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# **Living in Virtual Communities: An Ethnography of Life Online**

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
(Social Anthropology)  
in the Department of Criminology and Sociological Studies  
University of Hull

by

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## Abstract

This thesis examines some of the issues involved in the development of human relationships in cyberspace. Set within the wider context of the Internet and society it investigates how geographically distant individuals are coming together on the Internet to inhabit new kinds of social spaces or virtual communities. People 'live in' and 'construct' these new spaces in such a way as to suggest that the Internet is not a placeless cyberspace that is distinct and separate from the real world. Building on the work of other cyberethnographers, I combine original ethnographic research in Cybertown (<http://www.cybertown.com>), a Virtual Community, with face-to-face meetings to illustrate how, for many people, cyberspace is just another place to meet. Secondly I suggest that people in Cybertown are investing as much effort in maintaining relationships in cyberspace as in other social spaces. By extending traditional human relationships into Cybertown, they are widening their webs of relationships, not weakening them. Human relationships in cyberspace are formed and maintained in similar ways to those in wider society. Rather than being exotic and removed from real life, they are actually being assimilated into everyday life. Furthermore they are often moved into other social settings, just as they are in offline life.

## Keywords

Community, friendship, space, place, real, virtual, social capital, cyberethnography, virtual community.



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Those who read my work will learn that I have come to understand what friendship is, and so my last comments are for a special friend, Angela Keen. She set out on this journey with me as an undergraduate in 1995, but died last spring after a short and aggressive fight against cancer. I wish you were here.

Denise Maia Carter, 2005.

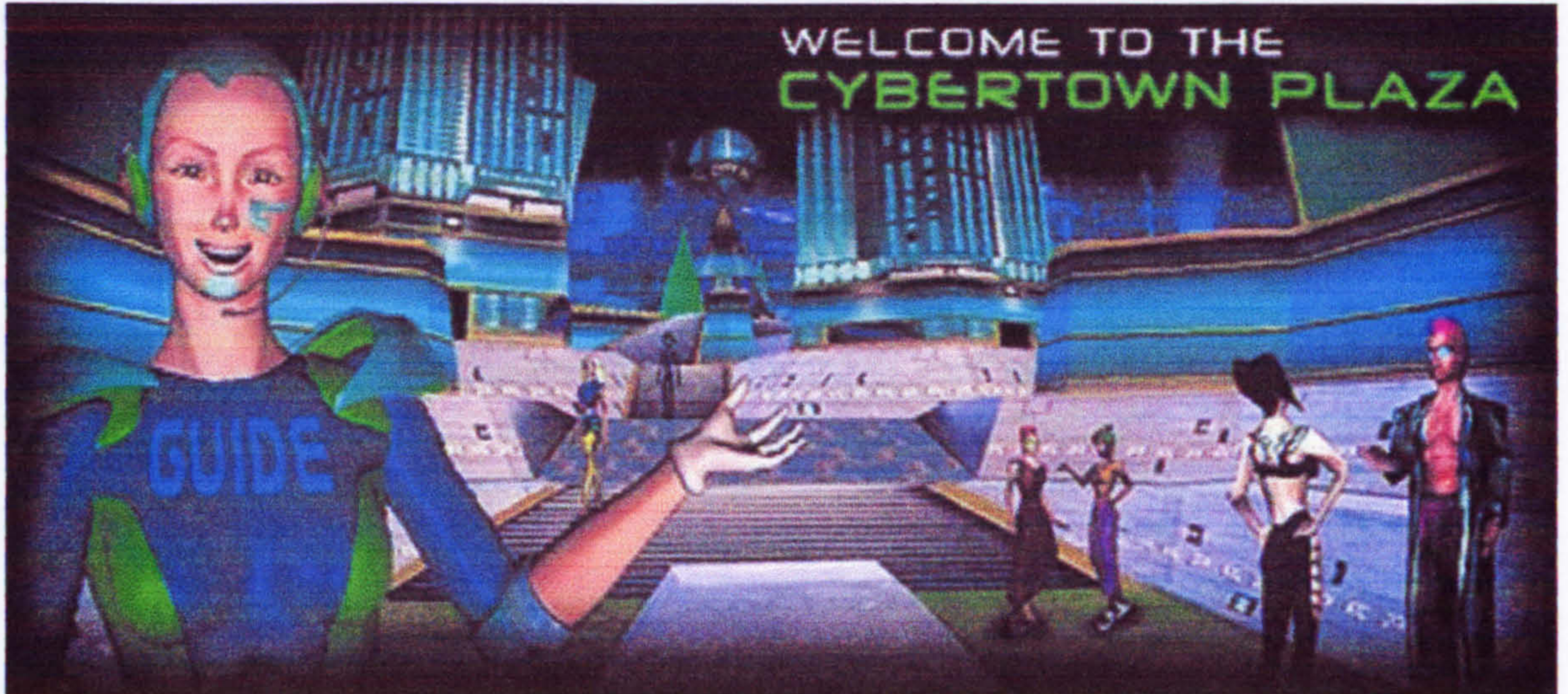


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## **Welcome to Cybertown**



## **Living in Virtual Communities: An Ethnography of Life Online**

by

***dutypigeon* (Cybertown Elder)**



## **Introduction**

*The Internet has not changed anything, but we have changed the ways in which we do many things by using the Internet.*

Christensen (2003: 10).

### **Introduction**

Those who search the Internet for evidence of major transformations in social life will not find it in Cybertown. On the contrary, my study of this virtual community demonstrates how ICTs (Internet Communications Technologies) are becoming increasingly embedded in our everyday lives. Regardless of wider theoretical debates about the 'real' and the 'virtual', or discussions about what 'place' really means, Cybertown's residents choose to live part of their lives there. As Christensen (2003) has said - they do some things differently but the Internet itself has not changed anything. In short, this thesis is a contribution to the ongoing debate about the significance of ICTs in our everyday lives. Its main focus is not only to find out how the residents of Cybertown live part of their life online, but also to discover why they choose to live life online.

Cybertown is an online virtual community, available through either a 2D or 3D chat environment. Residents can have jobs within the community for which they earn virtual money called CityCash. They can then use this money to buy homes and other items, including gifts. The Cybertown 3D worlds runs on the Blaxxun Community Platform software, and has a unique social structure characterised by social interaction between residents. Cybertown began life as Colony City in 1997. It was a showcase project of Blaxxun interactive of Munich, Germany.



Colony City made use of the VRML (Virtual Reality Modeling Language), a standard for displaying 3D content, including virtual worlds and avatars, on the Web. These VRML files became shared virtual worlds using Blaxxun's award-winning multi-user server technology, enabling people from all over the world to meet and interact in rich-media environments in real-time on the Web.

In the course of this research I developed an empirical, ethnographic methodology that also contributes to current anthropological debates about virtual ethnography and about the field. Twenty years ago social theorists were suggesting that the Internet would revolutionise social relationships. Turkle (1995) and Stone (1991, 1995) both wrote extensively about how the perceived anonymity provided by Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) would allow people to explore alternative aspects of their identity and of themselves like never before. Even Benedikt (1991) and Rheingold's (1991) early assessments of the revolutionary nature of the Internet led them to believe that it would bring about immense transformations in social life. Despite the fact that these early predictions seemingly encapsulated the exciting, transforming and revolutionary potential of the Internet, Hine's (2000) evaluation suggests that these predictions remain largely a myth. In this respect the Internet has not been an agent of social change. In other words it does not bring change about by itself. On the contrary, although Internet technology itself retains the capacity to be an agent of social change, it does not necessarily act as one (Hine, 2000: 4; Grint and Woolgar, 1997: 6). In other words the Internet is increasingly being recognised as a vehicle for social change rather than being a dynamic future-altering device, and Internet technology is becoming embedded in everyday

social life rather than the other way around. However, one major outcome of the persistence of myths about the Internet is that the search for radically altered futures has until recently overshadowed the investigation of how people are using and understanding the technology itself. This suggests that there is a manifest need to investigate those everyday practices through which the Internet is used and understood. In brief, there is a need to emphasize the significance of ways of thinking about the technology instead of the technology itself. Rather than searching for radical futures, we need to investigate what is happening currently. With this in mind, the central subject of my thesis is an analysis of the development of human relationships in cyberspace<sup>1</sup>. Set within the wider topic of the interconnection of the Internet and society, and drawing on a range of research methodologies underpinned by ethnographic practice, it provides a critique of those academic discourses that suggest the Internet is a placeless cyberspace that is distinct and separate from the real world. On the contrary, cyberspace is as Christensen explains, a: 'space of life that is organised in relation to the world people live in' (2003: 22).

This analysis investigates those everyday practices through which life online in a virtual community called Cybertown is lived and understood. This study aims to illustrate the processes by which everyday cultural patterns and social conventions about community and friendship structure online relationships.

This is not to say that there is merely a one-way causality. People are not simply embedding offline identities online, or indeed escaping into an abstract,

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<sup>1</sup> William Gibson, is often credited with inventing the term cyberspace in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, where he said that cyberspace was '...a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation...' (1984: 51). However, since then it is becoming a more generic term to indicate any social space on the Internet.

disembodied, mythical post-modern space. Instead people are acting as conduits for the flow of culture between the online and offline life, resulting in a conceptualisation of cyberspace within a whole world. Central to the analysis of this flow are three basic questions: how are online relationships formed and maintained; what kind of relationships are formed online; and how are real life and virtual life interwoven in terms of lived experiences?

Ethnography is a useful starting point for such a study since it provides a set of methodological tools that allow the understanding of meanings and experiences. Later chapters explain how this is achieved, showing how ethnography can look at the ways in which virtual communities on the Internet are experienced and understood, and consequently uncover the manner in which Cybertown residents make sense of their lives both on and offline. Using an ethnographic perspective allowed me to focus on the locally situated aspect of Internet use, in a virtual community called Cybertown. As a result, my research explains how the sharing of new contextual social spaces in cyberspace through community building and friendship results in the integration of these spaces into offline social life, thus becoming an accepted part of the 'whole social world'. One question constitutes a major theme throughout my analysis – why were the residents of Cybertown so concerned with making me understand how 'real' their experiences in Cybertown were? Later chapters explain how they did this in often mundane but sometimes surprising ways. However, in many respects the debate about whether virtual communities are 'real' or 'not real' is superfluous. What is more important is what virtual communities and their residents can tell us, not only about social interaction in a virtual setting, but also



about social interaction in the rest of our everyday lives. When writing about the investigation of virtual communities it was Schaap who said: 'the anthropologist's task then, it would seem, is still to hold up the mirror, to tell the tale of another world' Schaap (2002: 1).

He was explaining how getting to know another culture allows the researcher to see themselves as if they were not themselves but an Other, as if reflected through a mirror. More importantly, he goes on to say that as well as learning to understand the Other and their culture, this has the secondary effect of allowing the anthropologist to better understand themselves and their own culture. For example, elaborating on the construction of gender through online role-playing Schaap explains: 'gender in everyday life after all is not neutralised by a few keystrokes and has real effects and consequences for the way people live their lives' (Schaap, 2002: 3).

The same can be said of Cybertown where community building and social relationships there reflect back or 'mirror' what is happening in the rest of our lives. It is in this process of reflecting the real world that Cybertown is understood by its residents as being no less real itself, and in later chapters I explain their predilection for describing Cybertown as a 'real' place, Cybertown as a 'real' community, the people they meet there as 'real' people and the friendships they form there as 'real'. That this is possible is not surprising given Baudrillard's explanation of what is real and what is not real. He explains how what we see in the mirror is no longer an abstraction: 'it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 1983a: 2).

According to Baudrillard nothing is 'not real' anymore precisely because nothing is 'real' anymore. The dichotomy between the real and the unreal has been dissolved, resulting in the residents of Cybertown experiencing their city in what they describe as 'real' ways.

With regard to the relationship of online and offline life three of the wider debates covering the interconnection of the Internet and society impact directly upon my research, since they affect the assumptions that I took with me into the field. The first of these concerns the proposed effects of cyberspace on changes to the understandings of place and space, the second concerns the questioning of the dualism between the real and the virtual/imaginary already touched on briefly, the third relates to the extent (if any) of the influence of the Internet on community and social relations.

### **Cyberspace and our Understandings of Place and Space**

First, my experience in Cybertown is that I was not dealing with a place that was disembedded from offline reality, thus I did not treat it as a space 'apart from' the rest of social life. Instead I started from the assumption that the Internet, or cyberspace is neither opposed to nor disembedded from 'the real':

We need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform, but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness.  
(Miller and Slater, 2000: 5)

There has been an interest in changes in the perception of social space over the past few decades (B. Anderson, 1991; Augé, 1995; Carter *et al*, 1993; Certeau,

1984; Foucault, 1967; Lefebvre, 1974). That social space has become a central issue for theorists appears to coincide with the assumption that Western modernity has (almost) drawn to a close (Bauman, 2000; Featherstone and Lash, 1995; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Harvey, 1989). Yet even this assumption has been challenged, and modernity, associated with the rational ordering of our social lives appears to be resistant to change. In the past several key technologies have been recognised as exemplifying modernity, in particular the clock and the calendar, which have been acknowledged as major contributors to the separation of time and space. In basic terms, as time becomes a universal concept, able to be co-ordinated across vast distances, space becomes separated from physical location - what Giddens (1990) calls time-space distancing. New systems of exchange and knowledge that are independent from particular locations in time and space act as disembedding mechanisms that promote this distancing. Hine (2000) has drawn comparisons here between new ICTs and the clock and the calendar, suggesting that the Internet, as a new system of knowledge, might be seen to 'augment possibilities for restructuring social relations across time and place' (2000: 6). However, Hine contemplates this possibility against the background of new ICTs perhaps acting as re-embedding mechanisms through their 'capacity to organise and to know' (2000: 7), thus becoming agents of social control rather than disembedding mechanisms. Nonetheless, in the 1990s ICT and Internet theorists, among others, increasingly associated this theorising of new social spaces like the Internet with the concepts of postmodernity and globalisation (Baudrillard, 1983b; Bauman, 1998; Benedikt, 1991; Castells, 1996; McLuhan, 1964; Poster, 1995; Rheingold, 1991). For these theorists the Internet in the postmodern era lends itself to being an agent of fragmentation and



deconstruction of the self. Consequently, as individuals lose both social and cultural meaning in their everyday lives, they assemble on the Internet, in cyberspace, instead to re-invent them, leading to a further erosion of social and cultural meanings. This was predicted by Bauman when he suggested that having no further need of our now empty physical space all social meaning would be 'transplanted into cyberspace' (Bauman, 1998: 20). Similarly, Baudrillard believes we live in a social world taken over by simulated experiences and feelings, resulting in an inability to understand reality as it truly exists: 'the real is not only what can be reproduced, but also that which is always already reproduced' (Baudrillard, 1993a: 146). One result of this hyperreality is that we only experience prepared realities such as edited war footage, television soaps, theme parks etc. Thus it might be argued that Cybertown is one such 'prepared reality', within which we can only experience a sanitised form of place, community and friendship, yet it is also one into which we can transplant all meaning and experience if Bauman's premise is correct. This is an extreme view, and, as I explain in later chapters what this is not yet happening, if at all. Cybertown is not a postmodern city on the Internet into which all meaning and experience has been transplanted. Instead, I explain how there is a flow of experience and meaning between real life and Cybertown life, and that this flow is not simply one way, from real life to Cybertown life, causing our experience of reality to be lost online. In fact the opposite is true, the residents understanding of their online life feeds back into their offline life, enriching their experience of both, as Cybertown becomes increasingly embedded in their daily lives. Both online and offline experiences are real in the sense that neither is less real than the other. However, by holding up the mirror to Cybertown, the

reflection informs us not only about what is happening in this city on the Internet, but also what is happening (or not happening) in the rest of our everyday lives. This is explained in the later chapters on community and friendship.

Miller and Slater (2000) are sceptical about the reasons for the recognition of the Internet as postmodern, suggesting instead that the Internet ‘appeared at precisely the right moment to substantiate postmodern claims about the increasing abstraction and depthlessness of contemporary mediated reality’ (2000: 5). As a result, it appears that the representation of the Internet as ‘virtual’ has had less to do with the ‘characteristics of the Internet’ than with the needs of postmodern ‘intellectual projects’ (Miller and Slater, 2000: 5).

More recent research, including my own, demonstrates that although these new social spaces on the Internet may challenge modernity, they are in fact becoming part of the modern social order (Markham, 1998; Miller and Slater, 2000; Schaap, 2002; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). My research indicates that the Internet, far from becoming a disembedding apparatus is itself becoming embedded in everyday social structures. These debates are continually revisited throughout my thesis as I explain how, for the inhabitants of Cybertown, the Internet has become an important vehicle of everyday social life that is both contiguous with, and embedded in, their everyday social structures and relations. This impacts directly on the second and third issues that concern me: the relationship between the real and the virtual/imaginary; and the extent of the influence of the Internet on community and social relationships.

## **The Real and the Virtual/Imaginary**

The Internet is often associated with a blurring of the boundaries between the real and the virtual/imaginary (Poster, 1995; Turkle, 1991). In addition, the dichotomy between the real and the virtual/imaginary is closely related to discussions about space and place where doubt is thrown on authenticity, representation and reality. For example, in discussing place and space Ingold (1993, 2000) suggests that the difference between space and place is that the first is an abstraction and the second is invested with meanings. This can be more easily explained by looking at the difference between unfamiliar and familiar territory, where the former is an abstract space, and the latter is familiar because of the known patterns of social interaction by which it is characterised or understood. As such, places are not rigid and inflexible locations, instead they are representations of their history, whereas space is not a representation, but an abstraction.

Similarly for Augé (1995) the contrast of place and space is what generates the difference between places and non-places. His explanation is that place is produced by the symbolic organisation of spaces within it and this organisation has both a spatial and a temporal presence. The temporal aspect of place allows places to claim a relational history, in which they supersede their own past.

Where there is no organisation of symbolic spaces, and no history to relate to the present, then these are non-places (in similar ways to which Ingold's (1993, 2000) spaces are abstractions that are not invested with meanings or history).



The organisation of space and the founding of places, inside a given social group, comprise one of the stakes and one of the modalities of collective and individual practice.  
(Augé, 1995: 51)

If this 'collective and individual practice' produces lived in or 'frequented' space, then it is these lived in spaces that generate places. By contrast where there is no lived in space, there is non-place. However, place and non-places are not opposite, they are merely descriptions of different spaces, although non-place always retains the possibility of place. Its status as non-place is not permanent because it may be lived-in in the future, thus endowing it with both a temporal history and a symbolic organisation of space. At the same time non-place is not a transitory condition because that would imply that all non-places would eventually become lived in places. In other words as people 'live in' (Augé, 1995) spaces and invest them with meanings (Ingold, 1993, 2000), their collective and individual practices generate place, or as Lefebvre (1974) puts it, social action creates social space. More broadly, all these notions come together in understanding place as constituted through embodied practices engaged in a locality, and that locality is in cyberspace. As Whitridge explains: 'the notion of 'place', of a meaningful location assumes a remarkable discursive richness, and need not remain tethered to the archaeology of the landscape' (Whitridge, 2004: 213).

### **The Influence of the Internet on Community and Social Relations**

My third debate concerns the influence of the Internet on community and social change. The meanings that Cybertown residents attach to their experiences

there, i.e. in the ways that they ascribed the adjective 'real' to many facets of their lives online: Cybertown as a 'real' place; Cybertown as a 'real' community; the people they meet there as 'real' people and the friendships they form there as 'real' impacts on this debate because, if Cybertown mirrors or reflects back what is happening in the rest of our lives then what is it telling us? The clue is to discover exactly what Cybertown's residents are looking for and why: in other words to investigate community and friendship in Cybertown. My analysis of the two shows a strong correlation between community building, the formation of friendship ties and trust. These three notions are important, since as Putnam explains (1995: 67) trust is one of the essential components of social capital, along with a wider network of interpersonal relationships. Social capital operates to improve people's lives by increasing the flow of information, networking and resources available to them:

Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible.  
(Cohen and Prusak 2001: 4)

Social capital itself cannot be measured but trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours are attitudinal and behavioural indicators of social capital. Putnam (1995) documented a decline in activities that produce social capital in the US, for example participation in bowling leagues, church attendance, family dinners and holidays. He suggested that this results in disengagement in three areas: first, civic disengagement where Americans vote less; second, informal social ties are weakened between neighbours, family and friends; and third, Putnam's survey data indicated a decline in trust. In the light of this decline in civic engagement, close personal ties and trust, some theorists

have looked at ways to reverse this trend, often by increasing the personal ties and flows of information in communities by means of CMC (computer mediated communication). The answer, then, could be that the continuing downward trend in social capital in our everyday lives (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995) could to some extent be balanced by looking for new places on the Internet where social capital is increased such as virtual communities (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; Pruijt, 1997, 2002; Wellman *et al*, 2001).

