

Digital Bloodsports and Inked Paws: What I Love About the Alterhuman Communities

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It's easy to talk about what I find aggravating or difficult to deal with in the alterhuman communities—complaints are a dime a dozen, especially since I'm rapidly approaching my ten-year anniversary of activity (is that the barest hint of salt-and-pepper I spy in my muzzle?) But even with all my criticisms, there's a lot I love about the various parts of the alterhuman communities. There are more wonderful quirks in these groups than I think we ever realize or genuinely acknowledge.

And if there's one thing that I don't think the alterhuman communities are given enough credit and love for, it's our collective ability to never shut the fuck up.

In these spaces, people are always doing, or saying, or creating *something*. In some ways it reminds me of college, with something always happening somewhere, no matter the weather, time, or day. Whether dead of night or coldest winter day, you'd always be able to find a party, or a study group, or a sportsball match—and in the same way, wherever you are in the alterhuman communities, there's always something going on: a debate or discussion, a convention (big or small), a newbie asking for help with their identity, a bunch of older alterhumans shooting the shit, a new term being banged out, art and games and comics being created and commented on, collaborative projects or surveys or groups being advertised. The list goes on and on—someone, somewhere, is always dipping their paws in ink, it seems.

Our community thrives off our interactions with one another, and that's fundamentally shaped both the subcultural elements—such as the way we so highly value content creators and writers, and people who have been in the community for long periods of time and can share stories and experiences that we might otherwise have no knowledge of—and the bizarre forms of (n)etiquette and discourse that we constantly see evolving and changing. It's a beautiful thing to witness in real-time, watching the customs and terminology and language we have change and shift over the years, and

watching the wheels of discourse turn their spokes into previously uncharted waters, a new subject to be written and examined by an invested collective.

It's a testament to the diversity and fluidity in alterhuman experiences and identity, the fact that so many people with so many different experiences and different explanations can come together time and time again; space and space again; all to hash out their ideas and their thoughts and their differences and their similarities. All to share in the beauty of being *other* with one another. It's a sight to behold, like an ocean of a thousand different blues all forming wave after wave of colors, and I get to be a lucky painter who's too stunned to even figure out where to look first.

Our community's perchance for debate (or, more accurately, for digital bloodsports) is also something I absolutely adore. Maybe I'm just a young hooligan who's ready to fistfight the first person who comes through my door at any given moment, with my Ye Olde Discourse days still singing through my veins, but I love the willingness of so many people and groups in this community to throw down over what they believe and their opinions. It's an admirable fighting spirit that I see in so many alterhumans and, whatever the reason for it, it's something I feel a deep kinship regarding.

People in these communities care with their whole chest. It gets us in trouble often, but I don't think these groups and subcultures and identities would be the same without it: we're loud. We're stubborn. We inevitably butt heads, but it's what makes us, *us*. But it's more than just our tenacity that I'm talking about here. Being alterhuman, at least in the spaces that I personally find myself in, is about being unabashedly yourself, in whatever wacky, interesting, bizarre, wild, feral way that might translate to.

It's reminiscent of the queer spaces I've been in previously, both in how it harnesses a sense of aggressive pride sometimes, with attitudes of "Yeah, I'm not human—if that's a problem for you, get lost!" and in how it just purely makes me feel unafraid and unashamed to be nonhuman. This is something I've experienced especially at Howls and other in-person group meet-ups.

When I spend time in-person with other alterhumans, it'd be silly to say there's outright some sort of spark on connection or feeling of family—but there is a feeling of

recognition. Of not an “us vs. the world” spark, but of an “we can all be ourselves here,” understanding. It’s so much less dramatic than some accounts I’ve heard, but it’s still a powerful, comfortable, enjoyable feeling. It’s knowing that you can go chasing after a squirrel with reckless abandon without getting judged, or can stop to roll in a pile of especially crunchy leaves just for the sensation of it, and isn’t that its own form of freedom?

And then there’s the beauty of individual identity. One of my favorite parts about my archival work is getting to learn and hear about identities that I’ve never seen before, especially if someone’s written a lot about the “how”s and “why”s. I love getting to not only see how other people experience things differently than I, myself, do, but I love getting to watch the gears in their brain turn as they explain how they got to one conclusion, or other possibilities they’ve considered, or any number of detail-oriented information. Getting to hear about shifts, especially shifts from identities we don’t often see like species-specific fictionkin, conceptkin, machinekin, and phyanthropes, is always such a treat. Hearing how it feels to experience phantom shifts as Southern Live Oak tree, or getting to read about mental shifts from an Alolan Marowak, or any other number of things I’ve been lucky enough to learn about in these communities, is sincerely, genuinely just the absolute coolest. Group experiences and concepts are amazing, but individual experiences are just as, if not more, spectacular.

And speaking on individuals...as a young, teenage nonhuman, I probably would have included a section about how much I admire or value the efforts and works of older alterhumans who are still in the community, and how much I especially enjoy getting to see their content in the communities. How they’re such “inspirations” for me and other such cheesy words. But that feeling has grown and changed a lot as I’ve gotten older: while I still appreciate all the greymuzzles and oldfruits in the community (shoutout to all you grey-furred and grey-scaled rascalions out there), I feel like the individual age group I particularly appreciate is a lot of the younger folks and ‘new blood’ I’ve seen pop up in the communities.

It’s such a strange feeling to look at someone and go, “Oh man, you’re going to be an absolute *force to be reckoned with* when you’re older!” but that’s something I’ve definitely experienced. It’s a strange mixture of wistfulness, thinking about my own

budding years in the alterhuman communities with probably rose-glassed fondness, and of before-the-fact pride, watching how passionate people are and already being proud of them: for achievements they haven't yet made, and goals they haven't yet realized, and selves they're just now discovering. It's genuinely great to see the new, uncharted directions that a lot of the older teenagers are starting to pull and shove the communities in, bringing up old ideas in new ways or just throwing out new perspectives entirely. It makes me feel excited, filled with anticipation for what the future holds and how everything will look like in ten, twenty years.

It also does make me feel a little left behind and out of the times, admittedly, but that's not a wholly bad thing: times change. Communities change. Our communities are based almost entirely on evolution, where they either continuously change, or they stagnate and die out. The fact that I'm feeling a little out-of-place more and more these days just means I'm settling into the aspects of my identity and the language that I grew up with for describing it is falling more out of use—it just means that I'm getting older and taking on a different niche than I inhabited when I was younger. When I was still a teenager in the community, I was the teeth-bloodied, hot-headed discourser who was willing to shout down and fight anything with a pulse, who was always in the thick of it no matter what "it" was. Now, I think I'm a lot closer to a scholar; jokingly a warrior-scholar, like my patron, if you had to reference the way I came into these communities, but overall, I'm a lot more content to sit it out on the sidelines these days and focus more on my own research and creation.

I wouldn't stick around these community spaces if I truly didn't want to be in them, but there's so much I love wrapped in them that I don't want to go, anyways. For every physical shifter that drives me up the wall, there's a million more things that make me want to keep interacting with other nonhumans and alterhumans and that makes me want to keep being a part of specific alterhuman spaces. I love getting to be here, getting to watch how these communities evolve, getting to hear everyone's stories; I'm glad I get to be a piece of it all, and I count myself lucky for any positive changes I can help affect just by being here. I would do better to remind myself of that more often.