable (R, P, D, or O):	R
Version:	Final
Total number of pages (including cover):	21

Abstract:

Computer parties are gatherings where many people with an interest in computers get together at the same location. They bring their personal computers and hook them up so they are able to communicate both locally with other participants and externally on the Internet. In this case, we have studied a party called The Gathering, which is the largest such party in Norway as well as Europe. The Gathering was first organised in 1992 and has since been an annual event every Easter holiday. Since 1996, the party has had about 4500 participants and more people have wanted to join in if there were room. After the party in 1999, The Gathering ended up in the Guinness book of records. Never before had as many people been connected to such a huge temporary network at the same time. The Gathering is organised by a voluntary organisation that emphasises the importance of young people acquiring good computer skills.

The Gathering goes on for five days and night. The main computer-activities these days are computer games, chatting and downloading, especially of mp3 (music). However, most of it is a social gathering where people come to meet up with new and old friends. Friends they normally

communicate to only online. The participants are on the average between 17 and 23 years old. Parties like this used to be an all male area. It is still male dominated, but the female attendance has grown to around 10 %. The main inclusion effort is directed at everyone, also women.

KANDU, the organisers behind The Gathering, has most of all an inclusion for all strategy. They want to get the computer-interested youngsters out of their 'bedrooms' and into a community where they can communicate in a face-to-face relation. They do not have only the 'professional' computer youngster in mind, but want to reach out to as many people as possible. In addition, the organisers have also had some inclusion of women strategies. For two years the tickets have been free or half price for female participants. According to them, this did not work so they stopped. Today they have most of all informal strategies and try to encourage and push forward females that show an interest in and talent for computing. They now have females on all levels of the organisations. However, the amount of female participants has not increased much during the last three years, and it is still a male dominated arrangement.

Keyword list: Computerparty, Voluntary inclusion initiative, Informal support

DOCUMENT HISTORY

Date	Version	Comment	Editor	Affiliation
31.8.02	2	Draft	Hege Nordli	NTNU/DISC
25.10.02	3	Final	Hege Nordli	NTNU/DISC

DELIVERABLE REVIEWERS

	Name of Reviewer	Date Reviewed	Affiliation
1st Reviewer	Els Rommes	2002-09-09	Twente
2nd Reviewer	Carol MacKeogh	May 2003	DCU

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Computer parties are gatherings where many people with an interest in computers get together at the same location. They bring their personal computers and hook them up so they are able to communicate both locally with other participants and externally on the Internet. In this case, we have studied a party called The Gathering, which is the largest such party in Norway as well as Europe. The Gathering was first organised in 1992 and has since been an annual event every Easter holiday. Since 1996, the party has had about 4500 participants and more people have wanted to join in if there were room. After the party in 1999, The Gathering ended up in the Guinness book of records. Never before had as many people been connected to such a huge temporary network at the same time. The Gathering is organised by a voluntary organisation that emphasises the importance of young people acquiring good computer skills.

The material for this case has been collected through three visits to The Gathering, doing observation and interviews, some formal and some informal. The analysis in this case is particularly based on interviews with three people who play an important role in the supporting organisation.

There are good reasons to study such a phenomenon in relation to inclusion as well as gender and ICT more generally:

- Computer parties are to some extent an epitome of the so-called boys' room competence, the kind of skill that surprisingly often is admired and assumed to make the entrance into professional computing easier. Through this case, we can study an inclusion effort that in a way is trying to facilitate the acquiring of such competence.

- By studying a computer party over a period of time, we can learn something about why the number of women has increased, while at the same time study why it remains male dominated. This may provide information about the effects of outside changes that to some extent may support the inclusion of women into computer enthusiasm.

- In addition, we believe that the constructions of the gender - ICT relationship in this kind of location are of particular interest, since participating at computer parties for women could be seen as an entry into the belly of the beast in terms of computer cultures.

The Gathering goes on for five days and night. The main computer-activities these days are computer games, chatting and downloading, especially of mp3 (music). However, most of it is a social gathering where people come to meet up with new and old friends. Friends they normally communicate to only online. The participants are on the average between 17 and 23 years old. Parties like this used to be an all male area. It is still male dominated, but the female attendance has grown to around 10 %. The main inclusion effort is directed at everyone, also women.

KANDU, the organisers behind The Gathering, has most of all an inclusion-for-all strategy. They want to get the computer-interested youngsters out of their 'bedrooms' and into a community where they can communicate in a face-to-face relation. They do not have only the 'professional' computer youngster in mind, but want to reach out to as many people as possible. In addition, the organisers have also had some inclusion of women strategies. Two years the tickets have been free or half price for female participants. According to them, this did not work so they stopped. Today, they mainly pursue informal strategies and try to encourage and push forward females that show an interest in and talent for computing. They now have females on all levels of the organisations. However, the amount of female participants has not increased much during the last three years, and it is still a male dominated arrangement.