Cybertown is particularly interesting because it is a community where the major reason for living there is to make friends and be community-spirited. In this respect it fits into the second of the two categories of virtual communities outlined by Blanchard and Horan in their examination of the potential for virtual communities to increase social capital:

The first involves the more traditional sense of a physically based community which adds electronic resources for its citizen's use...the second is geographically dispersed with members participating due to their shared interests in a topic and not their shared location.  
(Blanchard and Horan, 1998: 295)

Blanchard and Horan (1998) point out that it is on this first group that more research has been done into the potential effects on social capital, but that it is in the second group where individuals can possibly develop stronger interpersonal ties because those ties are based on shared interests and not just on shared location. This is true in Cybertown, where the residents there share strong ties to each other and to what they call a 'real' community. Many theorists accept that virtual communities are 'real' communities because their residents believe they are communities (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; Rheingold, 2000), and this is certainly true in Cybertown. The residents of Cybertown believe it is a 'real'



community and use the community metaphor to describe what they perceive to be a desirable attribute. But what exactly does community mean? With the advent of computer mediated technologies and the attendant increase in communications technologies social theorists have continued to attempt to explain what if anything is happening to community. For example where Tönnies (1957) argued that traditional community has been lost, Wellman (2001a) and Castells (1996) suggest that community has not been lost, instead it has changed. These two are among a growing cohort of social scientists who hotly debate the impact of the Internet on community (earlier studies include those by Rheingold, 1991 and Turkle, 1996), and although most believe that there have been changes, there are many different opinions about the nature and extent of the changes. These changes can however be grouped in three basic themes: the Internet weakens community; the Internet enhances community; and the Internet transforms community.

Among those who suggest the Internet weakens community, because it is socially isolating, are Kraut *et al* (1998) and Nie and Erbring (2000). The latter suggest quite strongly that the Internet is dangerous because it is both immersive and compelling. They believe that it may even result in Internet users neglecting their family and friends. However, Nie and Erbring (2000) have been heavily criticised for what many see as producing a study flawed in both its methodology and conclusions. One critic is Etzioni (2000), who suggests Nie and Erbring's claims that the Internet increases social isolation are wholly unsupported. Etzioni does however acknowledge that technologies like the Internet do impact on our social lives. Some studies go further and even speak



of Internet addiction (Young, 1998; Swartz, 2003), indeed there is even a Centre for Internet Addiction (ironically this centre is situated solely online, at <http://www.netaddiction.com>).

However, one important point to keep in mind is that community was changing even before the Internet came into being at the end of the last century. As a matter of fact every time a new communications medium has been introduced, from the telegraph to televisions to telephones and now computers, claims have been made about their transforming influence. For example, in the nineteenth century with the advent of the telephone it was suggested that people would be more socially isolated since they would no longer need to meet face to face (Ling, 2004; Marvin, 1987). In this respect the debate about the Internet's impact on community can be seen as simply a continuation of anxieties since the Industrial Revolution about the impact of any kind of technology on community. In particular McLuhan's (1962, 1964) work on the mass media, and his recognition of emerging trends in the social transformations brought about through human interaction with communications media can increasingly be applied to the Internet. As McLuhan states, 'each medium, independent of the content it mediates has its own intrinsic effects which are its unique message' (1964: 8). The former, intrinsic effects, refers to his concept of a 'global village'; and the latter, the unique message refers to what he called a 'change of scale'. McLuhan suggested that the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale, something he indicated later when talking about the 'global village'. Indeed McLuhan first made the concept of a 'global village' popular when he forecast that the whole planet would end up being connected by an

electronic communication system back in the 1960s (McLuhan, 1962: 31; McLuhan, 1964: 5; McLuhan and Fiore, 1967; McLuhan and Fiore, 1968). Hence the arrival of the Internet thirty years later was seen by many as inevitable (Poster: 1995). Many recognise, as Barlow *et al* (1995) so elegantly stated, that ‘with the development of the Internet . . . we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire’ (1995: 35).

The second important point that I want to mention here is that the Internet enhances community because the Internet is used to keep in touch with family and friends, either by adding Internet contact to telephone and face-to-face contact or by shifting their means of communication to the Internet (Markoff, 2000). Hence Nie and Erbring’s (2000) assertion that the Internet weakens community appears less attractive, a point made by Fred Langa when criticising their study:

Let me pick one glaring example: the study trumpets that 26 percent of Internet users report they spend less time talking with family and friends on the phone -- clearly, a symptom of increasing social isolation, right? But the same study shows that by far the most common Internet activity is sending and receiving e-mail. Amazingly, nowhere in the study did I find anything that recognized what is, to me, the obvious causal link: E-mail simply has replaced the phone for many routine types of communication. (As my daughter would say, duh!) The interpersonal interaction still takes place; it's just shifted from one medium to another. (Langa, 2000: n.pag.)

There are other theorists who support this idea that social interactions are being extended into online life, for example the work of Miller and Slater (2000) who investigate how the Internet is used to (re)construct local spaces of identity such as home and family in their ethnography of the Internet in Trinidad. Similarly, Christensen (2003: 12) explains how online identities are constructed with

strong links to offline sociality, culture and landscape as he investigates the Inuit and Cyberspace in a more recent ethnography.

Finally, a third point suggests that the Internet transforms community because it facilitates the development of more global and far-flung communities of shared interests, although not necessarily at the expense of local contact. However, since the 1970s, many studies have documented a change from local to long-distance community, in which friends and family live long distances apart, and there is little contact with local neighbours (Fischer, 1982). This is where the work of Wellman (Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Wellman and Hampton, 1999b; Wellman *et al*, 2002) fits in. He suggests that community is better conceptualised as a social network rather than a group. Such networks could be locally bound, as in traditional neighbourhoods, or global as in some Internet-based communities.

My argument is that Cybertown does not weaken community. Cybertown is a community in the sense that its residents understand community as a meeting of place, people and culture. Indeed my research explains how Cybertown strengthens and transforms our perceptions of community by facilitating the development, of a more global and far-flung community of interest, a virtual community. By locating this argument within the wider theoretical debate around community, later chapters identify two things: first, a range of community characteristics that encompass virtual community; and second, the conditions under which Cybertown is constituted as a virtual community. In short, Cybertown is a 'real' community because its residents say that it is.

## **Thesis Organisation**

**My analysis begins in chapter one with an introduction to the development and history of the Internet. Beginning with the Internet's origin as a non-centralised communications network called ARPANET, then moving through various applications of use, it closes by establishing the nature and use of virtual communities.**

**Chapter two offers a discussion of the research methods I used as well as a rationale for their application in the virtual field. Ethnography in cyberspace is not without its problems. Participant observation is a central component of ethnographic research that allows the researcher to achieve the breadth of knowledge that comes from being both insider and outsider to the social group being studied. In this chapter I explore the various opinions of other ethnographers in cyberspace, among them Sherry Turkle, Annette Markham and Daniel Miller, before I go on to discuss my own methods, the challenges I faced, and their resolution.**

**Chapter three is a description of my field of research. This chapter includes a description and discussion of Cybertown's structure, the rules and regulations therein: and the practices, rites and rituals associated with immigrating, living and working in this particular online cybercommunity situated at <http://www.cybertown.com>.**



Chapter four explains how the language of Cybertown contributes towards the maintenance and reproduction of Cybertown culture. 'Language represents, embodies, constructs and constitutes meaningful participation in a society and culture' (Morgan, 2004: 3) and anthropologists have explored the importance of language and its links with ethnography since Hymes first published his paper 'The Ethnography of Speaking' in 1962. Consequently language is recognised as being a significant tool for engagement with the community under study because this facilitates the sharing of the 'intuitions of the speech community' (Saville-Troike, 1989: 4). In Cybertown the written word is the key means of communication and the physical modalities of speech such as the sound of laughter are absent. Yet a new language has developed in Cybertown as in other places on the Internet: one where words have developed to express larger meanings, where they are emotive, active and performative. Thus, like many other ethnographers I had to learn a new language: the language of the Internet. The second part of chapter four briefly explains what it means to live in Cybertown. By asking the question 'what does it mean to say you are there in Cybertown when you are here in front of your computer screen', I analyse the position of individuals in cyberspace - that is, their position as social bodies. This lays the foundations for the analysis of community and friendship in later chapters by building up a picture of how technological engagement is structured by underlying cultural knowledge and discourses of identity, community and friendship.

In chapter five I synthesise the analyses of traditional discourses of community that include B. Anderson's (1991) collective imaginings of community, and

Cohen's (1985) symbolic community spaces, with the more recent views of Barry Wellman (1999, 2001c) who suggests that we are now finding community in networks rather than in groups, and Howard Rheingold's (1991) earlier work on virtual reality. I demonstrate how there has been a shift from spatial communities to more temporal social networks based on connectivity rather than proximity. More importantly this chapter introduces the complex relationship between community, trust and social relationships by analysing social capital, concluding that social capital emerging out of public trust in Cybertown is one factor that can facilitate the formation of closer interpersonal ties like friendship.

In chapter six I continue my analysis of trust and interpersonal ties. Drawing on my interview material and original ethnographic research I demonstrate how, for many people, cyberspace is just another place to meet. Human relationships in cyberspace are formed and maintained in similar ways to those in wider society. These relationships are not exotic and removed from real life, instead, they are being integrated into everyday life. Furthermore these relationships are often moved into other social settings, just as they are in offline life. People in Cybertown are investing as much effort in maintaining relationships in cyberspace as in other social spaces, as they order their social lives both on and offline.

Mitchell (2000) appears to be a more proactive supporter of this social network theory. An architect, he suggests that since the Internet is here to stay architects have a responsibility to steer us towards living in a city of the future, or as he puts it 'e-topia'. In this futuristic city we will move towards creating



electronically mediated environments for the kinds of lives that we want to lead. He argues that our definitions of architecture and urban design must be broadened to include both virtual and physical places in these cities of the future. In this 'e-topia' we will be connected by the Internet as well as by road, rail and other transport systems. Whatever the debate about community, friendship and the Internet it is clear that the Internet is an increasingly popular medium of both communication and socialisation. It is also playing a progressively more important role in our everyday lives. This has major ramifications for the study of virtual communities. First, if Wellman (1999, 2001c) is correct in his predictions that we are living in networks rather than communities, and second, if architects like Mitchell (1996) do intend to steer us towards a city of the future, then the study of virtual communities like Cybertown will definitely be an important theoretical tool for studying the organisation of online life. At the very least it will help us make sense of the interaction between online and offline life.

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# **Chapter One: The Internet**

## **Introduction**

Familiar as many people are with the Internet, few of them are aware of its development and history. The Internet continues to develop in what some see to be an exponential, unruly manner. Yet these matters do have a bearing on the ways in which it is used by millions of people around the world. People are using the Internet in many different ways, driving its development in areas not envisaged by its original creators. My research looks at only one of those applications, a virtual community called Cybertown. However, it is important to see the bigger picture, to be aware of where virtual communities are positioned in comparison to other Internet usage. In this chapter I explain how the Internet has developed to the present day. Beginning with a look at the rationale for its initial inception by Paul Baran in 1962, I explain how the Internet matured from a military communications network into the global digital network we now know. Next I move on to give a brief discussion of who uses the Internet. In this first section I explain what is meant by the Digital Divide, not only between individuals within nations, but also between nations themselves. Following that, I give examples of general usage, from education, information, crime and socialising. It is the last that concerns my research, the ways in which individuals across the globe connect, play, communicate and socialise. Accordingly the second section describes how the Internet is not a single 'space' or 'place'. The difference between space and place, where the first is an abstraction and the second is invested with meanings, is a subject I investigate in

more detail in later chapters. The Internet is made up of many different areas, each with different uses, and each invested with different meanings by their users, for example email, MUDs, MOOs and virtual communities. Although not exhaustive, this section gives an idea of the scale and scope of the Internet, and in it I talk about the possibilities of its use as an instrument of freedom or of surveillance, raising the spectre of the Internet as a contested site. My discussion continues as I examine its portrayal in popular culture and films, as the possibilities for inhabiting cyberspace move out of the science fiction genre and develop into actuality. In addition I look at the possible globalising effect of the Internet and the way in which it may facilitate the compression of time and space. It is this development that is central to my research, since the last thirty years have already seen tremendous changes in the social arrangements of everyday living, and more changes are coming. Rather than social life now operating within tightly knit groups, communities and organisations, individuals are, according to Wellman acting within loosely connected, distant, disparate 'partial networks of kin, neighbours and organisational ties' (2001b: 17). Urban planners suggest that we are building cities without agoras<sup>1</sup> or public community spaces. Harvey (1989) suggests that this increases social isolation, resulting in a search for new social spaces and networks to replace what Oldenburg (1989) calls the old coffee houses and village wells. In this respect chatting on the Internet may be an alternative to gossiping with neighbours over the garden fence. Mitchell (2000) argues that the global digital network is a new urban infrastructure that must be incorporated into architectural design, thus reinventing public space. He proposes strategies for the networked connection

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<sup>1</sup> The agoras of ancient Greek city-states were 'public spheres' where true democracy was lived each day by citizens who made collective decisions about issues affecting their lives.



of real and virtual places that ‘create linkages *between* cities and *within* cities’ (Mitchell, 2000: 19, authors italics). These new agoras within his 21<sup>st</sup> century e-topias are not necessarily physical places, nor will they function in known ways. They will be real or virtual places that operate in new and complex combinations, yet serve the purpose of providing places of assembly and interaction with freedom of public access, in much the same way that Cybertown is operating already. Old definitions of community are being rewritten, and the complex interplay between the Internet and social life has led to the inhabitants of Cybertown taking the Internet into their offline social lives, where it is deeply entrenched in their everyday social structures and relations. How they do this is one of the central narratives of my ethnography.

## **The Internet**

Only yesterday a colleague explained that they were going ‘on the Internet’ to check the rail times between Hull and London. Likewise, people all over the world now use the word ‘Internet’ to describe what it is they connect to through their computer systems and modems. The Internet is increasingly in general usage across the globe, for example the World Internet Usage and Population Statistics<sup>2</sup> report a 125.2% growth in Internet use worldwide between 2000-2004. However, the term Internet is often used interchangeably with the World Wide Web (WWW or Web) even though the two terms are different. To be more exact, the Internet refers to the physical network of cables and computers,

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<sup>2</sup> World Internet Users and Population Statistics. Available from: <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>>.

and the Web refers to the body of information and knowledge available on the Internet. There are other components too, for example, electronic mail, newsgroups and search engines to name but a few.

In order to understand what the Internet is and where it came from we should examine its roots in the Cold War. Indeed, the Internet is sometimes popularly described as a 'Cold War baby'. One of the foremost problems of the Cold War (1945-1991) was what would happen to national communications in the likely event of a nuclear war that resulted in widespread global destruction. For the USA think-tank at the Rand Corporation<sup>3</sup> finding the solution to any ensuing communications problems was a priority. Within the USA a communications network was needed that would link command centres with cities, states, military bases and allied forces, and that would not break down in the event of a nuclear strike. There were some seemingly insurmountable problems. First, no material protection would be able to completely safeguard any kind of communications network in the event of a nuclear strike. The network would always be vulnerable to a physical attack. Second, if the network had a centralised operating structure it could be neutralised by a single attack. Yet if the network was not centralised this would lead to a third problem; if the network is too fragmented it will not function properly, therefore its command-and-control structure must be extremely sophisticated to overcome these problems.

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<sup>3</sup> The RAND Corporation is a contraction of the term Research AND Development. It is a think-tank originally sponsored by the US Air Force (then the Army Air Forces). RAND's main research areas are foreign relations and diplomacy, security and defence, economic issues, regional studies, social issues, health and welfare, education, labour and human resource development, science and technology.

The earliest idea of a computer network intended to allow general communication between users of various computers was formulated by J.C.R. Licklider of MIT in August nineteen sixty-two, in a series of memos discussing his 'Galactic Network' concept. But it was Paul Baran of the RAND Corporation who proposed a working solution in nineteen sixty-two. First, a lateral network would be designed that could operate whilst fragmented. Second, it would have no centralised authority. Messages would be broken down into digital fragments or 'packets' which would be individually routed/switched between nodes<sup>4</sup>, with no previously established communications path.

According to Sterling (1993), the principles were simple. This new packet switching network would be assumed to be unreliable at all times. In spite of this it would also be designed to overcome its own unreliability. Baran envisaged a branching, interconnecting network of computer terminals, what he called a distributed network (see diagram 1). Each junction that was common to two or more branches of this system would be called a *node*. Each of these nodes in the network would be equal in status to all other nodes (hence no centralised operating system), and would be authorised to originate, send, receive and pass messages. The messages themselves would be divided into packets, and each packet would be separately addressed. Each packet would therefore originate at one *source node*, and would end up at a

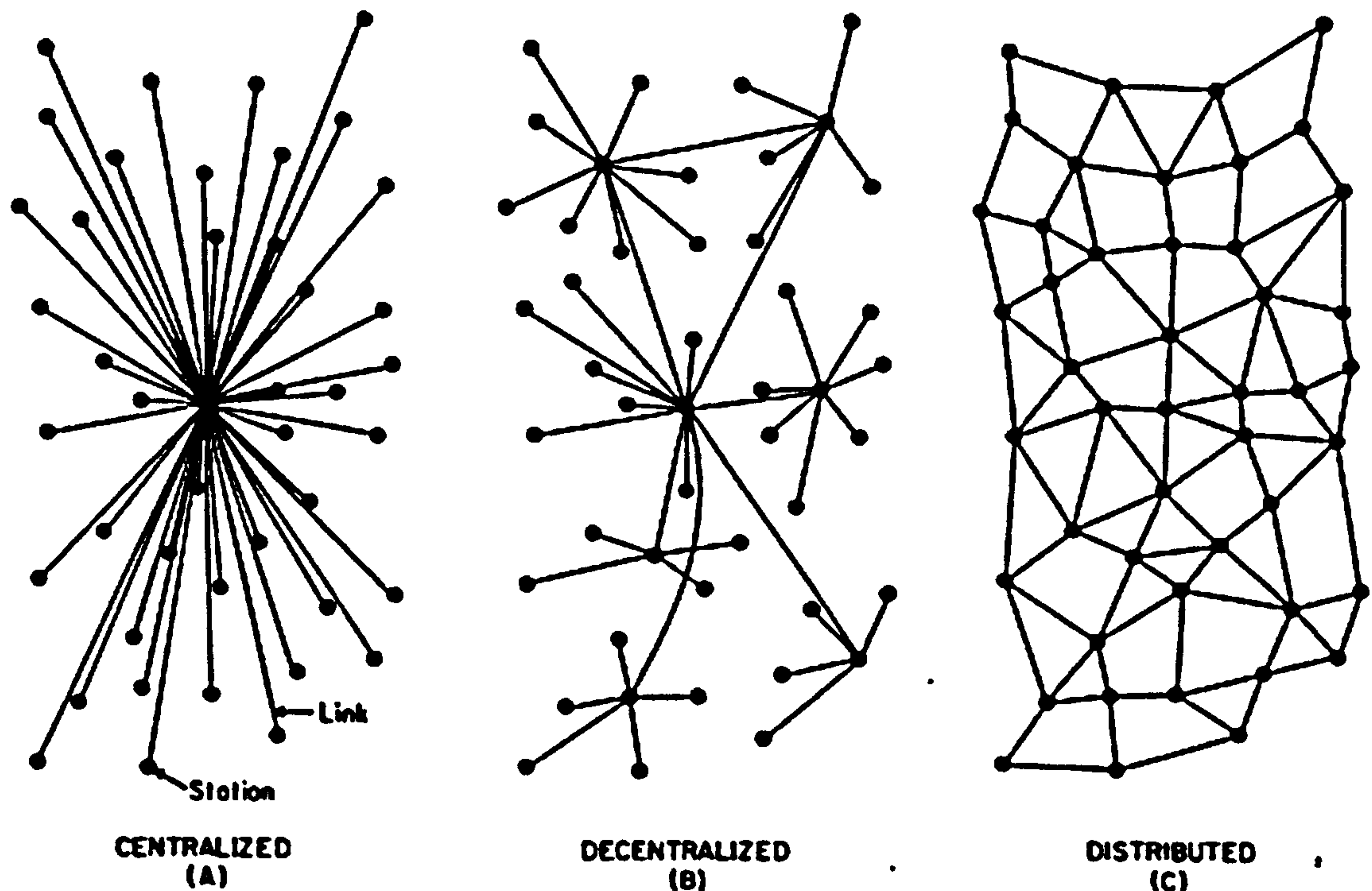
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<sup>4</sup> A node is a junction of one or more computer networks.



specified *destination node*, but the route through the network of available nodes would not necessarily be the same.