Arguably, the most important inclusion aspect of The Gathering is the way in which this computer party portrays computing as a social and fun activity. This is an inclusion strategy directed at males as well as females.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

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1. Rationale for choosing the case

At computer parties, many people with an interest in computers get together. In this case, we have studied The Gathering, which is the largest such party in Norway as well as Europe. Parties like this used to be an all male area. Today it is still male dominated, but the female attendance has grown to around 10 %. The Gathering is organised by a voluntary organisation that emphasise the importance of young people acquiring good computer skills. The main inclusion effort is directed at everyone, also women. However, we believe that there are some very interesting aspects of this case:

- Computer parties are to some extent an epitome of the so-called boys' room competence, the kind of skill that surprisingly often is admired and assumed to make the entrance into professional computing easier. Through this case, we can study an inclusion effort that in a way is trying to facilitate the acquiring of such competence.

- By studying a computer party over a period of time, we can learn something about why the number of women has increased, while at the same time study why it remains male dominated. This may provide information about the effects of outside changes that to some extent may support the inclusion of women into computer enthusiasm.

- In addition, we believe that the constructions of the gender - ICT relationship in this kind of location are of particular interest, since participating at computer parties for women could be seen as an entry into the belly of the beast in terms of computer cultures.

2. Thumbnail description

The Gathering is a place where you find many computer interested young people together at the same location. The organisers started The Gathering in 1992 because they wanted young people to have a common place where they could meet, learn, socialise and exchange ideas and knowledge about computers. It was typically an inclusion for all strategy. Above all, the people who started The Gathering wanted it to be a place where everybody could meet, regardless of age, sex, handicaps and knowledge of ICT.

They have also made some special attempts to attract more female participants as well as female members of the crews that run the party. Arguably, we may observe inclusion initiatives related to 'women and ICT' (women as users of ICT) and 'women into ICT' (women as ICT specialists). When The Gathering started in 1992, there were around 200 participants and nearly no women. Now it has grown to 4500 people, and we find a female rate of participation around 10%. Women are also present at all levels of the organisation, including technical support work.

3. Introduction

A computer party is a gathering for computer-interested people. In many ways computer parties is a continuation of what used to be known as copy- or demo-parties. At the latter events, the main activity was to exchange demos' and copies, including the cracking of copy protection codes. Other parties within the computer enthusiastic community are LAN parties and game-parties where the main activity is playing games. At computer parties today everyone brings their own computer and computer-equipment to the same location. There, they hook up to a net that connects you to the other machines at the party as well as to the outside world. Since access to the Internet has become a commonplace, the number of computer parties organised every year have grown considerably. This means that the amount of people actually participating at computer parties increases too. The organisers behind The Gathering started the party because they wanted to give computer-interested youngsters a chance to meet and learn from each other. As the community grew and more and more people wanted to attend, they decided to rather make it a party where as many people as possible could participate, rather than creating a meeting place only for the professionals.

They wanted in principle the inclusion of all computer-interested youngsters in Norway and abroad.

However, in addition to trying to include everybody, the organisers have tried to include more women. Computer parties used to be a male dominated arena. Six years ago, you rarely saw one or two females. Today, more and more girls and women join in, and they have become less visible as individuals and more visible as a group. By studying a phenomenon like computer parties we may analyse inclusions strategies for all as well as strategies particularly for women. Also, it is a good arena to study the gender and ICT relationship. What may a gathering of computer enthusiastic youngster teach us about gender and ICT? What have they done to increase the amount of females attending? And what kind of inclusion strategies are we talking about? Does computer parties make more women involved with ICT as users or is it also a strategy where women become involved in ICT as technical work? Getting more females to participate at computer parties could also mean that more females would like to take part in the ICT world when they grow up. To feel included here is important for future career choices.

The Gathering has also started to get more attention from the rest of Norwegian society. Media has always written about them, usually under the headline: "The Easter-holiday is here again. How is it possible that a bunch of teenage nerds choose to spend five days and nights in front of the computer instead of going skiing in the sun?" However, the attention has started to change into a more positive interpretation. Media pay more attention in the first place, and they write more positive and interesting pieces on the phenomenon. This year (2002) it is also interesting to notice that the Norwegian Minister of Trade and Industry, Ansgar Gabrielsen, opened the party. He had himself called the organisers and asked if maybe he could do something. His son was going to participate, so he would be there anyway. He gave a speech, where he focussed on the importance of getting a formal computer education as well. The organisers had asked him to talk about this because they very much want participants to get a proper computing education in addition to the informal knowledge they acquire as enthusiasts. The Minister of Trade and Industry and his people were very positive towards the arrangement, and they stated a wish to keep on having conversations with the organisers and maybe give them some kind of financial support in the future.