**Diagram 1: Distributed Networks, Reproduced from Baran (1962)**



This new packet-switching network would pass packets of information from node to node until they arrived at their destination. How they got there was not important. In other words messages are fragmented at the source node, sent by whatever routes available and reassembled at the destination node. This meant that if huge parts of the network were destroyed, the packets would simply be re-routed/switched by the surviving nodes. This system would be virtually indestructible, which was the central requirement for any post nuclear strike command-and-control network.

The first tests on this kind of network were carried out in the UK in 1968. Later that same year the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) funded a project to set up a network between four supercomputers that would speed up national research and development programs. The network was nicknamed ARPANET after its sponsor, and by the end of 1969 there were four nodes on the network, linked by high-speed transmission lines. For the first time, scientists and researchers could share each other's computer facilities by long distance. By 1971 ARPANET had fifteen nodes, and by 1972 there were thirty-seven nodes. This number steadily increased until by 1981 there were more than 200 nodes in existence (Hauben and Hauben, 1997; Kantrowitz and Rogers, 1994; Sterling, 1993).

ARPANET was proving to be a success, however its original purpose, that of enabling long distance computing, was superseded by an entirely unexpected development. This was that the main traffic on ARPANET was news and personal messages rather than official messages. Researchers were not only collaborating about their projects, but were also gossiping. ARPANET was being used for person to person (one-to-one) communication through dedicated personal electronic mail addresses. The email was born. Soon after this a technique was invented that allowed messages to be sent automatically to a list of subscribers (one-to-many). The mailing list was born. Even today many organisations struggle to control the use of email for gossip as illustrated by the actions of Liverpool City Council (Ward, 2002), in banning the use of email every Wednesday in an attempt to 'make council business flow more efficiently'.

The fragmented, sprawling structure of ARPANET facilitated easy expansion. Any computer with the ability to operate as a node could be added on to the network without too many problems. They only had to be able to speak the packet-switching language to enable them to originate, send, receive and relay messages. Their ownership, language or affiliation was immaterial. Any group, corporation or government with resources could own a computer node. ARPANET's original packet-switching language was called Network Control Protocol (NCP). This was superseded by a faster, more sophisticated, protocol that is still used today, called TCP/IP. The first part TCP or Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) converts messages into packets of information at source and then reassembles them at destination. The second part, Internet Protocol (IP) routes the packets across multiple nodes and ensures they arrive at the correct address. TCP/IP software was (and remains), in the public domain and freely available to those with the equipment to use it, thus contributing to ease of Internet access.

ARPANET was firmly controlled until 1982 when its military arm MILNET<sup>5</sup> broke away. However, it was not the only network in existence at this time. There were many groups who for one reason or another were forming their own networks. This fact, coupled with the partial deregulation of ARPANET and the easy availability of TCP/IP, led to many networks just attaching themselves to each other, each becoming a node in its own right. It was out of this decentralised and anarchic network of linked networks that the Internet was

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<sup>5</sup> MILNET was subsequently integrated into the Defence Data Network that was created in 1982.



born. The word 'Internet' literally means, 'network of networks'. Internet usually refers to the connected TCP/IP Internets, but is often widened to include all the other networks that have connection to the Internet, such as BITNET (Because It's Time NETwork) and USENET (Unix User Network)<sup>6</sup> and JANET (Joint Academic Network)<sup>7</sup>. It was basically impossible to stop anyone with the capability and the technology from connecting to the Internet. Each node was independent, with its own financing and technology. There was no master/slave relationship between nodes; rather it was always a peer/peer relationship.

As this amorphous web of connections grew ever larger, and more and more people were connected to it, it became a more useful and valuable resource. Sterling (1993) likens it to owning a fax machine, since it is only valuable if everyone else has a fax machine. Until they do, a fax machine is just a curiosity. Computer networking and the Internet are no longer curiosities - they are essential. The nodes in this ever-growing web of connections can be loosely categorised into separate Internet domains, e.g. gov, mil, edu, com, org and net. Foreign nodes are known by their geographical location, e.g. au, uk etc. Gov, mil and edu stand for governmental, military and educational institutions. Com stands for commercial institutions, orgs are non-profit institutions, and domain computers are gateways between networks.

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<sup>6</sup> BITNET and USENET were early store-and-forward networks that evolved alongside the Internet in the 1970s and early 1980s. They extended email technology into conferencing technology. Conferencing is a hybrid of broadcasting - one way, one-to-many communication, and email - two way, one-to-one communication (Hardy, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> JANET is the network developed by the UK Higher and Further Education Funding Councils. It is connected to the equivalent academic networks in other countries and to many commercial networks in the UK and abroad forming part of the global Internet.

Although ARPANET was formally discontinued in 1989, it was scarcely missed, if at all. The use of TCP/IP as a packet-switching protocol is now global. From only four nodes in 1971, there are now tens of thousands of nodes in many different countries, and the network continues to grow daily. With advances in technology over the last thirty years even privately owned desktop computers have become Internet nodes. As of September 2002, NUA<sup>8</sup> estimated that 605.6 million people globally, access the Internet from home (according to the latest Nielsen-Netratings Global Internet Trends report). In total the world Internet usage reached 812.9 million in December 2004<sup>9</sup>.

As noted before, no one actually owns the Internet. There is no centralised governing body that controls it. In some ways it has evolved exactly as Paul Baran envisaged, a lateral communications network that operates whilst fragmented, with no centralised authority, an anarchic entity. However, this is not to say that conflicting user groups do not compete for control/ownership of the Internet. The five main user groups are governments and ruling bodies, commercial enterprises, academia, military groups and individuals. Governments and ruling bodies tend to want more control and regulation. Commercial enterprises would appreciate a more robust financial footing. Academics would like to devote the Internet to research and scholarly investigation. Military groups want more security and individuals want freedom. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in New York, groups

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<sup>8</sup> NUA Internet Surveys are the world's number one resource for Internet trends. Available from: <<http://www.nua.ie/surveys>>.

<sup>9</sup> World Internet Users and Population Statistics. Available from: <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>>.

associated with national security across a range of countries are investigating Internet use by terrorist organisations. One cyberterrorism expert, Ben Venzke, suggests that within terrorist groups like al-Qaeda leaders prefer to use Web sites to communicate with followers, rather than use telephones or mass e-mails that are much easier to trace (quoted in Kelley, 2002). The latter half of 2004 saw the Internet become an important medium for displaying the beheadings of hostages taken during the Iraq conflict. With so many people worldwide connected to the Internet, it becomes apparent that balancing the needs of all interest groups is an extremely difficult proposition. Combine this with the numerous contexts within which both individuals and other groups use the Internet, and the problem is multiplied tenfold.

### **Internet Use and the Digital Divide**

Personal Internet use in the UK is on the increase. World Internet Project research in October 2003 estimated that at least 59.2% of the UK population currently use the Internet, a rise of 15.2% since 2001. Although many individuals are connected to the Internet, there are many that are not. This gap in access to the Internet has been termed the 'digital divide' and it reflects not only a lack of access to the technology itself and an inability to make meaningful use of it, but also a cultural divide. According to The Scottish Executive<sup>10</sup>, 'the groups most affected by the digital divide are those which are already most excluded within society'.

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<sup>10</sup> Available from: <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/enterprise/dics-02.asp>>.



There is no agreement as to either what the extent of the digital divide is, or whether the divide is opening or closing. However, there has been unanimous recognition that some sort of divide does exist. Research has attempted to explain the digital divide by investigating its links to cultural differences and comparative social disadvantage based on three main aspects, economic status, educational status, and skills levels (James, 2003; Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2003).

The first, economic status is important because the physical technology itself, computers, printers etc, as well as high connection charges are an expensive commodity. The UK government has actively promoted Internet use by launching the 'UK Online Centres'<sup>11</sup> initiative in January 2001 to ensure that everyone in the UK who wanted it could have access to the Internet. The National Lottery New Opportunities Fund also provided money to enable all 4,300 of the UK's public libraries to give public access to computers and the Internet by the end of 2002. New WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) phones have been developed that allow users to send and receive email on their mobile phones. Public telephones in larger cities now have email access. Internet television sets that allow Internet access without the use of a computer have reached the High Street shops, and Internet Cafes are appearing on street corners.

The second aspect, educational status and skills levels, affect the ability to use and disseminate the information and content found on the WWW. Countering

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<sup>11</sup> The official web site is available from: <[www.dfee.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/](http://www.dfee.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/)>.

the presence of low-level technological skills is one that also been addressed in the UK. On Monday 31 January 2000, the Minister for Learning and Technology, Michael Wills, announced a £252m initiative to tackle this problem. Seven hundred new Information and Communications Technology Learning Centres, located in pubs and football clubs were to be set up to provide training in these technology skills.

However, the gap in access to the Internet and technology is not only affected by economic or educational status within nations, but also between nations (see Table 1). Less developed nations often have a limited infrastructure, low income and literacy levels, and restrictions on free expression and democratic participation. Hillebrand (2000) expressed the worry that not only individuals, but also nations will face isolation because they are unable to express themselves or their national identity in the global communication environment.

**Table 1: Who is Online?**

World Total	812.9 million
Africa	12.9 million
Asia/Pacific	257.9 million
Europe	230.9 million
Middle East	17.3 million
Canada & USA	222.2 million
Latin America	55.9 million
Oceania/Australia	15.8 million

*Table adapted from an Internet World survey, December 2004.*

People experience online/virtual life in many different ways, sometimes socially, sometimes impersonally. A university student who subscribes to an academic discussion list, a participant in an online role-playing game, a housewife doing the Christmas shopping, all, according to Rheingold (1993) look at cyberspace through different keyholes. In the main, online activities can be loosely grouped around categories about education, commerce, cybercrime, and communication. Together these activities and the contexts in which they occur, from socialising in cybercafes to doing business and working online, inform us about the actualities and possibilities of the interpenetration of real and virtual life. It seems at first glance that these possibilities are endless.

First, the Internet is seen by many as an educational cyberplayground for the storage and retrieval of information and knowledge. The preliminary results of my research are showing that an individual's first steps in cyberspace are often in the pursuit of knowledge and information. Educational Internet use is on the increase. Where previously the provision of Internet access and email accounts to students tended to be confined to Universities, it has now spread throughout compulsory education even down to primary schools. In 1998 nine pupils had to share a single computer in secondary schools. On 26 September 2000, the UK Government announced new funding to ensure one computer will be available for every five pupils in secondary schools by 2004<sup>12</sup>.

Distance learning on the Internet is beginning to replace more traditional forms of correspondence courses. By the year 2000 the number of universities in the

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<sup>12</sup> Available from: <<http://www.regeneration-uk.com/Info/are.htm>>.



United States offering online degree courses had doubled from 15% in 1999, to 34% that year<sup>13</sup>. Four UK universities have followed this US trend. In 2000 Leeds, Sheffield, York and Southampton formed a partnership with four major American universities to take advantage of the growing global markets in teaching and research - the University of California at San Diego, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Washington and the University of Wisconsin-Madison<sup>14</sup>. More recently, 2005 sees the University of Edinburgh funding the establishment of e-learning modules in Social and Political Studies.

The second category, commerce, reflects the globalising effects of capitalism. As Internet communication advances, the effects of globalisation appear to be accelerating. Everyone who has a web page has a global presence, whether it is individual or commercial. Using the Internet to communicate with someone on the same street is usually no more expensive than with those who live half way around the world. There has been an explosion of Internet usage for commerce. In what is often referred to as the 'Wired Economy', many businesses now trade online or engage in e-commerce. According to the DTI report *Business in the Information Age* published in October 2000, businesses representing 27% of UK employers are trading online, putting the UK on a par with the USA and Canada and ahead of Germany and Sweden. Online shopping is made possible by sophisticated security software and credit card purchasing. For example the EGG credit card company gives a 1% cash back incentive for all online purchases as opposed to 0.5% cash back for offline purchases. Of those businesses that do not yet trade online, many do maintain a web page that

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<sup>13</sup> Available from: <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/education/newsid\\_681000/681072.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/education/newsid_681000/681072.stm)>.

<sup>14</sup> Available from: <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/education/newsid\\_642000/642843.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/education/newsid_642000/642843.stm)>.

constitutes their commercial identity, providing product ranges and contact details.

Third, cybercrime has become part of our everyday lives. The press regularly carries a story about the human effects of cybercrime, most recently that of defrauding Internet banks (Merrell, 2004). As many elements of traditional social life find new ways of expression on the Internet (work, leisure and play), it seems natural that there are also cybercriminals committing cybercrimes. There are no policemen on the Information Superhighway waiting to zap potential offenders with a radar gun or search for weapons if someone looks suspicious. Cybercrime comes in all varieties on the Internet but four common examples are malicious damage, industrial espionage, dissemination of pornographic material and credit card fraud. Malicious damage is often the result of computer network break-ins, where, using software tools installed on a computer in a remote location, hackers<sup>15</sup> can break into computer systems to steal data, plant viruses<sup>16</sup> or work mischief of a less serious sort by changing user names or passwords. Industrial Espionage involves spying on the enemy or opposition. Hackers-for-hire retrieve information about product development and marketing strategies. The dissemination of pornographic material, both on and offline is problematic throughout the world. Recently, a more worrying use of the Internet for international child pornography has come to light. With credit card fraud the US Secret Service believes that half a billion dollars may be lost

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<sup>15</sup> Someone who attempts to crack someone else's system or otherwise uses programming or expert knowledge to act maliciously.

<sup>16</sup> Executable code that, when run by someone, *infects* or attaches itself to other executable code in a computer in an effort to reproduce itself.



annually by consumers who have credit card numbers stolen from on-line databases

Finally, people communicate in many different ways on the Internet. The Internet is a vast digital communications network that is now an integral part of many people's social life (Castells, 1998; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). According to Poster (1995), we are living in the second media age, and one outcome of this is our increasing connection to each other through these digital communications networks. As Baudrillard ironically commented, 'we are no longer a part of the drama of alienation: we live in the ecstasy of communication' (Baudrillard, 1983b: 130). Our growing connection to each other through the computer and the Internet has, according to Gumpert (1998) resulted in the transformation of home from 'sanctuary to communications hub'. More recently it has been suggested that the use of personal mobile telephones takes this a stage further, leading to the temporal and spatial redefinitions of individuals' lives. In particular the individual who uses the mobile phone becomes the communications hub rather than the home, with notions of time and space revolving around the mobile individual rather than the fixed 'home' space (Green, 2002; Fortunati, 2002; Selwyn, 2003).

The most basic method of communication is through the use of email (electronic mail). Email is transmitted as digitally encoded streams of binary information, and is one of the packet transfer protocols included with the TCP/IP suite mentioned earlier. Email is asynchronous in that messages are encoded and transmitted from the sender's desktop computer, television or email phone, but



may not be downloaded and decoded from the recipient's server for many weeks. Thus conversations may last weeks or months. Email protocol tends to be fairly relaxed with short informal messages. The present generation of email software now allows the sending and receiving of sound files, images and text files. These are sent as attachments and are useful for both leisure and work. For example, I could send an email of a newly born baby to a relative in Australia within ten seconds, rather than using the traditional postal services, or *snailmail* as it is referred to by email users. Email costs less and is easier and more reliable than both snailmail and the telephone. Incorporating the use of a webcam with email makes video conferencing possible, again with applications for both leisure and business.

Email can be distributed to lists of people as well as to individuals, and there are many thousands of email lists in operation, reflecting special interest groups, work groups, academic and specialist groups. Various instant messaging services take the use of email one step further. ICQ, an acronym for *I seek you*, is a free downloadable program that will inform you when friends, relatives and other contacts are also online. ICQ allows you to page them, chat with them, and initiate and participate in PC-to-PC calls, PC-to-phone and phone-to-phone calls. To use these instant-messaging services both parties must have downloaded the program so that their computers can talk to each other. These instant messaging services are to all intents and purposes synchronous, as the contact happens in real time.

## **The Internet and Society: Freedom and Control**

Not all computer interaction involves communication between individuals. The Web, available through the Internet, is the largest known repository of knowledge and information in the world today. Millions of people worldwide are making information available from their homes, workplaces and educational establishments. Governments, corporations and charities also store and display (or store and secrete) megabytes of electronic digital information. The Internet's decentralised structure means that individuals are personally responsible for the documents they author and make publicly available on the Web. This may be problematic as Whine (1997) points out. He suggests that a lack of supervision could lead to more extreme racist and political material rapidly increasing in both scale and content. At opposing ends of the debate on freedom and control, the Internet represents either the freedom to do what Haraway (1991) welcomes as being able to transcend the subjugation of our physical bodies, or, as Lyon and Höller (1997) worry, a global network of surveillance and control and a movement towards an electrical panoptical society. The truth is that the relationship between freedom and control need to be reassessed if there is to be some balance in the future. Governments and individuals continue to dispute these issues making the web a contested site.

Although this outline of basic Internet uses is not exhaustive, the escalating rates of Internet use raise an important issue regarding its impact: the possibility for increased freedom or increased surveillance and control. The Internet, as I pointed out previously, is designed to operate even when damaged, or when



packet switching through one or more relays is blocked. Consequently the technology might interpret any censorship as damage and bypass it. In other words the Internet may be technologically resistant to censorship and/or control. Combine this possible immunity to censorship with the global spread of users and the ease of getting online, and the Internet becomes a political and economic machine without state control. However, this is being addressed, for example with the *Convention on Cybercrime* signed by twenty-six member countries of the Council of Europe, among them the United Kingdom, in Budapest on 23 November 2001. This was the first ever international treaty on criminal offences committed against, or with the help of, computer networks such as the Internet. Its main aim is to pursue 'a common criminal policy aimed at the protection of society against cybercrime, inter-alia by adopting appropriate legislation and fostering international co-operation'. It has an additional protocol (added 19 February, 2002) making it a criminal offence to disseminate racist or xenophobic propaganda via computer networks.

In contrast, those who campaign for individual freedom welcome the anarchic nature of the Internet, and express themselves accordingly. The US Telecom Reform Act of 1996 prompted the now famous 'Declaration Of The Independence Of Cyberspace' by John Barlow, part of which is eloquently reproduced here:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies



you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.

(Barlow, 1996: n.pag.)

It was the ease with which personal information could be gathered, organised, updated and stored by various authorities using computer technology that was of primary concern for early theorists. McLuhan (1960) feared this would enable these authorities to exert ever more control over society. This was a suspicion echoed by Lyotard (1979) when he suggested that the control of knowledge would become more hotly contested than the control of territory. Even today the ownership and surveillance of digital information is being debated as illustrated in this Guardian newspaper article:

Ministers were last night accused of conducting a systematic campaign to undermine the right to privacy as it emerged that a host of government departments, local councils and quangos are to be given the power to demand the communications records of every British telephone and internet user... Simon Davies, director of Privacy International, said: 'The Home Office has absolutely breached its commitment that this law would not become a general surveillance power for the government'...

(Millar, 2002: n.pag.)

Given the argument over rights of access to personal communications records it seems strange that every Internet user has their web site usage monitored by cookies (see glossary) and most of them do not even realise it. There is already zero privacy on the Internet. When someone accesses a web page on the Internet, the user's Web browser requests, receives and decodes packets of information and displays it on their monitor as the required web page. Cookies are embedded in this information flowing back and forth between the user's computer and the servers. Cookies make use of user-specific information transmitted by the Web server onto the user's computer so that the information

might be available for later access by itself or other servers. Most users are not even aware that this is happening, and generally no consent is given. The cookie remains on the user's computer. For example if I want to search for information about Derrida, I will enter the search term on a search engine site such as Yahoo. The Yahoo site will save a tagged string of text (the cookie) that records both the search terms and the sites I have visited. Yahoo will then place this tagged string on my personal computer, where it is saved on my hard drive, in a special file called a cookie list. The web server without my knowledge can then clandestinely access this personal information (in this case concerning the web sites that I have visited) next time I connect to the Internet. One major concern is that cookies could allow marketing companies to profile individual users by monitoring their activity over hundreds of websites. The clandestine cookie placed on your hard drive is seen by many as an infringement of civil liberties. Yet others suggest that the cookie is a harmless monster that cannot divulge really personal information such as email addresses, but only lists preferences. The greater fear is that the pace of technology will encourage these innocuous cookies to greater heights of intrusion and surveillance.

### **The Internet and Globalisation: Contracting Time and Space**

Part of the reason why some individuals and governments remain in opposition over the freedom/surveillance debate is the global accessibility of the Internet. It is a public domain with no territorial boundaries that is in perpetual use. This deconstruction of geographical space, combined with the temporal context within which it occurs, is an



area in which the Internet has had a huge impact on social life.

Discussions of modernity, postmodernity and globalisation that revolve around the concepts of time and space are pivotal to understanding what this impact on social life is. Modernity is often conceptualised as resulting from the transition from relatively isolated local communities to a more integrated large-scale society during a period of rationalisation (Beck, 1996; Giddens, 1990). Postmodernity most often originates with problematising knowledge, arguing that knowledge is not rational.

Rather knowledge is linked to time, place and social position, and it is from time, place and social position that an individual constructs their own view of knowledge (Harvey, 1989; Lyotard, 1984). Globalisation suggests that an increased connectivity between societies due to transculturation leads to closer ties between different parts of the world (sometimes called the global village), time/space compression and the increased possibilities of mutual exchange and friendship between world citizens (Featherstone and Lash, 1995; McLuhan, 1964; Robertson, 1995; Waters, 1995). These notions of time and space provide the framework within which the daily life of every individual is structured. We live and work and play in a medley of differing geographical spaces, from houses, to schools, to football grounds, to shops and offices. Traditionally, social life is a complex interweaving of action and movement between geographical social spaces that occurs along a temporal axis. The advent of Internet technologies, however, is driving the formation of a new kind of social space that is not geographical, but contextual, as I explain in later chapters. The development of new kinds of social spaces like



cyberspace is driving the need for a new kind of sociological analysis that is not placed in a logical, historical, temporal context. According to Fukuyama (1992) this drive has climaxed in the 'end of History'.

Fukuyama's position is easier to understand if we compare his definition of history with History, where a difference between the two is denoted by capitalisation. The former, history, is simply the occurrence of events, whereas the latter, History, is a 'single, coherent, evolutionary process' that takes into account the experience of 'all peoples in all times'. The end of History informs us that old ways of analysing and understanding human society have ended, and that new methods are emerging. To put it simply, Fukuyama (1992) identified a shift in perspective from investigating some historical or geographical spaces to investigating social spaces. Within this shift globalisation has been used as a key paradigm that continues the post-modern tradition of looking at space differently (see for example Featherstone and Lash, 1995; Spybey, 1996). According to Featherstone and Lash (1995) and Spybey (1996), although globalisation appears to be a natural progression from postmodernity, its importance is neither universally accepted nor fully understood and documented. However, for the purpose of my research, I will demonstrate how the unique globalising capacity of the Internet, and its ability to close the distance between separate geographical locations is both a causatory factor in the emergence of new social spaces, and a response to an increased individual demand for more fluid social networks:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. (McLuhan, 1964: 3)

As McLuhan's 'global embrace' has tightened, there has been what Cairncross (1997) refers to as a 'death of distance'; attributable to this rapid time-space compression, resulting in what Bauman (2000) calls a much more fluid and speeded-up 'liquid modernity'. According to Cairncross changes in the way we think of geography are the most consequential outcome of time-space compression. As a result physical distance will be less significant than knowing which time zone someone inhabits. Waters' (1995) definition of globalisation predates Cairncross by two years. Although they appear to adopt the same position Waters introduces the concept of individual, rather than group, awareness:

Globalisation is a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding. (Waters, 1995: 3)

This individual awareness is enhanced by the global connectedness afforded by the Internet, and leads to a more 'reflexive monitoring', that enables the individual to monitor their own actions within both local and global frames of reference (Giddens, 1991: 32). This reflexivity has the effect of transforming how social life is ordered across time and space. Giddens suggests that we are in a period of high modernity characterised by increasing global awareness, while Robertson (1995) challenges this position, suggesting that Giddens has marginalized the spatial aspect of the process of reflexivity. Robertson offers globalisation as a paradigm that allows the investigation of the global creation of

locality by privileging space over temporality. He is critical of the myths of globalisation that lead to the triumph of cultural conformity. More concerned with the interpenetrative relationship of the local and the global, or, *glocalisation*, Robertson asserts that globalisation concerns the intersection of presence and absence (Robertson, 1995). The exploration of this intersection is central to my research as it allows me to answer one of my four basic questions: how are real life and virtual life interwoven in terms of lived experiences?

It should be noted that I do not refer to globalisation without also referring to the global economy or world market forces. Wallerstein (1990) argues that the relationship between the universal and the particular is simply a product of the dominant institution of world capitalism, and that this relationship is accomplished through the movement of labour and exploitation of resources on a global scale. In contrast Giddens (1990) sees the world capitalist economy as one of four agents of change, while Robertson (1995) insists that the process of globalisation predates modernity and the rise of capitalism. Castells (1998: 311) argues that the globalisation of economy, technology and communication is one of two 'macro-trends' that characterise the Information Age, the other being identity. It is clear that global marketing is having a big impact on social life. The abolition by twelve European countries of their national currencies on 1 January 2002, and their replacement by a single currency, the Euro, greatly facilitates cross border shopping, banking and working. Combine this with businesses advertising their wares on the Internet and a whole new consumer experience is developing. Internet shopping is on the increase.



As a result the Internet brings together the spheres of global consumption and global leisure, and as such could be considered to be a typical Baudrillardian post-modern environment. As products become available globally, the Internet has the potential to fulfil Baudrillard's (1983b) pessimistic prophesy of homogeneous masses of consumers existing in a state of hyperreality where the real can no longer meaningfully be distinguished from the simulated. In contrast to McLuhan's utopia of the global village, Baudrillard might see the hyperreal world of cyberspace as a barren, desolate realm of communication and information. The exploration of these themes is continued and expanded in the next two chapters.

### **The Internet and Leisure**

There is evidence that the Internet is increasingly being used for leisure pursuits, often 'play'. It was Huizinga (1950) who first explored the instinct for play as a central element in human culture. He suggested that play facilitates freedom by allowing players to step out of the constraints of reality into the imagination. Play has a finite duration; it is distinct and limited within both time and space, or playtime and playground. Tensions between the freedom of play, and the constraints and demands of the real world result in limitations on playtime. In his work *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1950) explains how the nineteenth century left 'little room for play' (1950: 191), and describes how in the twentieth century, technology was the impetus that carried the world back in the direction of play (1950: 199). In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan (1964) develops this argument further by underlining the general importance of games and media in

culture. He suggests that, 'games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of any culture' (1964: 235). The rise in the use of Internet technologies for play, and the evolution of fully bounded sites of play such as virtual reality sites appear to function as higher forms of play that Huizinga called representations of communities. It is difficult to draw the line between these play-communities and permanent social groupings. There is also a relationship here between Baudrillard's (1983a) notions of simulation, where simulacra are copies without the original, and Foucault's (1967) sites of heterotopia, those wholly differentiated other sites. In later chapters I develop this connection and suggest that Cybertown represents an important site for the practice and performance of everyday social relationships, where practice is an example of play that is training. This play that is training is similar to Huizinga's child-play in that it is not only play but also preparation for activities that take place outside of play, in this case the management of social relationships. At the same time, the proliferation of various games sites on the Internet illustrates the fulfilment of Floridi's (1999) prediction that Internet technology has the potential to liberate mankind from work and increase leisure time and leisure space, signalling a new phase in human evolution, that might see humans moving closer to a playful existence.

At first glance this appears to be happening, for in the twenty-first century humankind is using Internet technology to move back in the direction of play. It is possible to find nearly every game that was ever invented on the Internet. There are Scrabble tournaments, Chess tournaments, cheat sites for Playstation games and downloadable games for your personal computer to name only a few.

However there are some sites on the Internet that are role-playing games. In the next paragraph I expand upon two of these types of sites, the text-based sites MUDs and MOOs. These text-based sites, although remaining extremely popular, have now been joined by virtual game sites. This is partly due to the improved technologies that allow 3D interactive simulations in these new virtual reality sites. The presence of Cybertown on the Internet can be demonstrated to be a natural progression from these text-based sites because Cybertown is so close to a representation of real life that its inhabitants are finding reality in play. In Cybertown, humankind is not only moving closer to a playful existence, but is finding existence in play, a proposition I make in more detail in later chapters.

MUD stands for Multi-User Dungeon, a general term for a text-based virtual environment in which users from all over the world can interact in real-time. Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle wrote the original MUD in 1979 at Essex University in Britain. This was a text-based fantasy role playing game that allowed multiple users to play together simultaneously. This game environment was like the popular board game of the 1970s, Dungeons and Dragons, and people went off on quests, facing dangers at every turn. Nowadays MUDs can sometimes comprise thousands of interlocked descriptions of various *rooms* or settings. Although MUDs are text-based, they are, according to Poster (1995) visual in the sense that complex locations and characters interact continuously. Users create a virtual character and move about by typing in compass directions that correspond to the *exits* of the *room* that they are in. They interact with other virtual characters, controlled by other users. Rheingold (1991) suggests that this interaction can include exploration, conversation, friendship, debate, conflict and



even romance. Many MUDs may have many players logged on at any given time. Thus MUDs are extremely complex, consisting of perhaps hundreds of users creating and inhabiting virtual characters/identities within which they act and react to others, thus improvising and inventing their own scenarios and selves, developing a community story through writing. This is a notion Schaap (2002) addresses in his ethnography of a MUD, and one that Turkle first examined in 1995: 'as players participate, they become authors not only of text but also of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction' (Turkle, 1995: 12). MOOs are a variation on MUDs. MOOs (Mud, Object Oriented) contain rooms or objects built by users to improve upon the sense of reality. These objects might be anything from simple furniture or talking pets, to talking furniture. MUDs and MOOs specifically designed as learning environments are also beginning to have a place in education. These environments encourage students to collaborate together to build their own worlds, and explore historical and virtual worlds. Students are able to embark on adventures that allow them to discover knowledge in an exciting and interactive manner, studying history, science or mathematics, in a game-playing environment. Yet the use of the Internet is going beyond those already mentioned. It is having an expanding impact on everyday life. To some extent we can measure that impact by looking at its portrayal in popular culture, because even those individuals who live life online remain anchored in everyday life. The Internet has largely moved out of the science fiction genre, where the vision of cyberspace was first immortalised by Gibson when he said that cyberspace was 'a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation' (1984: 51). Two recent films provide

interesting commentaries on the way in which identity and self may be portrayed, and also raise awareness of the possibilities of cyberspace, and its relationship with real life.

In the first film, *You've Got Mail* (1998), starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, two bookshop owners become archrivals. Both are lonely people who have met anonymous 'love interests' online, chatting through email. The romance they are conducting anonymously on the Internet is, as it turns out, with each other. This film is an interesting study of what happens when two people want to surrender the anonymity that email chat allows them. In true Hollywood style love overcomes all and they live happily ever after. This film is interesting in that it accepts using email and chatting on the Internet as a 'normal' social pursuit for busy people, yet at the same time questions the possibility that identity on the Internet may not be 'real'. This is only problematic when the real and the virtual move closer until the two finally cross the boundary between real and virtual and meet in real life.

In the second film, *The Matrix* (1999), humans are kept in incubators and used for their energy output by Artificial Intelligence (AI). A computer construct of everyday life, The Matrix, is hardwired directly into individual human brains, as people lie naked in their separate containers. In other words, reality only exists in the mind. Corporeality has been transcended, as everything that is experienced is all just a dream. In the film a small band of free humans live in the physical world and fight against the subjugation of humankind by the machines. Cyberspace is portrayed as a virtual reality within which the whole

human race is trapped, rather than a liberating, postmodern environment. This virtual reality is a pure simulacrum; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever.

These two different films illustrate the ways in which only a very small proportion of one type of art is reacting to social change driven by Internet technologies. In some respects these films also represent notions about cyberspace that can be played out on screen, with the result that individuals can learn from them how to deal with the reality of cyberspace. There is an immense amount of literature that deals with the position of the body in relation to social interaction in cyberspace (Donath, 1998; Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999; Turkle, 1995). Much of this material deals with the freedom that results from a loss of face to face encounters, and in which cyberspace is seen to be a post-modern liberating environment that enables escape from judgements based on physical looks, age, gender, disability, race etc. As Turkle (1995) writes, 'in the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along' (1995: 10). Some, like Haraway (1991) suggest that gender can be deconstructed and that in its becoming obsolete we will all become cyborgs, while Hayles (1999) outlines the need for an account of 'the enacted body, present in the flesh on one side of the computer screen, and the represented body, produced through the verbal and semiotic markers constituting it in an electric environment' (1999: xii). Featherstone (1995) suggested that virtuality might help correct the inequalities faced by the elderly and infirm as they leave behind a decrepit and betraying 'body as prison' for the freedom of virtual reality. However, my thesis illustrates that real people living in Cybertown do



not leave their identity behind as they interact in cyberspace. Their life histories are fully integrated into their Cybertown selves as they negotiate a continuous performance of self that is part of their everyday lives. As such, online life is becoming deeply embedded in offline life. As this new social space called cyberspace becomes more familiar, fiction and research are interacting and developing new ways of connecting people in 'wired communities' (Jonscher, 1999; Wellman, 1999).

When explaining the transition from pre-modern closely-knit communities to modern society, Tönnies (1957) used the terms *gemeinschaft* (a spontaneously arising organic social relationship characterised by strong reciprocal bonds of sentiment and kinship within a common tradition), and *gesellschaft*, (a rationally developed mechanistic type of social relationship characterised by impersonally contracted associations between persons) to explain the differences between pre-modern community and modern society. It appears that having completed the transition from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, we are experiencing a new transitional period for which social researchers have no technical name yet. Researchers attempting to explain this phenomenon are beginning to look beyond the technology of the Internet. Virtual communities are being defined more by the interactions among the actors within them, than by the technology within which they are implemented, a position I expand on in chapter five. What is not in doubt is that people are imagining new communities in cyberspace similar to the ways Anderson (1991) explains that nations are imagined, without face-to-face interactions. This is borne out in my own research, which concerned only one small neighbourhood of a large cybercity.

Out of a total population of 996,664 I lived and worked with approximately two hundred citizens, yet they all imagined themselves to be part of the larger community that was Cybertown. The imagining of cybercommunities can be linked to Huizinga's (1970) notions on imagination as a ludic function of play. There are two positions from which cybercommunity is imagined, the first, from offline or distance before we arrive there, and the second, from how we imagine it when we are online, or there, which is a more dynamic relationship with the other 'players' who share it with us. The way in which cybercommunity is represented in offline art and media should reflect its online performance, which reiterates McLuhan's (1964) assertion that art and media are social reactions to culture. The drawing closer of these two positions illustrate the movement of cybercommunity from exotic to mundane as it becomes deeply embedded in everyday life.

The creation of virtual reality and virtual community sites on the Internet is the result of an explosion of technological know-how that began with Intel making a computer chip small enough to be fitted into a home computer in 1970. A year later the floppy disk was invented, the first step in allowing people to transfer data between unconnected computers. The ability to transfer data between two or more connected computers arrived with the development of the Internet, and, this has led to the creation of new social places and realities in cyberspace. It is becoming clear to many online researchers (Christensen, 2003; Hine, 2000; Kendall, 2002; Markham, 1998, 2003; Schaap, 2002) that both Virtual Reality and Virtual Community are true social places or realities. To follow Augé's (1995) reasoning they are *lived in* spaces where collective and individual

practice creates place. As such they are not technological constructs but cultural constructs, mediated through experience rather than through technology. It is the essence of that experience that my research in Cybertown captures, a theme I expand on in later chapters.

Anderson (1991) suggests communities are characterised by a shared mental model of a sense of place where social interaction occurs, a collective imagination. In this sense a community could be a city or a nation. With virtual communities, not only must the idea of the community itself be imagined, but also the place (Rheingold, 1993). Community cannot exist without being held in common by its members, who share the symbol, but not necessarily its meaning (Cohen, 1985). These members all look through different *keyholes* (Rheingold, 1991), making each member's experience of their common virtual community a different one.

If then, each community member's experience is a different one, then defining virtual community is no easier than defining community. It remains a contested notion, one that I develop later. However, there are several credible definitions for both Virtual Community and for Virtual Reality, with Rheingold's (1993) being one of the earliest. His definition of Virtual Community was that:

Virtual communities...are social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.  
(Rheingold, 1993: 5)

For Hillis (1999) shared ideas about community are transforming, yet building on more traditional explanations. As I explained earlier, the life histories of



Cybertown residents are fully integrated into their online selves. This is also true of the software and hardware developers:

Virtual reality is a technological reproduction of the process of perceiving the real, yet that process is filtered through the social realities and embedded social assumptions about human bodies and space.  
(Hillis, 1999: 2)

As can be seen from this chapter, the Internet is infinitely more complex than might be expected. This 'network of networks' provides a rich, diverse research opportunity with 812.9 million, or 12.7% of the world population using the Internet on 3 December 2003, a 125.2% increase since 2000<sup>17</sup>. Our knowledge of Internet technologies, spanning a variety of inter-disciplinary perspectives that has accumulated over the last thirty years, is beginning to bear fruit. However, the complex interplay between the Internet and social life, although not yet fully uncovered, has led to new ways of looking at everything pertaining to social life, especially space, time, identity and community. With what Hillis (1999) describes as social assumptions comes cultural knowledge, making the investigation of virtual community important. By addressing these issues in a critical analysis of contemporary debates, and, by an ethnographic process that grounds its analysis in real experience, my research suggests that we are now finding community in networks as well as in more geographically bounded localities. Community is in a state of transition, and as such my research provides an important contribution to both its study and its understanding, in addition to demonstrating how cyberspace is embedded in the real world.

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<sup>17</sup> Available from: <World Internet Users and Population Statistics, available at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>>.

## **Chapter Two: Reflections on Fieldwork on the Internet**

### **Introduction**

As explained in Chapter One the Internet was created during the Cold War as an information system capable of surviving a nuclear attack. Those design features that contribute to its military invulnerability also affect how the Internet and particularly cyberspace is inhabited today. Investigating how this is achieved is the broad purpose of my research project, as well as to add to the body of academic work that interrogates cybercommunity by examining how people live life online. More importantly, my central focus is to establish how people imagine themselves, and further, to determine how this ties in with the meanings they attach to their relationships and their membership of a particular virtual community called Cybertown. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, my research revolves around three basic questions that ask about the creation, reproduction and maintenance of online relationships. It is through uncovering the answers to these questions that my central aims were accomplished.

This chapter discusses my research methodology and its design and implementation. In it I explain and justify my methodological rationale. To this end it is arranged in two sections. The first section locates my research project in a qualitative paradigm that moots ethnography as the main process of inquiry, beginning with an introductory narrative account of my ethnography of Cybertown itself. This is because Cybertown is a culture in its own right, with its own language and netiquette (those protocols that govern everyday social



interaction there) and I had to learn about that culture just like any other ethnographer. Here I also draw parallels to more traditional ethnography by further subdividing this section into pre-fieldwork, fieldwork and post-fieldwork. In the second section I move on to discuss additional data gathering strategies, research design and development, the verification and trustworthiness of data, ethical considerations and data analysis tactics. The final section is a more reflexive account that considers whether the research outcomes have been met and discusses if my research project has succeeded in both pushing the boundaries of critical ethnography further, and in confirming cyberspace as an authentic medium for anthropological and sociological research.