4. Methodology

The material for this case has been collected through three visits to the computer party The Gathering. The case has also been part of my Ph.D. thesis 'The Net is Not Enough. Searching for the female hacker'. My visits to The Gathering in 1999 and 2000 were for my Ph.D. work. In 1999, I spent three days there. Most of all I did observations and informal interviews with people that were attending. The next year, The Gathering '00, I took part as a crewmember and worked in the press crew to be able to observe the activities from the inside. Because of my role as a crewmember, I had to arrive two days in advance of the party to help with the preparations and stay on for an extra day after the party to tidy up. Also, that year my main research strategy was observation. In addition, I also did interviews with female participants that I needed for my doctoral thesis. Thus, the empirical material for this case is most of all observation and informal interviews from my stay in 1999 and 2000. In addition, part of the information I got from my interviews was useful.

At the Easter 2002 I once again went back to get some extra information for the SIGIS case. My colleague Vivian Lagesen Berg went with me for this occasion. We spent two days observing, doing informal interviews and three formal interviews.

Thus, the empirical material for this case is a combination of observation, informal interviews and formal in-dept-interviews. I have done formal and informal in-depth-interviews with organisers and participants, but most of all I have done participant observation. The formal in-depth-interviews supporting this case are:

Interview 1: Vegard Skjefstad, male 32, the main-initiator of The Gathering. Skjefstad was one of the initiators when they started this computer party in 1992, and he has since then been a part of it. He is also head of KANDU.

Interview 2: Laila Skjefstad, female 27, is the only woman in the administrative crew. She is also head of the Press Crew and started the Crew Care in '97. She has been a participant and worked in crews at The Gathering for 5 years. She got married to Vegard at The Gathering '00, in front of all the participants.

Interview 3: Håvard, male 35, one of three initiators of the organisation "Norwegian Nerds". Norwegian Nerds was started at The Gathering '96. They are responsible for a large amount of the competitions and the entertainment during The Gathering.

5. The Gathering – presentation of the case story

The Gathering is an annual event organised to get computer-interested youngsters together at the same location. The first time was at the Easter holiday in 1992. At that time, Internet was something private homes rarely had. This meant that most of the communication between computer-interested youngsters would take place in their local environment or through BBS. The idea was that at a computer party, they can exchange experiences, opinions and be social in face-to-face interaction, as a contrast to communication through digital media. The organisers of the event wanted to get the computer-interested youngsters to become included in a larger network of computer-interested people.

Right from the beginning, The Gathering was a success. Every year since, it has grown. In the first years, the party was organised at different places, mostly around Oslo but once also in Stavanger. In 1996, the amount of people wanting to participate became so large that they had to find a larger place. After searching around, they decided that the so-called Viking ship (Vikingskipet) would be a suitable place. The Viking ship is a huge indoor ice-skating hall that was built when Norway hosted the Winter Olympics in 1994. It is situated in a small town called Hamar; about two hours drive from Oslo.

The party is now as large as it can be, considering the space in the Viking ship. The Gathering 00, 01 and 02 had about 4500 participants. In 2002, the tickets were sold out three hours after the sale was opened, and many people wanted to get in but could not be admitted. In the last couple of years, the organisers have tried to find a new place, but have not succeeded. They cannot find a building that is large enough, with a 'central' location and affordable. They want a place where they can get all the participants inside the same room, so that one can have an overview of the whole thing. They are sceptical about having it in Oslo, because they fear it will attract criminals, people wanting to steal computer-stuff or sell drugs. And because they want attendance to be as cheap as possible, they do not want to pay a lot to rent it. However, they still have not succeeded in finding this better place.

From a modest beginning as an impulsively organised 'copy party' put together by a small group of friends that all belonged to the computer group Crusaders, The Gathering actually ended up in the Guinness book of records after The Gathering '99. Never before had as many as 4300 people been connected to such a huge temporary Network at the same time.

In the beginning, The Gathering was organised by people from the computer club Crusaders, together with other people within the computer enthusiast community. More and more people took part and at some point one needed an organisation that could be in charge. KANDU was started in 1996. KANDU has more than one meaning. First of all, it is acronym for *creative and active Norwegian computer youngsters*.[1] Second, KANDU can be seen as put together by two words, 'kan' and 'du', which means in English, can you. In many ways that say a lot about what KANDU really is. The aim was to show people on the outside, the trade and industry and potential sponsors, what a computer party was really about and the importance of an activity like this.