### **Section One: Ethnography**

Human relationships in cyberspace do not exist in opposition to offline life. Indeed, as I will explain, by building on the work of other cyberethnographers such as Markham (1998), Miller & Slater (2000) and Schaap (2002), my research demonstrates that in Cybertown the opposite is true. In Cybertown, social relations are no different than those occurring in offline social spaces. Furthermore, even where those social relations might be considered different, for example in MUDs, Schaap (2002) suggests that they are still structured by those same social and cultural patterns learned in everyday life. Consequently, despite Benedikt (1991) and Rheingold's (1991, 2000) early assessments of the revolutionary nature of the Internet and the immense social and cultural transformations it would bring about, my research in Cybertown suggests that



the changes have been less dramatic and more embedded in the existing practices and power relations of everyday life.

My research is about human relationships. More precisely it is about uncovering the meanings the residents of Cybertown attach to their relationships in cyberspace. Since it is about the question of meaning, it is also about the question of culture, because culture generally refers to the systems or ‘webs of meaning’ which govern the conduct and understanding of people’s lives (Geertz, 1973). Learning about the culture of Cybertown became the main focus of my research, because as Murphy (1986) implies, the meanings generated by our understanding of culture give us a particular definition of reality:

Culture is...A set of mechanisms for survival, but it provides us also with a definition of reality. It is the matrix into which we are born; it is the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged.  
(Murphy, 1986: 14)

Ethnography is also, as Werner and Schoepfle suggest, the ‘description of a body of cultural knowledge of a group’ (1987: 122). Since arriving at an understanding of Cybertown culture was my goal, then ethnographic practice became my methodology of choice to achieve that aim. Ethnographic practice constitutes a set of data gathering methods that can be called on as necessary. Consequently my ethnography in Cybertown was supported by a number of qualitative research methods including participant observation, chatting, questionnaires and offline semi-structured interviews.

As is the case with so many ethnographers I did not start out with a theory, but rather, with an insatiable curiosity about another culture. That the other culture

was situated on the Internet made the journey no easier, nor no less difficult than that of any other ethnographer. Indeed, as the process of cyberethnography unfolded I was often startled by its similarities to the ethnographies of more traditional anthropologists. It was a set of methods that allowed me to collect whatever data was available through the observation of Cybertown's inhabitants and the way in which they made sense of the world in their everyday life. To echo Geertz's words, my research in Cybertown became 'an elaborate venture in thick description' (1973: 6). Consequently, although guided by traditional ethnographic methodology I was not constrained by it, a course that allowed me to engage with a study of the process of performing cyberethnography as well as my analysis of human relationships in cyberspace. This section, then, is not merely about methodology, but is also a voyage of discovery through the immersive process by which I, the ethnographer, arrived 'there' and as a result was able to capture the essential truths of place-making and people-making in Cybertown.

The practice of fieldwork together with ethnography is often seen as being central to anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997), although this is not always the case, as can be seen in the Comaroffs discussion of 'ethnographers of the archive' in their treatise on historical anthropology (1992: 18). Yet the 'legacies of the field are strong in the discipline' (Clifford, 1997: 19). As such the field became for me, a useful organising framework on which to hang my ethnographic narrative. Consequently, my own approach to performing cyberethnography can be grouped into three loose categories within which different tasks were undertaken. These are pre-fieldwork, fieldwork and post-



fieldwork. However, I am not suggesting that fieldwork is the most significant aspect of ethnography. Indeed, as Marcus (1986: 20) states, 'fieldwork is only one part of the ethnographic research process. More important is the 'ethnography as a written product of fieldwork' (Marcus, 1986: 20). Put simply, fieldwork is no more than one method of collecting data, whereas ethnography is the study of another culture, 'we require ethnography to know ourselves.... [It] makes the strange familiar' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 6). Like the object of my study, human relationships and social life itself, ethnography is an ongoing process. Consequently even though I locate the different tasks I undertook in relation to my fieldwork in Cybertown, there was no question of completing one task before moving on to the next. Like Markham (1998) my story also 'seems to loop back on itself' (1998: 23), and I did not always recognise critical moments until long after they had occurred. Therefore, my ethnography is not a linear, chronological affair, neither in its progress towards completion as an investigative act, nor as my own voyage of discovery.

Cyberethnography placed me in a rather strange position, compared with the other post-graduate students in the Anthropology Department, whose fieldwork excursions to 'exotic' places caused them to forever appear and disappear, whilst I was still here. Or rather, I was there, without needing to leave here, and if Turkle is right when she says that '...decountrifying oneself is one of the most powerful elements of fieldwork' (1995: 218), then I had to wonder if I missed out on that experience. I had no problems with passports, visas, language, malaria, sunstroke or cravings for baked beans; in fact I was always home in



time for bed. Yet fieldwork in Cybertown had its own set of problems. Going online does not simply mean switching the computer on and typing out words on a keyboard. Like Markham (1998) I had to learn how to 'move, see and talk' because 'to be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there' (1998: 23). However, engaging in fieldwork does not only involve being there, and participating as an embodied and social being. As I discovered, it also involves sometimes subtle, sometimes complex changes of identity for the ethnographer. Marcus (1998) explains that the identity of the anthropologist is 'profoundly related' to the particular world they are studying (1998: 69). Hastrup describes how 'one is not completely absorbed but one is no longer the same' (1995: 19). These are points illustrated by Markham's (1998) struggle with her changing sense of self, and echoed in Barry's (2002) later account of the relationship between her shifting identities and fieldwork. Similarly, during the performance of my ethnography I discovered how to live and work in Cybertown. I also learned how to be an anthropologist.

Part of that learning was mediated through the experience of other 'cyber' ethnographers whose work on how technology and culture interact to produce communities in cyberspace, and how their study has led to the opening up of new anthropological field sites in which as Barry (2002) suggests, the 'familiar is being made strange'<sup>1</sup> (2002: n.pag). The study of this new kind of 'field' has come to be known as cyberanthropology, although the performance of cyberethnography remains relatively new to anthropology. Escobar (1994)

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<sup>1</sup> 'Making the familiar strange' is one of the dynamics of Synetics, that is based on the systematic use of analogies for the generation of ideas. It means to approach common phenomena under a new light and from an unusual perspective, see also Comaroff and Comaroff (1992: 6).

forecast that anthropologists would become involved in the study of cyberculture because it ‘generally concerns what anthropology is about: the story of life as it has been lived and is being lived at this very moment’ (1994: 223).

‘Cyberethnography is the anthropology of new places’ (Carter, 2002), in that it describes places that do not occupy geographical spaces. Bearing this in mind, my research draws on the experiences of Christensen (2003), Markham (1998), Schaap (2002) and Miller and Slater (2000), in the performance of their cyberethnographies. All three find similar ways ‘to destabilise a traditional idea that the experience of reality is grounded in the physical, embodied world’ (Markham, 1998: 20).

The focus of Markham’s ethnography, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*, is the ‘lived experience of what it means to go and be online’ (1998: 18). She examines how users frame their experiences of CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) along a continuum of ‘connection of self’ (1998: 87). Markham develops three points along this continuum that help her to understand online experiences. The first is that of CMC being a tool that facilitates communication, the second that cyberspace is a place to go to be with others, and the third is a way of being that is inseparably woven into lived experiences. She concludes that there is no distinction between real and virtual experience: ‘People experience cyberspace as they experience life - it is not that profoundly different’ (Markham, 1998: 89). My own research, as I explain in later chapters, reaches this same conclusion, and in similar ways to Markham. Our experiences as cyberethnographers are also similar as we investigated the same area - what it is like to live life online. Markham (1998) writes of the

difficulties of validating and legitimising her research using 'traditional social scientific norms' whilst 'conducting a non-traditional ethnography in a non-traditional nonspace with traditional sensibilities' (1998: 62). Revisiting her work in an online article four years later Markham (2002) explains how her methodology emerged out of two primary goals. First, rather than searching for universal laws that explain and predict human behaviour, she attempts to 'collect rich, in depth information within cases', that results in a fragmentation of voices. Her second goal was to 'honestly reflect on the struggles with methodology' (2002: n.pag.).

Schaap's (2002) research, *The Words That Took Us There: Ethnography In A Virtual Reality*, is based on three years of research in a particular online role-playing game, aka a 'text-based virtual world' or MUD. Schaap has two main goals. The first is an analysis of how the players of MUDs 'perform' or 'enact' a convincingly gendered character. The second is to bestow the reader with an impression of the experience of playing a character in a text-based virtual environment. Finally, by weaving text and theory together, Schaap (2002) succeeds in illustrating the processes by which everyday cultural discourses about gender and identity structure social interactions in MUDs.

In Miller and Slater's (2000) work, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, their main premise is that researchers who make assumptions about the separation between the real and the virtual are 'misguided' (2000: 5). They, like Christensen (2003) promote the idea that online spaces are important as being an integral part of everyday life. This represents a very real departure from earlier



thinking that the Internet is ‘a monolithic or placeless cyberspace’ (Miller and Slater, 2000: 1) that produces its own social practices. Miller and Slater’s ethnography is a detailed account of the use of the Internet in Trinidad and among the Trinidadian diaspora, yielding rich descriptions of the impact and effects of the Internet on modern society and culture in Trinidad. They found that one in twenty households had an Internet connection, and that one in three households contained people who used the Internet. This represents a dramatic uptake of Internet use in Trinidad, where Internet culture has become mass culture, with users coming from almost any social background. People see being connected to the Internet as being in the vanguard of ‘style’. This Trinidadian expression of ‘style’ is so deeply embedded in notions of being ‘Trini’ that the Internet is therefore conceived as being ‘naturally Trinidadian’. When ideas about kinship are combined with ideas about style, it becomes clear to Miller and Slater that online relationships are not in opposition to offline relationships. The two are deeply embedded in both notions of Trini-ness, and in the social practices that are an integral aspect of people’s daily lives. Similarly Christensen, in his study of the Inuit found that some of them ‘embed rather than disembed or deconstruct their identities’ online (2003: 12).

My research is similar to, but different from, the work of Miller and Slater and Christensen. They focused on examples in which the Internet is used to ‘assert those cultural identities that already exist offline’ (Christensen, 2003: 13), more precisely of being Trini and of being Inuit. Instead I investigated how diverse cultural identities came together in Cybertown to produce everyday practices through which life online is lived and understood. In short, rather than

embedding the local in the global, people were embedding the global in the local. They were Cybertown citizens both on and offline.

## **Fieldwork**

My intention was to engage with and gather data about the inhabitants of Cybertown. As Agar (1996) suggests, identifying patterns of behaviour is an essential feature of ethnography, and those patterns must be learned gradually over 'direct, prolonged contact with group members' (1996: 243). Many of the patterns that I identified by living and working in Cybertown over the three years of this study were constantly changing. I had to learn how to live in Cybertown and how to account for events there over time - chapter four explores these issues in more depth. Making sense of these patterns entailed employing a certain amount of reflexivity. It is this reflexivity that Davies (1999) indicates is, 'not a single phenomenon, but assumes a variety of forms and affects the research process through all its stages' (1999: 6). It was not always a singular, introverted, personal reflexivity. At times it was a very social form of reflexivity as I spoke with my supervisor and other colleagues. It was through the exercise of reflexivity that I came to know this strange place, Cybertown, and its culture well. I have attempted to not only construct an insider interpretation of occurrences, but also an outsiders understanding. Like Markham (1998) and Schaap (2002), my knowledge has given me a way to reflect back and better understand my own world and culture. The 'travelling' and 'knowing' are only part of the inquiry that is called ethnography, with fieldwork itself possibly the most visible part. Nevertheless, at first the construction of the cyberfield as an



authentic field site seemed problematic, and I compared and contrasted field and cyberfield in an attempt to order my own thoughts.

### **Field and Virtual Field**

There are two aspects to 'field'. First it is a physical locality. It contains material objects among which its inhabitants experience their social and cultural processes. As well, language is central to meaning making because: 'the speech community [...] is the product of prolonged interaction among those who operate within shared belief and value systems' (Morgan, 2004: 3).

Generally, the language within a particular field is embedded in the physicality of that field, and is also reflected through its use by the social activities that take place there. Location, visual, aural and tactile clues assume equal importance for the ethnographer in the interpretation of a particular culture. In this respect then, the ethnographic research process incorporates both a locality and a set of social practices. Any knowledge gained about the field is on two levels, locality and language. Within that locality are different venues that each adds an additional dimension and definition to the cultural field of inquiry, for example the public and private places such as the workplace or the home.

The virtual locality does not appear to offer physical clues, and without the impact of aural and tactile clues would seem to offer a diminished view of online culture. As Mann and Stewart explain, 'in the mainly black and white world of text we lose the Technicolor of lived life' (2000: 197). It is true that community



members online cannot be seen, and do not share the same physical site. It is also true that the site of their personal physicality cannot be touched; the world in which they live cannot be seen. For the researcher this poses problems, they can only know about their own physicality, (but also the physicality of the people they study), as evidenced from the text. Thus ethnography in the virtual field must develop its own methods for collection and interpretation of data. The text-based language of the virtual world has a heavy burden to carry. Because of its divorce from the physical arena where social activities take place, that is, the lack of aural and tactile clues, the language itself has had to expand. The mechanisms by which language achieves this are the subject of a discussion in chapter four. One example of this however, is the use of emoticons such as ☺ to indicate smiling, or ☹ to indicate sadness. Consequently, like other ethnographers, I did have a new language to learn, although at first I did not realise it.

Identifying Cybertown as my research field was neither fast nor easy. Having set out to do some research on the Internet in virtual communities I still had much to learn about the Internet. As I explained in chapter one, it is a huge network of networks that is expanding daily. It encompasses email, the WWW, MUDs, MOOs, virtual communities and many more (Hine, 2000; Kollok and Smith, 1999). I had known that there were people out there chatting. I assumed that all I had to do was to find them and the rest would be easy! To this end, I plunged into cyberspace, feeling unfamiliar and exposed, but determined to speak to someone, anyone! I wanted to actively engage with all those 'cyber surfers' socially. However, finding someone to talk to was another problem. I

had imagined cyberspace to be teeming with people anxious to chat and while away the hours. Where were they all? I spent some time logged on to the Internet and drifting/surfing around. This was quite an intensive learning period as I began to understand how to navigate on the WWW. I came into contact with lots of new terms like ISP, browser and cookies. I went to Yahoo (a search engine<sup>2</sup>) and peeked into its chatrooms. They were mainly discussion groups based around headings, so for example, if I wanted to chat about dogs I would go to the chatroom entitled 'labradors' or 'crufts'. Finally I decided to apply a more logical approach to my search for an Internet Community to study. I began with a more mundane surf of the shelves in the local WH Smith bookshop and returned home with Kennedy's (1999) *Guide to the Internet*. It promised to 'make me an Internet guru in the shortest possible time' and guaranteed to 'find anything, anywhere – the easy way'. It contains a whole chapter on chat and chat worlds, but I was struck by the irony of resorting to older, print technology to deal with the new ICTs. In the end I found a community by inputting IRC (Internet Relay Chat) into a search engine called Metacrawler. Using a search engine is a bit like looking at a notice board to see what's on and where. I chose Cybertown, a futuristic cybercommunity set some years in the future, because it looked like somewhere I would enjoy.

Cybertown is a secure web site. It can be entered as either a visitor or an immigrant. Anyone may visit Cybertown, although visitors can only watch the chat and not join in. Visitors can wander around the different places and see if

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<sup>2</sup> A database front end that allows a user to seek information on the Internet by keyword. Search engines may look for titles of documents, headers, or text; examples are Metacrawler, Google or Yahoo, and more recently Yahoogie.

they would like to immigrate. Cybertown residents do not logon, they immigrate. Immigration itself is fairly simple but if you immigrate you become a citizen of Cybertown and subject to the rules and regulations therein. Like most secure sites on the Internet you need a password and a nickname to enter. Passwords and nicknames assume great importance within Cybertown, and the Cybertown Web Page carries warnings never to tell anyone else your password. There is also a warning that your browser must accept cookies. Throughout the period of my research it was a free site, but more recently a small charge of \$5 per month has been levied to cover its upkeep, for example the server costs. The first time I ever went to Cybertown I was quite nervous; in many respects the Internet has precipitated a kind of 'moral panic', especially about safety and of children. Even now the panic is getting worse with anti-paedophile adverts on British TV channels, and sensational news stories telling us that whenever anyone disappears they were surfing the net<sup>3</sup>.

My arrival in Cybertown was bewildering. No, that's wrong. My arrival in Cybertown was easy. I arrived. I was bewildered. I was lost and alone. I was an outsider. I was also afraid. Mainly I was afraid that my optimism about being able to carry out this ethnography was misplaced. After weeks of preparation, choosing software, reviewing the literature and reaching 'expert status' in my chosen field I had now landed in a place so alien and incomprehensible that I felt like a child. The remembering of these feelings has stayed with me. I was a newbie, computer jargon for someone who is new to

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<sup>3</sup> This happened in Soham a few years ago when two small girls were murdered. At the beginning of the inquiry Police checked the girls Internet logs in case they had left the house to meet someone they had got to know on the Internet. This fear proved unfounded, they were not murdered by someone they met on the Internet, but by their school caretaker.



computing and the Internet. Within Cybertown newbie specifically refers to those with little or no experience in Cybertown, a topic I expand on in later chapters. I have since learnt that many of the inhabitants of Cybertown take great pleasure and achievement in taking a newbie under their wing and helping them, and making friends with them. Indeed newbies are often the target of the specific ‘friend-finding’ expeditions that I analyse in chapter seven.

The process of immigrating to Cybertown was different from my expectations. Immigrating is a word that to me connotes ideas about ‘belonging by choice’. Not just accidentally arriving but intentionally going there, and fulfilling certain criteria. In my discussion of community later I consider how this connotation of belonging by choice might contribute to actively constructing Cybertown as a community by its inhabitants. Having immigrated I decided to get to know Cybertown before embarking on my fieldwork. Looking back I now recognise this getting to know Cybertown was actually an essential part of my fieldwork, rather than just preparation, a point I develop in chapter four. I spent about two weeks looking round Cybertown. Again there was a lot to learn, a new and exotic city with a new kind of movement. The Cybertown planners<sup>4</sup> had organised the city so that everyone enters the city by arriving at the Plaza. As a result it is the first place that most people explore. However, before any exploration you have to learn how to move around Cybertown, a process I will explain later. The Cybertown Plaza, similar to other city Plazas (like St Mark’s Square in Venice, or Trafalgar Square in London) is a public place. It was ten days before I had made the decision to acquire my own house, an undertaking not without its difficulty, as I will explain. By that time I had used the city map

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<sup>4</sup> The Cybertown planners are the developers whose software drives the creation of the city, a topic I expand on in later chapters.

to take me on a city tour and felt more familiar in my surroundings. Nowadays there are city guides who help show newbies around, but back in 1999 there were none and I had to look out for myself. Cybertown itself was also much smaller then, there were only 43,000 citizens as opposed to 168,000. During this initial time I did not talk to many people, mainly because speaking in Cybertown totally bewildered me. The text scrolled up the screen so fast that it was difficult to follow. Not only that but it represented anything from one to twenty concurrent conversations. And it looked odd, I was only a two-fingered typist but that language was so fast, and different. In the following example there are forty seven lines of text from one of my first visits to the Plaza to demonstrate how bewildering it can be when you do not know what all the names, numbers and acronyms mean. In addition this short piece involves twelve individuals chatting, and probably took less than half a minute to scroll past. Also only eight to ten lines were probably visible at any one time although it is possible to scroll back to see what you have missed, although this tends to be a fruitless exercise for the obvious reason that you then tend to miss what is being said currently:

Guelf [5025] : because Flouze  
[Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : If You have the wrong version of  
Blaxxun, then  
delete all of blaxxun and re-download the right version, Honey.  
[Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : hope that helps, Honey  
Guelf [5025] : hehe  
[Club Owner] HippieChick\_ [3588] : hello everyone  
[CVN Cartoonist] Flouzemaker [8780] : good point guelf  
[Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : hugs for our Ktherine--oinks too  
[World Builder] doctragoz [22741] : hi hippie  
[Block Leader] Simon76 [17018] : Hi Chick  
[Club Owner] courtjester256 [3351] : Hello Hippie  
[Club Assistant] SRV\_Man [3805] : hi hippie  
[Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : Thanks Kind Whisperer--and oinking  
back with  
congrats on breking what You broke.



[Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : Hi Chick  
 [World Builder] TezlaRatX7 [17257] : life doesnt suck. its the situation  
 you  
 find yourself in that sucks. sorry just zen for thought  
 [Club Owner] Ramamses [3377] : nice dress your nearly wearing  
 katherine  
 [World Builder] doctragoz [22741] : wow, i realized i haven't had  
 breakfast yet  
 [Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : welky Whispy  
 [Club Owner] HippieChick\_ [3588] : are we happy people today?  
 [Neighborhood\_Deputy] deadlystorm [5308] : heya hippiechick huggers  
 [CVN Cartoonist] Flouzemaker [8780] : other good point Tez  
 [World Builder] doctragoz [22741] : thats a sucky situation  
 [Neighborhood\_Deputy] deadlystorm [5308] : im a happy people  
 ~smiles~ hows you  
 hippieness  
 [Club Owner] Katherine\_25 [2293] : lol ram  
 [Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : agrees with Ratty  
 [Club Owner] courtjester256 [3351] : \*pokes deadly\* so what u been up  
 to latl?  
 [Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : me either, Doctra, but I almost never do  
 [Club Owner] courtjester256 [3351] : \*lately  
 [Neighborhood\_Deputy] deadlystorm [5308] : ~moans~ working court  
 ALOT  
 [World Builder] doctragoz [22741] : aww chase most important meal  
 [Club Owner] HippieChick\_ [3588] : deadly :) hugz im pretty happy  
 myself  
 [Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : did You comprehend what I wrote  
 above, Honey?  
 [Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : yep Chick now that You are here, we be  
 happy  
 [Club Owner] Ramamses [3377] : your now being issed by a jellyfish  
 katherine  
 yuck  
 [Club Owner] Katherine\_25 [2293] : lmao  
 [Templar] Chase4ever [19939] : I know, Doctra--just wake up tooo late  
 for it.  
 [Club Owner] courtjester256 [3351] : aww \*hugs\* i have to go back to  
 school  
 tomorrow Deadly  
 [Club Owner] Ramamses [3377] : kissed even  
 Guelf [5025] : hehe  
 Guelf [5025] : brb  
 [Club Owner] courtjester256 [3351] : =(  
 [Neighborhood\_Deputy] deadlystorm [5308] : good to hear it  
 hippiechickness ~smiles~



As with any new language I needed practice to become more fluent, both with reading and writing quickly. In addition to this new language there were the rules that governed 'politeness and courtesy' or netiquette (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 59) to be learned. These concern such things as flaming, flooding, lurking or spam, and I give in depth examples of these in chapter four. However, flaming involves sending hostile or insulting replies to messages posted by someone else. Flooding involves repetition to such an extent that the chat screen becomes filled and unusable, an extremely unsociable activity. Lurking is observing the interaction on a discussion group without posting messages oneself. Spam is unsolicited junk mail.

Netiquette not only governs the use of language but also informs users about the protocols acceptable in daily social interactions, for example when meeting people. The existence of these protocols also reinforce the notion that Cybertown is a culture in its own right, and like any other ethnographer I had much to learn. For example, it was strange to me that in my everyday life I generally meet people before I talk to them. This is not true in Cybertown, and generally not on the rest of the Internet either. First you talk and then you meet. And generally you can talk about anything, no one appears to mind, although as I will explain, there are rules in Cybertown that forbid certain inflammatory subjects. I did not know it at the time but everyone I met there knew that I was a newbie. In Cybertown the display of my experience points were like a beacon attracting help and advice. This was because every resident of Cybertown gains a minimum of ten experience points for every day that they visit Cybertown. These experience points are displayed next to everyone's nickname in square

brackets when they are in Cybertown. For example, on the first day it would be displayed thus, 'nickname [0]', and the following day as 'nickname [10]'. If you look back at the forty seven lines of text I included earlier you can see that some of those individuals have been in Cybertown for a very long time indeed. Later, I used to go along to the Plaza specifically to see if there were any newbies who needed help. I would check their experience points and home in on them, starting a conversation and offering help and advice. As I explain later, the ethos of helping is very strongly encouraged in Cybertown. But in the beginning, when I myself was still a newbie I was nervous and afraid. However, at the same time I was also inquisitive and excited. Cybertown seemed so exotic to me in those first days. I felt like an explorer in a brave new world as figure 1, a snapshot of the Plaza, and this excerpt from my field log show:

*A Walk on the Plaza, 29 March 2000*

*Boundaries*

*It was a boring Sunday afternoon and I fancied a visit to the Plaza. I wasn't going anywhere ...but it still needed organising. First I organised my self. I ate, drank and relieved myself. There were no toilets where I was going! Then I sharpened my pencil, watching the curls of wood and carbon dust settling. I looked out of the window to see the sun, and checked the time.*

*Then I began.*

*I pressed the button, and launched Internet Explorer. I downloaded and installed the software that I needed. I used the pencil to write down my passwords. There was just time for another cup of tea before I went.*

*Then I crossed the boundary.*

*The screen blurred and righted itself as I tumbled at the speed of electricity down the digitalised cyber way. In the bottom left of my screen 'done' blinked at me in neon green. The journey reminded me of a book I had read as a child, 'Tunnel in the Sky' by Robert Heinlein, a breathless rapid journey across the stars to another place.*

*I had arrived.*

*I looked around. I was on the main Plaza, among the soaring space age, gravity-defying buildings. People around me were strolling, running, flying, leaping. I was entranced; the citizens of this strange world were magnificently interesting. I could see everyone's conversation scrolling up the screen.*

*When I got there it was quite crowded. Forty-three other people had gone there too, some were friends meeting and talking, and others like me had gone alone. It was an odd crowd, some old – some young, some black – some white, some men – some women,*



*French, German, American or Spanish. They were an odd crowd because they were all just people; I had no clues about their age, ethnicity, gender or nationality. They were just individuals who I hadn't yet met. Perhaps I never would. Some would be sitting at home as I was. Some might be in bed, or on a train, or at work. For some it was morning, for others evening. Every one of us was technologically connected to the Plaza through a computer screen and a modem. Every one of us was socially connected to the other visitors to the Plaza because we chose to inhabit its space.*

*People in cyberspace are challenging traditional ideas about presence and distance. The Plaza was a place we cyber bodies visited when we wanted to. We knew we were there, at the same time as we knew we were here. Cyberspace can be an ambiguous place.*

*When I arrived there were groups of people talking, several conversations were taking place at the same time. Some people were quiet – were they 'lurking' or simply 'afk' (away from keyboard)? Catfor said they were going, they had visitors coming, and a group of their friends added their farewells. For a while the screen was scrolling fast with 'byes' and \*waves\*. A strange thing I have noticed about cyberspace. I can take my body out of a room without anyone noticing, but in cyberspace*

*the comings and goings or my cyberbody are always celebrated.*  
*I used to find it difficult to leave, I felt as if everyone wanted me*  
*to stay.*

*I announced my arrival on the Plaza by saying, "Hello everyone -*  
*☺". I added the smile so that they would know I was friendly and*  
*wanted to talk. Although everybody on the Plaza could see my*  
*words, no one replied.*

Engaging with my project meant learning to live life in Cybertown. As Markham remarked cyberspace is not simply a set of texts to analyse, it is an 'evolving cultural context of immense magnitude and complex scope' (1998: 25). In order to usefully evaluate other people's experiences of these contexts as an ethnographer I would also have to experience them myself. To achieve this end I became dutypigeon.

Dutypigeon was the name I gave myself when I visited Cybertown. How I became dutypigeon, and who dutypigeon is now are questions that have intrigued me throughout my research, because who am I when I am dutypigeon? There seem to be infinite possibilities when you can live in a new place with a new name, in what Stone calls 'optional embodiments' (1995: 37) and I must admit that I thought this was one exciting aspect of moving to Cybertown. Turkle's (1995) discussion of multiple personalities in virtual life suggests that a more fluid sense of self allows us to acknowledge diversity, difference and the

possibility of limitations. 'We understand that we do not and cannot know things completely' (Turkle, 1995: 261).

In the beginning, much of my time was concerned with reading about these issues. The idea of constructing a new personality was in itself exiting, and I looked forward to becoming dutypigeon and exploring new dimensions of self and identity that could be ageless and genderless. However, as Stone remarks:

No matter how virtual the subject may become, there is always a body attached. It may be off somewhere else - and that 'somewhere else' may be a privileged point of view - but consciousness remains firmly rooted in the physical. Historically, body, technology, and community constitute each other.  
(Stone, 1991: 111)

Reading Stone's notions about multiple personalities and the post-modern deconstruction of self intrigued me, and was influential in my construction of a cyborg me. I was eager about being who I wanted to be rather than who I am. Rather than a modernist 'project' of transformation through which as Shilling (1993: 74) suggests I might express a sense of identity, a post-modern approach would deconstruct and fragment that identity allowing me to construct a more fluid self.

Practically speaking the possibility was there to choose my age, gender, background etc. Accordingly I started with a new name and expected to construct a new me. Looking back in hindsight I realise that I really am dutypigeon, and also that dutypigeon is me. In other words I have not managed to create a new me called dutypigeon that exists separately – online as opposed to offline. Little did I know that I would end up by negotiating my self the same



way as I do in Real Life. Basically I am simply dutypigeon to people who know me in Cybertown, in the same way, I am mum to my children, and Denise to my friends. As Stone might say, my body is still attached, and my consciousness remains firmly rooted in that body. Dutypigeon is simply one way of projecting that consciousness. Reading back through my fieldwork logs I remember a sense of excitement and fear that echoed both Schaap's comment 'I was nobody...the city was big, dangerous and new to me' (2002: 6), and Markham's observation 'I was paralysed in the dark, isolated from that world' (1998: 23). For me, learning to be dutypigeon was learning how to be embodied in cyberspace; this process of becoming more embodied in cyberspace is explained in chapter four.

To be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied there is to participate. To participate is to know enough about the rules for interaction and movement so that interaction and movement with and within this space is possible...because movement and interaction create embodied presence, not simply accompany it. (Markham, 1998: 24)

In contrast Schaap (2002) played a character with a different gender to his own. In an online MUD, a fantasy role-playing game, he became Eveline 'one of the voices who tells the story' (Schaap, 2002: 26). He did construct a new self that was feminine as opposed to masculine. Although this apparently contravenes the ethics of human subject research Schaap explains why he did this, using Fine's words, 'for the game to work as an aesthetic experience players must be willing to 'bracket' their 'natural' selves and enact a fantasy self' (Fine, cited in Schaap, 2002: 15). He further explains how, in MUDs, the player 'plays' a character, and although there are elements of playing a game it is more than that.



Figure 1: Welcome to Cybertown Plaza





This is because they don't play to win; instead they play for the pleasure of the social relations and social interactions between the characters. Schaap considers himself to be a divided self, one part the character of Eveline, the other part a post-modern anthropologist 'who registered what happened with his *forked eye* (Tyler 1987: 91) and took notes' (Schaap, 2002: 16). In particular Schaap is interested in the performance of gender online. This is for two reasons. First, there is an absence of physical body, and second the performer only has text. So although virtual environment as Schaap says has its 'own set of freedoms' (2002: 2) a player needs 'all his [sic] social, cultural and linguistic knowledge and wits to convincingly perform his [sic] character'. This performance is made more difficult by the scrutiny of other players. In essence, Schaap wants to show how the physicality of the body can obscure gender: that there are other processes at work and that a creditable performance of self is much more complex and embedded in language than we might think.

Markham (1998) felt protected by distance and anonymity as she realised she can change her names and characteristics in different places. Markham used her own name in most settings, preferring not to be anonymous, yet says that it was quite a revelation when she realised that most users don't have the time or energy to track down every person who communicates something to them (1998: 25).

At first I was a bit like Markham. I felt very shy and afraid. I didn't want people tracking me down in my real life. Much later I bought my own domain name and constructed my own web pages at <http://www.denisecarter.net>. I often



used this web page address as my badge of office, and offered it freely to those who helped me in my research so they could 'know me' as a legitimate researcher. Side by side on this web page were descriptions of the two me's, dutypigeon and Denise Carter. One lives and works in Cybertown, the other lives and works 'out here', yet the two are inseparable, dutypigeon is an integral fragment of my conscious body/self.

Getting a new name was probably the easiest part of learning to live online. Negotiating the hardware and software was more difficult. Looking back I see how innocent I was, in the sense of a newborn baby, a child. There was and still is a lot to learn out there. First the hardware, the computer itself. As a university student I had been limited to using my computer for word processing, handing in essays on time and looking things up on the Internet.

In some ways being in cyberspace is similar to driving a car. You get in and learn what the pedals are for, and the gear stick, but when you set off you need six pairs of hands and the ability to look in twenty places at once. It is overwhelming and confusing. But, you also need to know how to put fuel in, air in the tyres (and what their pressure should be), water in the window washers, check the oil – the list is endless. The same with a computer, the first time I took the case off to look inside looked inside in awe, hardly dare breathing in case I damaged a vital, sensitive bit of equipment. Now I tell people it is like building Lego and I have just built my son a computer for his birthday. So a computer is like a car. The hardware is the body and the software is the engine. Although I will not describe all the things I had to learn about the mechanics of

using a computer to 'be' online and to 'go to' Cybertown, these skills were not accomplished overnight. They were part of the process of learning to live in cyberspace that I explain in chapter four. One outcome of this is that I think I can now be considered a sophisticated computer user. I often forget that others do not have the same knowledge, and the Internet has become such a part of my life that it surprises me that it is not a large part of everyone else's.

### **Meeting *zosma* and *artady***

I spent the first few weeks wandering around this new place, this ethnographic field that was to be my new home. But for many weeks I had felt like a stranger, an intruder into the lives of others. Then I met someone who became both a friend and a teacher. She is still a friend, though not so much a teacher these days. Indeed we extended our friendship beyond the field and she has been to visit me at home, in my own life. Her name is *zosma*. She is not the only friend I have in that place, but she is a special friend. She was my first friend in Cybertown. She introduced me to many people and many places, and taught me the acceptable behaviours that here in Cyberspace are called netiquette.

In hindsight my first meeting with *zosma* illustrates the processes that are occurring in the background or behind the scenes, and with which those of us who take the scene at face value are often unaware. It was part of the later learning progress that I did eventually become aware of these processes. I had been wandering around Cybertown for about four weeks and I was feeling rather lost and alone. I had a house of my own there that I seldom visited. I cruised



the public spaces looking for people to engage with, and at this time the Plaza and the Café (figure 2) were two of my favourite places.

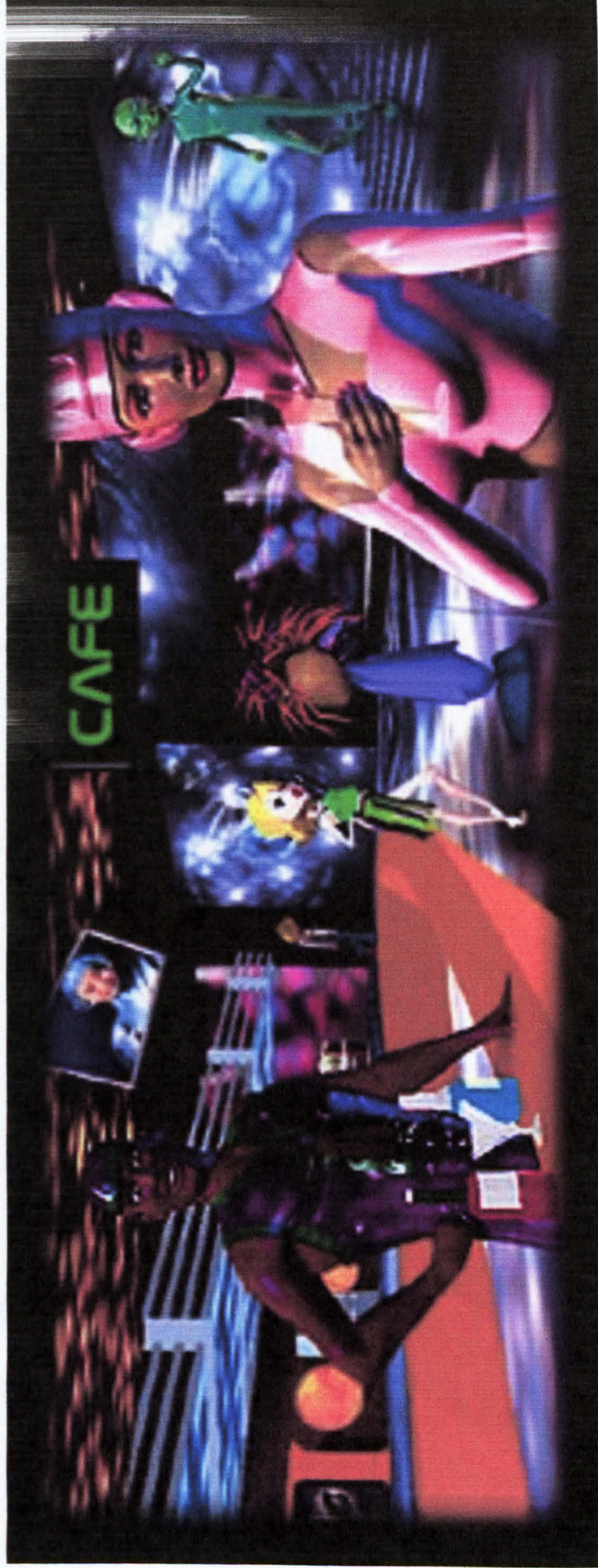
In retrospect I was doing things the hard way. One particular day I decided to visit my house...but it wasn't there!! I had meticulously kept notes and I knew exactly where it ought to be. It was in a Virtual Worlds Colony/Metaverse Neighbourhood/Windmill Block. After about an hour of puzzlement and searching I still couldn't find my house, so I put it another one exactly where I had left it and then left Cybertown. Later as a Block Deputy I used to check houses to see when they were last visited by their residents. Those that had not been visited for one calendar month were always deleted, solving the mystery of my disappearing house. However at the time I did not know this rule existed and I was extremely curious, so about an hour later I returned just to check on this weird phenomenon – 'the disappearing house'. It was still there, I checked my mailbox and found a message there, someone called *artady* said they were a Block Deputy<sup>5</sup> (BD) and welcomed me back. It was such a friendly message that I pressed reply and said 'hi' back. Our dialogue was confined to messages passing back and forth for about ten days until one day she arrived in my house. Simply put, a house is a single web page with the name of the owner and the name of the house displayed for everyone to see. Also displayed on the page are a text box and a list of people present. When *artady* came to my house, her name and details popped up in the text box and in the list of people present. Visiting homes in Cybertown is different to visiting people's homes offline.

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<sup>5</sup> Block deputies (BD) are employed to look after the residents in a block, approximately forty houses. There are various duties associated with the role, of which a major one is introducing oneself to newbies and facilitating their immersion into Cybertown society.



**Figure 2: The Café**





First you do not need to knock on a door and wait for it to be answered because every house is a web page that everyone in Cybertown can access. Second complete strangers often also call in looking for company, and I have met several people this way. However, the first time that *artady* came to visit I was amazed at my good fortune. I remember thinking what a coincidence it was that we arrived there together. Of course I now know that by putting my name on her friends list she would be automatically notified each time I arrived in Cybertown, and as a result had come to find me. This is a good example of those background processes that were gradually revealed to me. On arrival in Cybertown it is possible to access a citizens list that records all Cybertown citizens who are present in Cybertown at any one time. Then, by appending the names of people who you wish to find, you are automatically informed when anyone on this friends list arrives in Cybertown. It was not a coincidence either that after a short while another person arrived and was also introduced to me. This was *zosma*. At this time she held the post of Neighbourhood Leader (ND) and was recruiting for new BDs. I had been spotted as being active (i.e. I was visiting Cybertown daily, and had replied to the initial message), and was being considered for the post of BD. *zosma* had been summoned to meet me by means of *artady* conversing privately with her through the instant messaging<sup>6</sup> system present in Cybertown. That meeting was only the first of many over the course of my research. I was offered the job, I accepted it, and we agreed to meet later for job training. In theory, meeting online is the same as meeting offline although the mechanics of getting there are different. *zosma* and I arranged a place (my Cybertown house) and a time. Time in Cybertown is based around a

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<sup>6</sup> Instant messaging enables you to contact anyone actually present in Cybertown, i.e. if they are listed, you can message them and it will appear in a new, separate screen that overlays the ordinary chat screen. Only the sender and recipient are aware of the message.

twenty-four hour clock and is about nine hours ahead of the UK. Again, I didn't realise it at the time, but the organisation of work provides one framework upon which to build social relationships among the inhabitants of Cybertown, a notion I build on in later chapters.