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[1] In Norwegian: Kreative Aktiv Norsk Data Ungdom. http://www.kandu.no

One of the organisers behind The Gathering says that KANDU wants to contribute to increased interest among young computer-enthusiasts. They want to promote the idea that all the equipment that they own should be shared with others. They help others who want to put up smaller computer parties by sharing their expertise and computing gear. In that way more computer enthusiasts can be included. KANDU's goal is to get all computer-interested boys (and girls) out of their bedrooms and into a computer community. In that way, they can meet others, get friends, learn and have fun. In addition, KANDU also works towards schools and youth clubs. They get 'old' computers from the Norwegian trade and industry, bring these machines to schools and youth clubs and help them to get the system up and running.

KANDU is a non-profit organisation. Everyone that works as a crewmember at The Gathering automatically becomes a member of KANDU. However, KANDU is run by a board that has the authority in-between the annual meetings. The board consists of 10 people with different functions. They have meetings every now and then, but mainly they communicate through e-mails, IRC or phone. KANDU also has its own bus. It is quite an old one, but they have put a lot of effort into making it work, so these days it is in pretty good shape. The bus is used when they travel around to different parties, either in Norway or in other Scandinavian countries. In that way they can get their people around cheaply at the same time as they have a way of moving all the network equipment from one place to another. KANDU also have a small office place down town of Oslo. This is where they hold their meetings, but mostly it is used for storing computer equipment.

KANDU takes care of the preparations ahead of The Gathering. However, one needs more people to actually make the party run. A crew of about 150 to 200 volunteers takes care of that. The crews are divided in different groups that have special areas for which they are responsible. Every crew has a leader. If the crew is large, sometimes level two leaders as well. On the top is KANDU that operates as the Admin Crew during The Gathering.

The Admin Crew takes care of all the administrative work. This is where the 'big guys' are sitting. In addition to the preparations in advance of the party, they have the superior responsibility during the party. The Crew Care takes care of all crewmembers. They are usually about eight to ten people, and it is the only crew dominated by females. They make dinner for all the crewmembers every day in addition to making sure that there is warm soup, bread, tea and coffee in the kitchen at all times. Then we have two crews that take care of competitions. The Demo Crew is, according to their web page, in charge of the demo-scene-related competitions. They put up the schedule for the various competitions, receive the contributions from the people attending and set up the jury to select the top contributions to be shown on the big screen. The Game Crew organises different game playing competitions.

The Medics take care of people that are not feeling to well. The Net crew makes sure that the net runs smoothly all through the party. The Security Crew is the largest with its 50 members. They take care of security. They make sure that no one enters the hall that should not be there and keep control of what the participants are doing, in case of downloading of porn or other illegal stuff. They co-operate with the local police, which also have at least one representative present at all times. The Press Crew takes care of journalists and alike. They answer questions, show people around and put people in touch with the one they need to speak to.

The Tech Crew keeps the physical network up and running at all times. According to their web page they 'are they guys 'n girls you'll have to interact with if you've got some 'technical' problems during The Gathering'. They are also the crew who arrives first, in advance of the party, to put out switches, cables and everything necessary to get the network running. The Vision Crew takes care of the audio-visual part of The Gathering. They give participants' entertainment and information at the TG-Telly, the scene and the big screens. The Film Crew takes care of what movies are to be sent during the party. And last but not least is the Info Crew. They are responsible for gathering and distributing information about The Gathering. This crew is divided into web, IRC and info booth. The web people keep the web page updated at all times. The IRC people run the IRC-channel for the party. And the info group answers all kinds of questions at their info stand.

Thus, The Gathering is a well-organised computer party with a quite complex organisation. However, its voluntary character means that there are no permanent positions. Thus, you can do a kind of career here, moving from being an ordinary participant to become

part of one the crews that organise the event. There are also different positions within the crew, which means that if you do a good job one year you may be able to climb and get a better position the next. Also, it is important to note that that there is some concern about the role of women, which induces some reflections about the importance of visibility and role models.

6. The party experience

My party experience in 2002 started as I got on to the train from Trondheim, heading for Hamar. Next to me was a large bag. Inside it I could spot a monitor. On the row ahead of it there are two boys and a girl. Quite soon I hear one of them saying; *I just can't wait to get there. It's going to be so cool.* As we get closer they repeat this in a more rapid manner. When Hamar station is announced the three of them jump to their feet and start getting their things together. The girl has brought a laptop, while the boys have taken along desktop computers. It takes them quite a while to get all their stuff out of the train and over to where they can get a taxi. I leave the three of them there on the railway station, together with groups of other youngsters bringing large amounts of computer equipment. On the way to the Viking ship, I meet more and more youngsters. Some are sitting outside the snack bar eating a burger or potato chips. Others on their way back from the shop carrying bags filled with coca cola and chips.