### **Working in Cybertown**

I have held various posts in Cybertown's work hierarchy. I began as a Block Deputy in Windmill/Metaverse/Virtual Colony and ended as a Neighbourhood Deputy in Real Worlds/Virtual Colony, having also being awarded Elder Status in 2001. This status is honorary and dependent upon high levels of both experience and community involvement. These are, first a minimum of 5,000 experience points, which as I explained earlier are earned at a minimum rate of ten per day. Second I had to have given one years 'valuable contribution with good record, i.e. a good work record, going above and beyond the normal work requirements, having the reputation of one who 'stands out in a crowd' in a positive manner' (adapted from Virtual Worlds Elder Status application form, see Appendix E). The work itself was quite demanding and it was made clear to me by *zosma* at the outset that I needed to be able to commit to being in Cybertown for at least two hours per day.

Becoming a working citizen in Cybertown provided me with the gateway into my research project itself. I set out trying to understand how people carry on conversations, work together and build relationships in Cybertown through the exchange of texts. I ended up actively engaging in the creation of multivocal



texts that became the objects of my analysis. I became both subject and object, observer and observed, as the meaningful world of relationships that is Cybertown was revealed to me. As I became more familiar with Cybertown I could not imagine there would ever be a day when I would not want to go there anymore.

### **Leaving Cybertown**

I lived and worked in Cybertown for three and a half years during my ethnography. At times I spent as many as twelve or fourteen hours a day online. On occasion I would set my alarm so that I could get up in the middle of the night to see people from different time zones. Leaving Cybertown was a sudden decision. Not only did I believe that I had collected enough data, but I just did not want to be there any more. I started to feel lonely and like Markham I felt 'the urge to get connected to the planet again...to get connected in a different way' (1998: 199). Speaking to people in Cybertown can be a very silent affair, with only the humming of the computer and the sound of fingers hitting the keyboard. I felt hungry for the 'lyrical lilt of voices' (Markham, 1998: 217). Since leaving Cybertown I have rarely returned. When I do, I look for the friends I knew but seldom find them, leaving me feel more forlorn and lonely (Markham, 1998: 232). Then I realise that I am no longer a part of what we had then. I was only an observer after all. There is a strange kind of silence in the corner of the room where Cybertown used to be. Perhaps this is part of the problem of doing ethnography at home. I visited new places yet never left this place, so there is a gap, an emptiness, a blankness, and a silence. Markham and

Schaap have felt this too. Markham describes watching the computer screen going blank at the end (1998: 232). Schaap similarly describes how when he finally withdrew from his MUD and switched off the computer screen 'the fluorescent green of her [Eveline's] world lay soothingly in a sea of black' (2002: 137).

As I sit here writing this I realise that I have never actually entered Cybertown as a visitor. This is an oversight that I can remedy immediately because I am already sitting here at my computer. I only need to press a few buttons in the correct sequence and I arrive in Cybertown - in a way this action serves to illustrate the uniqueness of doing ethnography on the Internet. One of the reasons that I first became interested in cyberspace was the interconnectedness of the local and the global. As I quickly log on so that I can experience Cybertown as a visitor, I am illustrating this connectedness far more eloquently than a whole ream of words.

In actual fact I found going to Cybertown as a visitor frustrating. Visitors cannot join in the chat. They have access to all parts of Cybertown, but they have no contact. I felt like a ghost. I had no identity, other than 'visitor'. I saw a friend on the Plaza but I couldn't speak because I was dumb (unable to speak) in my guise as visitor. I did not stay long because I did not enjoy the experience of being cut off from people I knew. However I must recognise that this viewpoint is not the viewpoint I might have had if I had entered Cybertown as a visitor on my very first day when I was a newbie. This is for two reasons – first, I now have friends who I will not be able to speak to as an anonymous visitor – second,



I also have a far greater understanding of the language than I had on my first day. In short, any conclusions I might draw today are not the same ones I might have drawn then. My understanding and familiarity have changed my viewpoints since that far away first day - the day of my arrival. So now I write about my experiences and about Cybertown and its inhabitants, and like Schaap I hope I have not offended anyone. Like him I will also be honoured if this text becomes embedded in the local history of that 'singularly breathtaking city' (Schaap, 2002: 137) that is Cybertown.

## **Section Two: The Research Process, Themes and Tools**

### **Developing Questionnaires**

Developing a questionnaire to use in Cybertown followed general guidelines. I started with a list of things I wanted to know and then wrote questions around the topics. A mixture of open and closed questions was used. At the same time I wrote a more formal justification that was very useful tool in enabling me to focus on what I wanted to know.

The questionnaire was aimed at the residents of Cybertown. Its purpose was to capture the motivations, interests and perceptions of the respondents with respect to various issues; primarily how social networks are created and reproduced in cyberspace. Secondly it would provide an insight into the creation, negotiation and reproduction of the sociality of their online experiences as they shift

between being in cyberspace and being in the physical world. It consisted of approximately fifty questions in five sections; a copy is included in appendix F.

Section one collected background information and was further subdivided into two parts. Part one asked for general demographic data, such as age, gender and geographical location. The second part contained open questions dealing with general views about the Internet.

Section two asked questions about the impact of technology on language and communications technology. It asked about skills that may be needed to facilitate the human mediation of technology, and more specifically about the relationship of the computer and technology in enabling communications.

Section three dealt with the nature of community and belonging. It contained general questions asking how people discovered Cybertown and the amount of time spent there. Several more specific questions were aimed at personal beliefs about Cybertown. These aimed to discover how people relate to Cybertown as a 'real' place and how they might view it as a community.

Section four was divided into three subsections that dealt explicitly with issues around the construction of identity and the nature of reality and virtuality. I had wondered if this conceptual dichotomy was problematic for Cybertown's residents, but as I discuss in later chapters, this is not the case. Cybertown's residents have been emphatic in their assertions that Cybertown is a real place, inhabited by real people, and the major focus of my research has been to uncover



the meanings behind these assertions. These questions about identity were designed to further explore the field of research by eliciting personal reflections around those issues that inform us how Cybertown citizens move between their online and offline worlds. The first section explored the nature of the boundary between real and virtual in order to discover how movement between being in cyberspace and being in the physical world is negotiated. The second section asked questions about the nature of selfhood and identity and aimed to discover how people view themselves in reality/virtuality. The third section further explored issues of 'real' and 'authentic' identity centred on the use of nicknames.

Section five contained questions designed to further explore the complexities of the interpenetration of real and virtual modes of sociality. Some questions specifically asked about the nature of online and offline relationships and the respondent's perceptions of them. I hoped that this section would test the impact of the Internet on creating social networks and give me some clues about people's expectations of the future impact of the Internet.

## **Piloting**

After discussion with my supervisor, I initially asked only one person, *phad*, to complete my questionnaire and to give me feedback on the questions themselves. He was the highest status person I knew in Cybertown, the Colony Secretary. This meant that he was very involved with issues of policy in the Virtual Worlds Colony where we both lived. I felt that if he had objections it

would be important to modify things, but if not, my questionnaire probably wouldn't offend anyone. One added reason was that I had actually met him face to face on two occasions, once in my home, and once in his. He lives only about 50 miles away from me. We had spent many hours chatting in Cybertown and were newbies together (had immigrated to Cybertown together). In fact I had employed him as my Block Deputy when I was a Block Leader. He had risen up the employment ladder where I had deliberately turned down promotion in favour of retaining contact with Cybertown inhabitants on an everyday level, a problem often mirrored by management in everyday life.

### **Changes in Design**

*phad* was happy with my questions as they stood, so I did not change any. However, I did modify my questionnaire to ask two additional questions about technology and skills. In retrospect this has not been particularly useful information but may help to indicate future research areas around the digital divide. Two main aspects to the digital divide have been identified by researchers, the first is the actual cost of ownership of the computer hardware and connection to the Internet, the second is the skill levels necessary to operate the technology (James, 2003; Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2003).

Getting people to actually complete my questionnaire was the next challenge. People I knew personally would be easy, but would not provide a large enough database so I would have to work to expand this. I decided to pilot the questions with ten contacts I knew and then after any necessary adjustments to canvas



more respondents from the general population. Also, because of the time differences I gave choices about how to respond through asking respondents to select either face-to-face interviews, emails, telephone calls or to complete the questionnaire online. In order to offer this last option I created an online form out of my questions. I put this online form on my website at <http://www.denisecarter.net/interview.htm>, and when completed respondents pressed a 'submit' button that emailed the form directly to me. This involved learning yet more IT skills but was very successful and the majority chose to complete it in this manner. When respondents made it clear that they preferred this method I gave them the web page address of the questionnaire. I did not make it openly available on my website as I thought people surfing the net might find it and complete it, causing my results to be affected.

Around this time I made an important decision. I found I wasn't happy with my involvement as a Neighbourhood Deputy (ND) in Cybertown. I had continued to work in Cybertown because it gave me access to staff email groups that were not really generating useful data. At the same time this affected my freedom to canvas respondents as I had to spend a considerable amount of my time in Cybertown working. As I wrote in my fieldwork logs on the 15 April 2002, 'I need to get out there and chat to real people again'. The same day I also wrote 'I don't need to know everyone I interview'. So I worked my way around every message board in every Colony in Cybertown and posted a request for people to help me. Things started to move much faster. I discovered that most people preferred to fill in the questionnaire online and post/email it to me. I worried about the short answers I seemed to be getting, but rationalised that text and chat

are short in the medium of cyberspace, hence the use of emoticons and shortcuts. Typing long phrases takes too long and slows conversation.

I was disappointed that I could only manage to arrange three face-to-face meetings. Several people expressed an interest but because of various reasons such as physical location, travel costs, work and family commitments, many planned meetings did not take place. I also expected to attend a symposium of Cybertown residents being organised in the UK, but this was cancelled due to the ill health of the organiser. However, of the three face-to-face meetings that took place one was with my mentor and friend from Cybertown, *zosma*, who flew over from Denmark to spend six days with my family and myself. These three also completed my questionnaire online, and two of them wrote narratives for me about their experiences, the third was admitted to hospital and unable to participate in this stage of my research.

Following the preliminary findings from the questionnaires I asked some of the inhabitants to write me short stories or monologues about their personal relationships in Cybertown. Storytelling as a form of narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000) was exploited as a means of encouraging participants to write about their experiences in detail. This strategy attempted to overcome the reluctance of participants to meet me for discussions by simulating an open-ended interview process. The narratives were based around four themes specifically aimed at actively involving participants in the creation of data about their everyday lives. First I asked them to tell me about their best friends, worst friends, old friends, having fun, supporting, loving, laughing, falling out, making



up and anything else they could think of. Second I asked, are you someone's cyberparent or cyberkid (or both), and to tell me about it, how you feel and how you support/help your adopted cyberfamily. Third I asked do you give and receive gifts. I also asked them to tell me about celebrating special events online/offline, (for example, a birthday or Christmas), or special friends or work or promotions. Last I asked them to tell me about their experience of meeting people offline. As with the questionnaire, I developed a web page at <http://www.denisecarter.net/friendship.html> that could be completed at leisure, and as a result twenty-one people wrote me stories describing their experiences.

### **Response Rates and Demographic data**

Initially a snowballing technique to data collection was implemented. I posted a message to the staff discussion group explaining my research and asking for help in answering questions that would enrich my understanding of their relationships in Cybertown. Although effective in recruiting participants since all twenty-three members of this group assisted me I still needed a larger population. In an effort to expand the numbers I asked them to nominate other friends who might like to help. This resulted in three more participants. In order to further increase this number I then posted messages on general message boards in Cybertown that generated the remaining sixty members of my sample population. This method of sampling is what Arber calls purposive sampling (1993: 72) for the facilitation of exploration and theory development.

As well as comparing experiences, I also considered other variables such as age, gender and length of time visiting Cybertown, the latter emerging as an important variable in the negotiation of trust online. Generally respondents had lived in Cybertown between 6 and 57 months, and were aged between 15 and 63 years. An average respondent was likely to be female (59%), about 29 years old, and had been living in Cybertown for 30 months. Although I have calculated the distribution of age, country of residence and gender across my sample size of eighty four respondents, this data cannot be regarded as significant because I have no way of knowing whether this is a representative sample. This is because there are no official statistics available from Cybertown itself against which I can compare my own findings. However, subsequent analysis may provide correlations between these three variables, age, gender and length of time, and the insights generated into the online relationships of the sample population. This is an analysis that I will resist because in many respects the online self appears to be largely disassociated from these, but this is a notion I explain in more detail in chapter six.

The demographic data I gathered was entered into Microsoft Access to generate tables that illustrated age (table 2), gender (table 3) and country of origin (table 4). This data was secondary to my intent to gather perceptions and interpretations of relationships in Cybertown. I felt a kind of resistance to gathering this type of data because of the nature of being in Cybertown. When meeting face to face there is an immediate and often subconscious assessment of the other person's physical characteristics.



**Table 2: Age Displayed as Percentages of Age Groups of Sample Population**

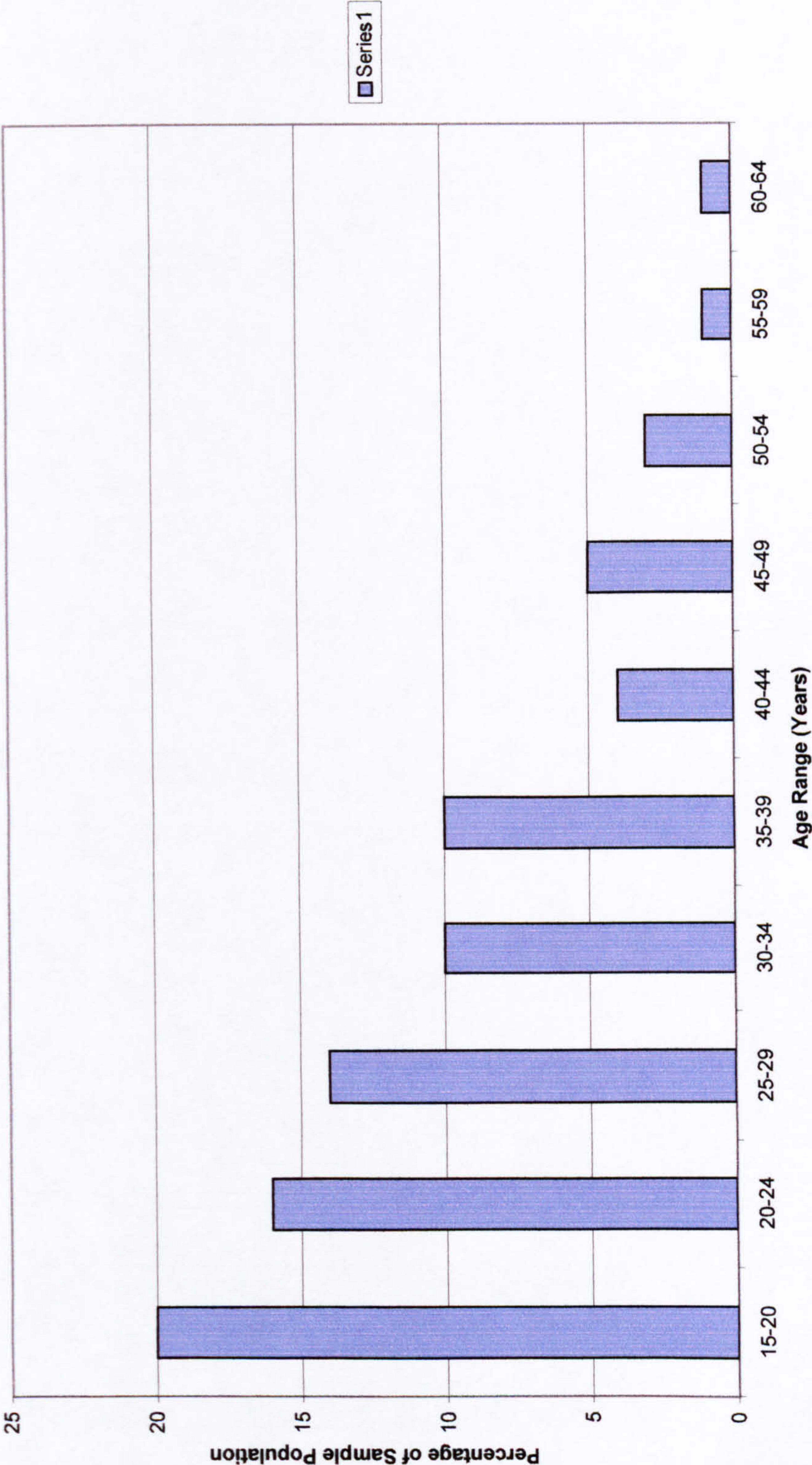
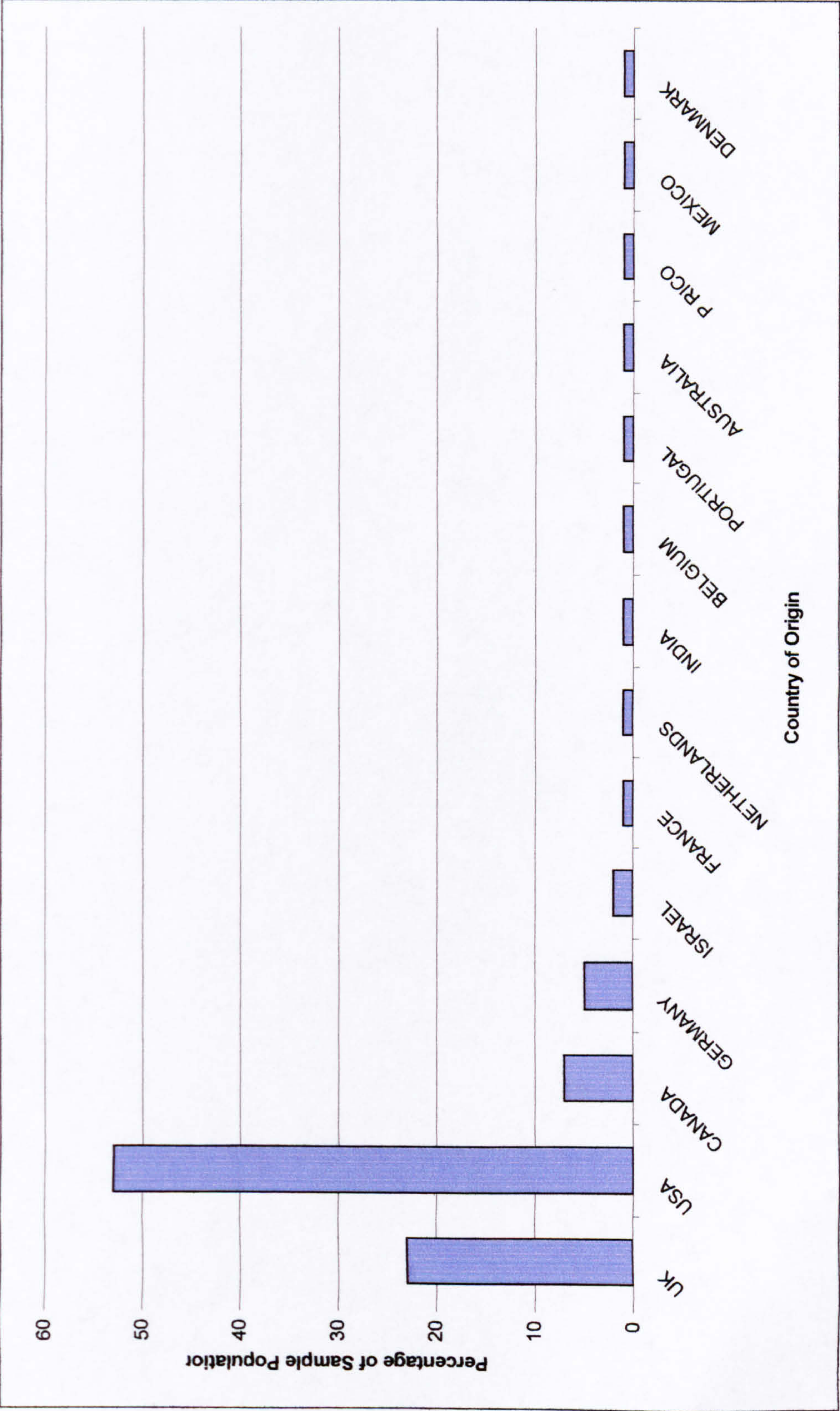