When I first entered The Gathering in 1999, this is what I wrote in my notebook:

This is just fantastic! It can't be described! A giant hall packed with computers. It's quite a few girls here. Not as dominated by boys as I was expecting. Another thing that strikes me is that it's not as nerdy as I had thought. A lot cooler, a bit kind of hip hop really. Today it's cool to be a computer-nerd!

Already after having been there for half an hour, I felt that my initial expectations were misleading. I was totally overwhelmed by the sight and the atmosphere. A lot of the participants had about the same experience when they first entered the party. Like Ina says:

I remember the first time I was at TG. WOW! I sat at the podium in the evening and saw all the lights from the monitors. I met friends whom I'd only met through IRC. It was a meeting place where one both could meet up with old friends and make new ones. A lot of the people that I'm in touch with on IRC daily live far away and one doesn't meet very often. TG becomes a meeting place.

Now, three years after, the thought or the sight of this still overwhelms me. It really is something special. Even people that are at The Gathering for the fourth or fifth time cannot get used to the sight. One of the crew-leaders that was there for the sixth time said this:

Every time a new TG starts I get startled. When the first night of the party arrives I know that all the preparation and work in advance of the party is worth it. Looking out on the party during night time is like looking at the sky on a starry night.

Figure 1: The hall during nighttime.

What you see is this huge hall packed with computers. It is all dark, except from the light coming from about 4500 monitors. In addition, some of the participants have brought with them small cosy lamps to provide some extra light to their places. A lot of the participants also use a lot of energy in decorating their private spaces. They put up flowers, teddy bears or do as the boys in photo 2.

Occasionally the whole place is lit up by laser-shows. The sound is overwhelming. Loud music comes from the main speakers at more or less all times. People also have speakers at their computers to play their own music or to get the sound from the computer-games. The music is mostly a kind of house or acid music. Because of all the noise, some participants wear earplugs or walk around with other kinds of ear protection. After a while, one either just gets used to it or gets exhausted. The Gathering '01 was a 'silent' party, which meant that there was no music played and people were not allowed to play music loud on their computers. However, the organisers found that the party feeling to some degree disappeared without the noise and reversed the decision.

Figure 2: Decorations.

To give you a better vision of the party I have also included a photo of the hall during daytime (see photo 3). It is also a special smell at the party. Try to imagine a smell coming from a combination of pizza, hamburgers, French fries, sweat, wet towels, stinky socks, bad breaths, deodorants and after shave. People live inside the hall for five days or more. The participants sleep there, shower there, eat there and work there. At day one the air is fine, at day three you can start feeling the smell and at day five one should try to avoid going outside since coming inside again is quite brutal.

The activity is at its highest during the night. From around six in the evening till three or four at night. Between six in the morning and twelve in the day, they turn down the music. This is the time when most people get some hours of sleep. They bring with them sleeping bags or a duvet. Some even bring small beds, like sun-beds, with them. You find them all over the place, some sleep outside the computer area, like on the tribune, but quite a lot just fall asleep where they are. At my first party, I could not believe that people were able to sleep in such a noise, but after having joined some parties myself, I know the noise is not a problem. It is just a matter of being tired enough. Most of the participants will go on for as long at they can the first night and then sleep as little as possible during the rest of the party.

Figure 3: The hall during daytime.

Figure 4: Boys taking a nap.

The parties are strictly non-drug/non-alcoholic. The organisers are very restrictive towards drinking and the use of drugs. Many participants are under the legal age of drinking, and The Gathering would not like to get a reputation for being a place where youngsters get drunk for the first time. They have had some incidents with people trying to get into the party being drunk and drugged, but only a few. If you are found intoxicated inside, you will not

ever be allowed to another party. And people do not want to risk that. They are there to get high on computing, not anything artificial.

Because the activity is at its highest during nights, people tend too get to little sleep. To be able to stay awake, people drink lots of caffeine. Coca-Cola is the most common liquid. In addition, one also knows that some people take caffeine pills. However, the organisers strongly encourage participants to get enough sleep and food, and to be careful with the caffeine. They send out messages over the load-speakers or the message board that people must remember to sleep and not have too much caffeine. People should rather go outside for a walk and some fresh air. Every now and then, a participant still needs to be taken care of because he or she has collapsed because of to little sleep and food. This is mainly the first timers though. Those who have participated before know how important sleep is, and they tend to sleep more to be able to cope all through the party.

7. The party from start to finish

As mentioned, I worked as a crewmember at The Gathering '00. Being a crewmember means that you have a responsibility to get the party up and running. The crewmembers have to meet a day or two in advance. The local sport club is hired to put up the tables before most crews arrive. And there are a lot of tables!

The day of the opening, people start queuing outside the hall around six in the morning. The doors do not open until five in the afternoon, but people want to be among the first ones in. Some have been driving all night and are eager to get their computers up and running as fast as possible. For quite a lot this is the major happening every year, and they have looked forward to and planned for it a long time. However, a 'seat-number' follows their ticket bought in advance of the party. So, the order in which they get inside has nothing to do with the seating. It is more a matter of getting the party started. In that way computer clubs, or just friends can make sure that they will sit next to each other when they order tickets.

Figure 5: Eight hours before the opening.

As the evening rise, most participants have their computers up and running. The biggest issue is always whether or not one manages to get on the net. The network people are under a lot of pressure, but for the last couple of years the network has worked very well. It breaks down every now and then, but this is in many ways a part of the game. Building a temporary network for 4500 people is quite a challenge.

After people have their computers working, they start walking around. They meet with old friends, people from last years' party, or people they have met and become friends with on the net. They chat, look at other peoples' machines, their programmes, and chat or maybe flirt. The social aspect of the party is very important. To meet up with old friends and new friends is their main reason for going to the party.

Figure 6: Participants engaged in dancing.

And the party is on. For five days and night people mainly stay inside the hall. Every now and then, a group will leave the hall and go out to get a pizza, a hamburger and more Coca-Cola. In the beginning, I had problems finding out what people were doing when they were actually paying attention to their computers, which they of course also did. However, many activities happen in front of the computers as well. Most people are running at least two tasks at a time. Playing games and chatting are of course the most frequent activities. ICQ and IRC (Internet Relay Chat) are the most common chat programs. The Gathering even has its own IRC channel so all the participants can talk to each other online as well as face-to-face. This channel is open a couple of months in advance of the party so that participants can discuss the forthcoming event and get to know each other. The number of games played is large. However, different action-games like quake are most common. A lot of time is also spent downloading mp3 files (music) or other programmes. For some of the participants this is a great opportunity to be online 24 hours a day and not have any restrictions whatsoever on how much time to spend on the net.

Different competitions are running all through the party. There are two types of serious competitions, game-compo and demo-compo. The game-compos' are about computer-games and goes on all through the party, day and night. People sign up individually or as a team to different competitions. The competition usually continues till there is only one person left. Different computer-games are played and on play against each other on the network. A

demo is a demonstration of what a computer club can design, using programming knowledge, graphic design and music with the help of a computer. The different groups compete against each other within different categories, made according to what type of computer that is being used and the size of the file. The size of the file says something about how advanced one could make a program without making it larger than a certain size. They also have competition for music and graphics on its own. The amount of people being involved in making demos is not very great, considering the total size of the party.

The participants at The Gathering are mainly from 15 till 23 years old. Yet, one can find participants that are no older than ten or eleven years old, coming together with a parent or an older brother. And there are quite a few people older than 23 as well. There is a group of people that has been involved from the beginning. Some of them are still involved in the organising and have now often reached the age of 28 to 35. So even though one can get the impression that teenage boys are the only ones that go to computer parties, this is not totally true.

8. Inclusion strategies

When I asked the organisers behind The Gathering what kind of inclusion strategy they were using, they usually said that they did not have any formal strategy. They just wanted to organise a party and everyone that is interested can join. However, the reason why they started to organise The Gathering in the first place was that they wanted to give computer-interested youngsters a chance to meet face-to-face. They wanted them to have a place where they could be social in a face-to-face relation, instead of just sitting behind their computers at home. As The Gathering has grown, they have had to make decisions about what type of party this should be. There has been a lot of discussion among the organisers as well as the participants if this should be a party for as many people as possible or if it should be a smaller event for the 'experts'. Because they feel it is important to include as many youngsters, they have decided to rather make it as large as possible and include all instead of making it small and only include the experts. Consequently, some of the more professional users have stopped coming to the party because they think it is too noisy and too many participants with no serious interest in computing. The 'older guys' are also concerned because they feel that there is no serious interest in programming and creative skills these days. While they went to parties like this to compete with real computing knowledge like programming skills, the participants today are only occupied with entertainment like games and chat.

So The Gathering is most of all a project about inclusion of all computer interested youngsters. In addition they have been concerned with inclusion of people that they feel for some reason are 'outsiders'. This could be working to include people with handicaps, people that are fat or of other reasons have a smaller network. They have people in wheelchairs working in crew and people with other disabilities that are given extra support as to be able to join. The go a long way in helping to organise so that also those that would normally have a problem joining an arrangement like The Gathering can participate both as participants but also in the crews. In '02 they had a person in wheelchair that worked at the Vision Crew. The other crewmembers had to lift him and his wheelchair up to the scene many times a day in order for him to do his work.

Very many participants at The Gathering are active in different online communities like Internet Relay Chat. They chat and become friends with people online. To some, The Gathering is their main possibility to meet these people face-to-face. One of the organisers told me this story when I asked why she wanted to spend so much time working with the event:

> *Like one of the girls that are here this year said. She is 15 years old and quite overweight. She has always been picked on a lot. She had been chatting with a boy on IRC here and they had agreed to go out for dinner together. After they got back she said; he didn't even think about how fat I am! And the first thing he said was; she went out with me and ate pizza. He was so proud and so was she. That's when it's worth something. (Interview 2)*

In addition to a mostly informal strategy to include all, some particular initiatives have been taken to get more female participants. As already mentioned, the introduction

computer parties used to be an all male business. This was also the case for The Gathering in the beginning. The first year (1992) there were two females, the next couple of years 6 and 7. At The Gathering '96 there were 28 females. Since then the number have increased little by little. They really do not know how many women that participate, because they do not do the statistics. The guesstimate for 2002 was something like 10%. So the amount of women is still not very large. However, among the participants there seems to be an understanding that there are actually quite a lot of female participants these days. And I guess it is, if you compare it to how it used to be. Laila, one of the few females in the leadership of both The Gathering and KANDU, says she remembers The Gathering in '96:

> *In many ways we were a girl-gang that year. It was great fun. We were something special, since there were so few of us. We spent time together, just us girls. Now we mix to a larger degree and become more invisible. I'm still known as one of the old girls though.* (Interview 2)

For a couple of years the organisers had special arrangement for females. One year they did not have to pay to get in, the next year they only had to pay half price. This was a strategy to include more women into the world of computer enthusiasts. They thought that by making it free for girls and women more of them would decide to go. No other initiatives where taken. However, according to the organisers, this did not really make more girls come. The year they stopped offering females a special deal on the admission, the amount of female participants increased substantially. The organisers have analysed this in this way:

> *We are trying to show the girls that KNOW something. We have focussed a lot on getting more girls to come. Earlier we had free tickets for girls. Then we had a couple of years with half price for girls. However, when it was the same price for all and they had to play by the same rules as the boys, then suddenly twice as many joined. It's because they are allowed to play by the same rules. If not, it's often like this; look how sweet she is, she can join. So we have taken that away. Instead, we have said; if you want to join, you have to play by the same rules as everybody else. The result is that the girls come that have something to show, or if they have someone they want to meet.* (Interview 1)

Since then, they say that they have not given girls any special treatment. No formal inclusion strategy is used to include more girls and women. They very much claim that it is important not to do it, because girls themselves prefer to play by the same rules, and because none may say that anyone has the job they have because of being a girl. However, they do focus on females and are consciously supporting the females that show they are skilled. Informally they have a strategy to emphasise women and ICT. They do this because, as they see it, it is important to show both people on the outside and on the inside that there are a lot of highly skilled female participants.

> *We have tried to show off the ones who got a clue. And we have pulled them with us of that reason. None of the girls are here because they have been given special treatment. Kari is not on Net because she is a girl. Kari works on Net because she is technically brilliant. She worked at Tech earlier and we showed her to the people from CISCO. And now she works at Net as Cisco's certified engineer. She has been through their whole education-system and showed what she can. So, the girls have had to fight to get where they are. Thank God.* (Interview 2)

They do not have any formal ways of supporting the girls and no formal strategy. The practise is more like if you are in a crew one year and do a good job so someone notices you, you will be asked to join the next year and after a while you will get a position higher up in the system. The way Laila supports them is by asking them to join when they go to other parties, like when travelling to Dreamhack in Sweden every year. It is also about getting a reputation for being a girl and into computing as compared to being a girl and at The Gathering just to chat and meet boys.

Now they have females on top in more or less all the crews:

> *We have girls up high in most crews. We have shift-leaders on Security that are females. We have shift-leaders on Tech that are females. One of the most*

professional on Net is educated by CISCO thanks to the fact that she's been working here. There are girls up high all over and that's the most important. The only place we don't have a lot of girls are in Admin, but that's because one needs a lot more push to keep going all through the year. Girls are mostly more engaged in boyfriends, or of building a house or a home.

The organisers very much feel that the way they are running things do include girls as well as boys. They also feel that they by now have started to succeed in showing that The Gathering is a place where you find skilled and talented girls and not just female 'hangouts' or IRC-babes as they say themselves:

The important thing for me is to be able to show that there are extremely skilled girls here. I think that's fun. The media is also more offensive now. They go out and pick out the girls themselves. We do not have to find them for them any longer. They are starting to interview the girls that are here because they know a lot (not because they are girls at a computer party). Especially within music there are many girls that assert themselves.

If we try to summarise, we may see a composite inclusion strategy at work at The Gathering. The baseline inclusion idea is to have as many different types of young people as possible participating, males as well as females. This is achieved mainly through the way the computer party is being set up and organised. It is reasonably cheap, it is safe, it allows many different activities, and it is labelled as cool and fun. At this level, inclusion is supposed to work through the experience of being a participant and what participants then tell on the grapevine. They say they make efforts to get female participants feel at home, which could also be considered as an inclusion activity.

According to the informants, they have tried the idea of offering cheaper tickets to females. This was experienced as unsuccessful and was terminated after a few years. They themselves emphasise the efforts they do to get women to be really interested in ICT and to provide opportunities for them to show it. This means a conscious effort to get more women involved with ICT technical work.

The Gathering has been set up as a very large computer party for a broad spectrum of computer interested young people. In this respect, it is a very interesting indicator of the development of the gender and ICT relationship among young people. Are computers becoming less of a boys' thing, and do girls also acquire the so-called boys' room's competence?

First, we should not overdo the female rate of participation at The Gathering. Even if their numbers have increased considerably, they are still a minority. Second, it is interesting to note that the gender and ICT problem is accepted as such also by a voluntary, male-dominated organisation as KANDU. It is part of their arguments, and they acknowledge the importance to do something about it. In fact, one might recognise that they have a kind of missionary attitude in relation to computer enthusiasm; they see this as something wonderful that they like to share with as many as possible. Still, they struggle with the female participants, not just to get enough of them, but also to have them recognised as participants on an equal footing with the boys and young men. In the culture of The Gathering, it appears to be a quite strong view on the gendered distribution of skills. Some boys know, some boys and most girls do not.

However, the organisers seem to operate from an understanding of the problem that things may change, and as we have seen, they try out various integration activities in relation to the crews. They are also giving some of the skilled girls extra attention, so that they get the opportunity to show off their skills. This is done with some care, they say, since the dominant ideology states a strong preference for equal treatment and the same rules for everybody. We may recognise this as a hacker ethos. Still, it is important and interesting that in fact, the organisers are bending the rules a little to be able to pursue their inclusion interest.

Arguably, computer parties might also contribute to make computer enthusiasm more attractive to women through the way they have changed the concept of the nerd. Previous research on gender and ICT have very much emphasised that most women are appalled by

the hacker culture and the intimate, passionate, all-encompassing relationship to computers that has been constructed as the main features of this culture. This has probably also made playing with computers appear as a kind of risk project. Would any sensible female take the chance of becoming a nerd? When we recognise the features usually attributed to computer nerds, the whole phenomenon of computer parties appears to be a paradox. Nerds do not socialise, do they?

However, there should be no doubt that The Gathering is a social event through and through. The main thing is not the computer screen, in fact, the computer is mainly an excuse to meet other people. However, the advantage of the computer party compared to other parties is that you meet people that share your strong interest in computing. The computer is allowed to play a central role as something it is ok to talk about and discuss. It is not an interest that is dismissed as nerdish.

At least to some girls and young women, this implicit effort of symbolic redefinition of the computer culture is probably quite valuable. It makes it easier to see that computer enthusiasm can be a social activity, something one can do with friends, and something that can give you skills that are appreciated by other people. It is not just about acquiring competence on your own, alone in your "boys' room".

In the accompanying user study, we will return to the issue of the efficiency of the inclusion measures that we have observed here. However, we need to emphasise that the increase in female participation at computer parties like The Gathering also has to be understood as a reflection of a broader change in girls' and women's relations to computers. In this respect, the computer parties represent an interesting arena of change. Compared to the copy parties of the late 1980s and early 1990s, they offer a much broader concept of interaction related to computers. Clearly, this is related to the phenomenon of the Internet and the emergence of new, computer-based activities like chatting and the design of web pages. Probably, there is now greater freedom for computer enthusiasts to construct themselves in different ways, something that may facilitate the erosion of the dominant idea of computers as masculine. Any inclusion strategy to get women into the information society needs to address the wearing down of this perception.

DISCLAIMER AND SIGIS CONTACT

Research referred to in this document and accompanying reports has been supported by the European Commission   Information Society Technology (IST) Programme, as an accompanying measure in the Fifth Framework, specifically, part of the Cross-Programme Actions of IST. (http://www.cordis.lu/ist/)

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Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society : IST-2000-26329 SIGIS

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