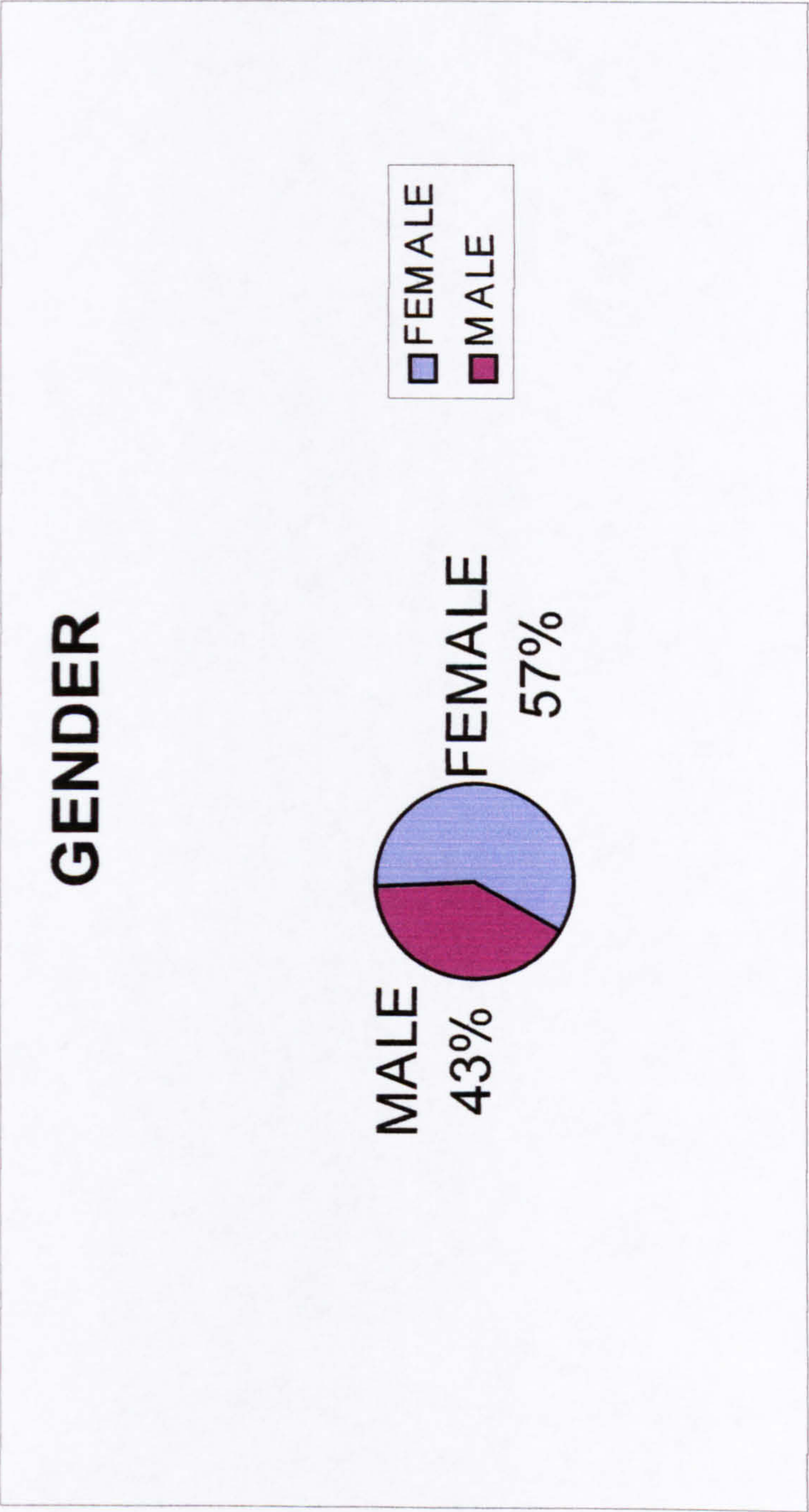


Table 3: Country of Residence Displayed as Percentage of Sample Population





**Table 4: Gender Displayed as Percentage of Sample Population**





This leads to assumptions about age, sex and gender. In Cybertown these characteristics are mainly hidden and are revealed only over time after people become more comfortable with each other. Table 2 appears to show a correlation between age and the sample population. At first glance the age distribution parallels the general assumptions on the use of modern technology across the world, but without knowing the age of all members of Cybertown, there is no way of knowing this for sure. As a result I am reluctant to draw any conclusions from this particular data set. Table 3 gives a breakdown of the country of residence of Cybertown's inhabitants displayed as a percentage of the sample population. This table indicates that the majority of respondents come from the US, the UK and the rest of the Western world. As a result my analysis of community and friendship in chapters is based on mainly western notions of friendship and community.

Table 4 suggests that more females than males are living in Cybertown. This result supports data on the gender distribution of Internet users in the USA in 2002, where female Internet use (60%) had overtaken male Internet use (40%) since drawing level in 2000 (Dholakia *et al*, 2003). However, although Dholakia *et al* (2003) explain that Internet usage statistics have revealed gender is one of the 'most important factors influencing Internet adoption and usage' (2003: 6-7), they also point out that it is the socially constructed aspect of gender roles that accounts for a wide variation in the gender divide between countries. This is problematic because statistical evidence regarding gender use and the Internet does not 'adequately capture the cultural and changing differences in gender roles' (Dholakia *et al*, 2003: 6-7), for example, looking at World statistics for the



same period, data suggests that a male bias still persists and that suggests that most Internet users are male. Even in countries where this gender bias is no longer apparent there are differences in the width and depth of technology adoption. Here 'width' refers to the number of people who use the technology, and 'depth' refers to the amount of usage (Dholakia *et al*, 2003: 9). This means that I am again reluctant to draw conclusions from this data set about gendered Internet use in Cybertown. However, chapters five and six explain how the width, or amount of time spent online, both in hours per day and in length over months does have significance for the negotiation of trust and commitment.

### **Verification and Trustworthiness of Data**

As with all human subject research I had to consider the trustworthiness and hence the validity of my data. Indeed the perceived difficulties in brokering trust with one's online or 'virtual' informants constitutes a major debate throughout Internet research (Jones, 1997; Markham, 2003; Mann and Stewart, 2000), where verifying the truth of informants is recognised as being just as necessary (if not more vital) in virtual communities as in real life. Many debates appear to start with the premise that researchers are good at recognising truth, but psychological research indicates instead that we are all poor judges of truthfulness anyway (Wallace, 1999: 50-52). What gives this issue an added dimension is that these debates also feed back into my earlier explanation of the dichotomy between the real and the virtual/imaginary. Because of this the facts uncovered in virtual/imaginary places online might be presumed to be virtual or imaginary and therefore invalid. Consequently, the likelihood of collecting real

data in a virtual place is brought into question. Despite this, I have realised that it is not important whether what the residents of Cybertown say is the truth: the more important issue is to establish the meanings behind what they say, and uncover their reasons for saying it. Hine (2000) writes something similar about her own research, explaining that there is no point in establishing if what someone says is the truth because authenticity should not be seen as absolute, it is instead:

Situationally negotiated... The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that informants judge authenticity.  
(Hine, 2000: 49)

This is a theme I return to time and again in later chapters, particularly when discussing community and friendship. Often the residents of Cybertown stress the ‘realness’ of their community and of the friendships they establish there, as well as drawing my attention to the perceived continuity between their online and offline lives.

Theoretically, Internet researchers have examined several issues related to trust and validity, including the use of nicknames and the amount of time spent online. For example, in a discussion of nicknames, Mann and Stewart (2000) suggest that by keeping the same nicknames participants in online communities create relatively ‘consistent personae’ that allow researchers to test truthfulness against regular patterns of interaction (2000: 210). As for spending time online, Kendall (1998) claims that spending time in an online community and getting to know the particular norms of the group compensates for the absence of facial cues online and also increases the researcher’s ability to evaluate the authenticity



of responses. Hence the amount of time spent online appears to be a useful predictor of truth. Whitty's study of chat rooms reveals that people who spend less time in chat rooms 'are more likely to tell lies' (2002: 350). Conversely, the more time people spend in chat rooms the more open they become about themselves. Whitty suggests that this follows a similar pattern to face-to-face relationships where trust develops gradually as people become familiar with one another (2002: 349). Similarly, by living and working in Cybertown over three years I learned to recognise the consistency of individuals in the presentation of themselves, and therefore to interpret their data as trustworthy, just as Mann and Stewart (2000) found. Indeed, my analysis of online friendship in chapter six draws on this notion that time spent online is a useful indicator of truthfulness. Furthermore, the residents of Cybertown tended to use the same nickname everywhere they went on the Internet. This resulted in their being easy to identify, an issue that can be problematic when protecting their identity as I explain in the later section on ethical considerations.

This 'trust' was further reinforced by also belonging to a Staff email discussion group that existed outside of Cybertown. Its twenty-three members were the original members of my sample population. Indeed, the email group itself yielded some interesting data as asynchronous debates about incidents in both Cybertown and Real Life occurred indiscriminately. Notable examples are debates about Cybertown policy and the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Centre. Real time events such as birthdays, children's birthdays and festivals such as Christmas were also topics. This discussion group also bore

witness to several meetings between staff members, and indeed, my own meeting with *zosma*, my main informant was celebrated and discussed here.

Throughout my research I cannot remember feeling that a resident was not ‘authentic’ in the sense that they deliberately told me untruths. Although, as I have already explained, trust is formed gradually over time as people become more familiar with each other<sup>7</sup>. Thus in Cybertown newbies would be treated with more scepticism than those of longer acquaintance (both by me and by the other Cybertown residents). This problem of ‘active deception’ is one that has been addressed by Mann and Stewart (2000), who point out that associating deception with Internet research is no different to suggesting that any data collected through indirect means such as questionnaires is untrustworthy (2000: 211). Concluding that large amounts of energy are necessary to sustain deception and suggesting that it might not be worth the effort, Mann and Stewart’s deductions are also supported in Markham’s (1998) work. As her interview with Matthew [a respondent] unfolds he maintains that ‘I’ve been me too long to be anybody else without a lot more practice than I have time for’ (Markham, 1998: 135). Schaap’s (2002: 1-2) explanation is more prosaic, that by exposing the meanings behind what people do and say online we hold up a mirror to everyday life – as a result we learn how people make sense of the worlds around them. Later chapters explain how my own research yields similar insights.

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<sup>7</sup> A more in depth explanation of these issues is presented in chapter six on friendship.



## Ethical Considerations

Alongside the preparation of the interview questions was a consideration of ethics. Ethically, cyberethnography is similar to conventional ethnography because the four main moral obligations of dealing with human subject research are the same. The first is the principle of *nonmaleficance* or not causing harm, the second is to protect the anonymity of subjects, the third is to protect the confidentiality of data, and the fourth is to obtain informed consent (de Beauvoir, 1981). However, the global reach of the Internet and the use of pseudonyms combined with the duty to fully inform the research subjects about my research and myself increased the complexity of ethical considerations. How I assessed and managed these issues is particular to my research, reflecting Simone de Beauvoir's (1986: 134) observation that 'Ethics does not furnish recipes any more that do science and art'. Nevertheless, membership of the Association of Internet Researchers gave me access to a set of ethical guidelines<sup>8</sup> that proved invaluable.

Not only did I have to honour the ethical code of traditional ethnography, but also the various international laws regarding internet privacy, especially in regard to those under the age of thirteen years. In part this problem is intimately bound up with the lack of visual clues about age that would ordinarily inform ethnographic research. I solved this problem by actively asking people below the age of thirteen years not to respond, and by including on my questionnaire a note that I attempted at all times to adhere to COPPA (the Children's Online

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<sup>8</sup> This comprehensive document giving ethical guidelines for Internet research runs to 33 pages, and is available from <<http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>>.

Privacy Protection Act of 1998<sup>9</sup>), the USA legislation, and to the recommendations of the IRC (Internet Crime Forum<sup>10</sup> sub-group), the European recommendations.

Traditionally, pseudonyms are used in research reports to protect anonymity, and although it might appear that pseudonyms in cyberspace are consciously chosen as a public aspect of identity and are already an alias, I argue that they must always be changed in research reports. Two issues make this essential - exclusivity and usage. Identifying individuals in Cybertown is made easier by the fact that each of its citizens has an exclusive pseudonym. When speaking to people in Cybertown you see only this unique nickname. Rather than adopting multiple personalities as Turkle (1995) suggested might happen, people are more like one of Markham's subjects, who said 'I'm just me, really or virtually' (1998: 134). Secondly, many people use this same pseudonym throughout the Internet and, when that relationship is moved into other areas of social life, the pseudonym goes too. When my good friend and mentor *zosma* (pseudonym changed) from Cybertown spent six days visiting my home we called each other *dutypigeon* (my pseudonym) and *zosma*. The tremendous range and accessibility of information on the Internet poses a very great risk to individual privacy and confidentiality. To illustrate this I used the Internet search engine Google<sup>11</sup> to search for *dutypigeon*. It returned five hits, each one pertaining to me! From those five hits it was possible to tell that I was called Denise Carter, I am connected with the University of Hull, I am a member of Anthropology in Action, and that I belong to an email discussion list called Cyberculture. The

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<sup>9</sup> Available from <<http://www.cdt.org/legislation/105th/privacy/coppa.html>>.

<sup>10</sup> Available from <[http://www.internetcrimeforum.org.uk/chatwise\\_streetwise.html](http://www.internetcrimeforum.org.uk/chatwise_streetwise.html)>.

<sup>11</sup> Available at <<http://www.google.com/search>>.



same search on *Denise Carter* came up with over 180,000 hits, making personal identification impossible. A third search on the real Cybertown pseudonym of *zosma* yielded 227 hits of which over 200 were particular to her.

While focussing on protecting the identity of my human subjects, they had to deal with a cyber researcher called *dutypigeon*. The main challenge, as with traditional ethnography was to develop a rapport with them. Presenting myself as open, informative, and professional was essential to this process.

Constructing a web site at <http://www.denisecarter.net> was a major element in this, and as part of my obligations to inform research subjects I always gave them this address as well as giving verbal explanations. Reaping the rich rewards of open and insightful comments about their private and social worlds more than compensated for the vulnerability I felt from having my identity on global view.

## **Chapter Three: Cybertown, A City on the Internet**

### **Introduction**

This chapter sets the scene for the coming narrative of everyday life in and around a virtual Internet based community called Cybertown. Although Cybertown might on the surface appear to be simply another text-based fantasy role-playing game that allows multiple users, (a user is any individual who uses a computer), to play together simultaneously like the MUDs or MOOs that I outlined in chapter one, the reality is very different. As with other cities, life in Cybertown is experienced on many levels. These experiences can, in part, be attributed to the choice between a two-dimensional (2D) or three-dimensional (3D) engagement with the city, and distinctions between the public and private domain. The city landscapes can be loosely grouped into those public meeting places such as the Plaza, the beach, the Fleamarket etc. and the suburbs containing private residents' homes. This distinction between public and private domains has important implications for both notions of community and the development of social relationships in Cybertown, an argument introduced here and continued in later chapters.

The basic difference between 2D and 3D interaction in virtual communities is that 2D is fundamentally text based, whereas 3D has an added aspect of animation. However, 2D interaction is no less important or valuable a contributor to the rich fabric of everyday life in Cybertown than 3D interaction. The skill of the city's residents in the use, management and understanding of



their language and culture largely negate the limitations of social interaction in a 2D text-based environment. Paradoxically, if a text-only environment appears to constrain social relationships through lack of visual clues or the aural nuances of spoken language, it also at the same time frees residents from the physicality of their bodies, a position that many Cybertown residents feel advantageous to the development of relationships. This freedom results in a certain sense of gender, age and race neutrality that sometimes enables other aspects of an individual's personality to dominate. Again, these issues are introduced here and revisited in later chapters.

Further, this chapter establishes the relationship between the geographical and social aspects of Cybertown. In the first section of the chapter I will give an account of the main geographical features of Cybertown, a multi-user virtual community that is accessible via the Internet. In this part, the focus will be on the spatial layout in the context of 2D/3D access to the city, the public/private domain, and home ownership. At the same time this first part will explain how residents negotiate movement between places, and introduce the interconnected economic system, status/awards system and employment system of the city.

The second section of this chapter will link these issues to make clear how the environment and the spatial, social and economic organisation within Cybertown act in unique ways to both free and constrain the social interaction that occurs there. Cybertown is a unique place that both facilitates and constrains ways of everyday social interaction for its population. The residents of Cybertown inhabit a complex virtual world that resembles the 'real' world in many ways.

This results in its alignment with other social worlds and, as my research demonstrates, facilitates the movement of social relationships between them. Following the train of thought begun in the introduction, this chapter also illustrates how Huizinga's (1950) classic definition of play is a good starting point from which to explain how many of the people who live in Cybertown play/perform themselves. Furthermore, I draw connections between real/imaginary and real/play, as the residents of Cybertown continue to stress that Cybertown is no less real than anywhere else. At this point I also put the spatial and social relations in Cybertown into the context of theories of place and space and differences between the public and private domain. Finally, in the conclusion to this chapter I draw all of these points together to illustrate how Cybertown really is - a real city on the Internet.

### **Section One: Geographical or Spatial Dimensions and Practices**

Cybertown is a very large city. The population on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2002 numbered 996,664 registered residents. Its layout is similar to any other large city in the world. It has features similar to any other large city in the world - a Plaza, a beach, a Café, a Funfair, a Post Office, an Employment Office, a Jail and suburbs where the residents live.

However, Cybertown is a city on the Internet, a social world that is no less real for being supported by Internet technologies, and its residents are drawn from all over the globe. In its entirety Cybertown is a large rambling city and, as with other cities, life in Cybertown is experienced on many levels, in particular those of the public and private domain, and



through the means of engagement with these domains. Dealt with in more detail in later chapters this distinction between public/private has important implications for both notions of community and the development of social relationships in Cybertown. However this chapter is more concerned with understanding how residents come to know their city, how they move around it in 2D and 3D.

I begin this discussion by looking in depth at the differences between 2D and 3D interaction in Cybertown. Take for example a visit to the Plaza where in 2D all that is visible is a dialogue box, and a simple photograph of the Plaza (see figure 3). Anyone who has access to a basic computer capable of connecting to the Internet can visit Cybertown in 2D. In contrast, special software<sup>1</sup> or computer programming is needed for visiting Cybertown in 3D. scattered throughout the following pages are a variety of 'screen captures' or photographs (taken using a special software programme) of Cybertown places when I visited it in both 2D and 3D.

The first screenshot (figure 3) shows a view of the Plaza as it appeared on my computer screen on one of my visits. In the bottom right hand corner you can see the date, Saturday 12 October 2002. Above the green dialogue box that contains the conversation is a large picture of the Plaza. This image shows a guide (called *mina*) welcoming you to the city. The Plaza is the designated entry point to the city for those who go there for the first time. Similar to other cities whose signposts lead to the town centre, in Cybertown the hyperlink (see

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<sup>1</sup> In Cybertown that software platform is Blaxxun.

glossary) on the main entry page leads directly to the Plaza. Consequently the Plaza displays the first image that anyone sees. When in 2D mode the image above the dialogue box does not change and is also unique to the particular place you are in. For example figure 4 shows the 2D image for another Cybertown location - the beach. The dialogue box itself is always fairly small and as a result it is only possible to see ten lines of dialogue in this box. This makes long, rapid conversations difficult to follow without practice although joining the conversation is not too difficult. It simply involves typing your remarks in the box below that and then pressing send. Just to the right of the dialogue box is a smaller green box with the heading '{20/313} City Plaza'. This heading explains where you are - the 'City Plaza', how many people are there - '20', and how many Cybertown citizens are in the city in total - '313'. Below that title is a list of the names of the people there. These names are in two different colours that correspond to whether the residents are in 2D (yellow) or (3D) purple. All residents visiting the same place within Cybertown can still see and speak to each other regardless of whether one or all of them are in 2D or 3D. To the right is the control panel that is needed for moving around the city, and I will explain this in more detail later in this chapter.



Figure 3: 2D Screenshot of The Plaza





Figure 4: 2D Image of the Beach

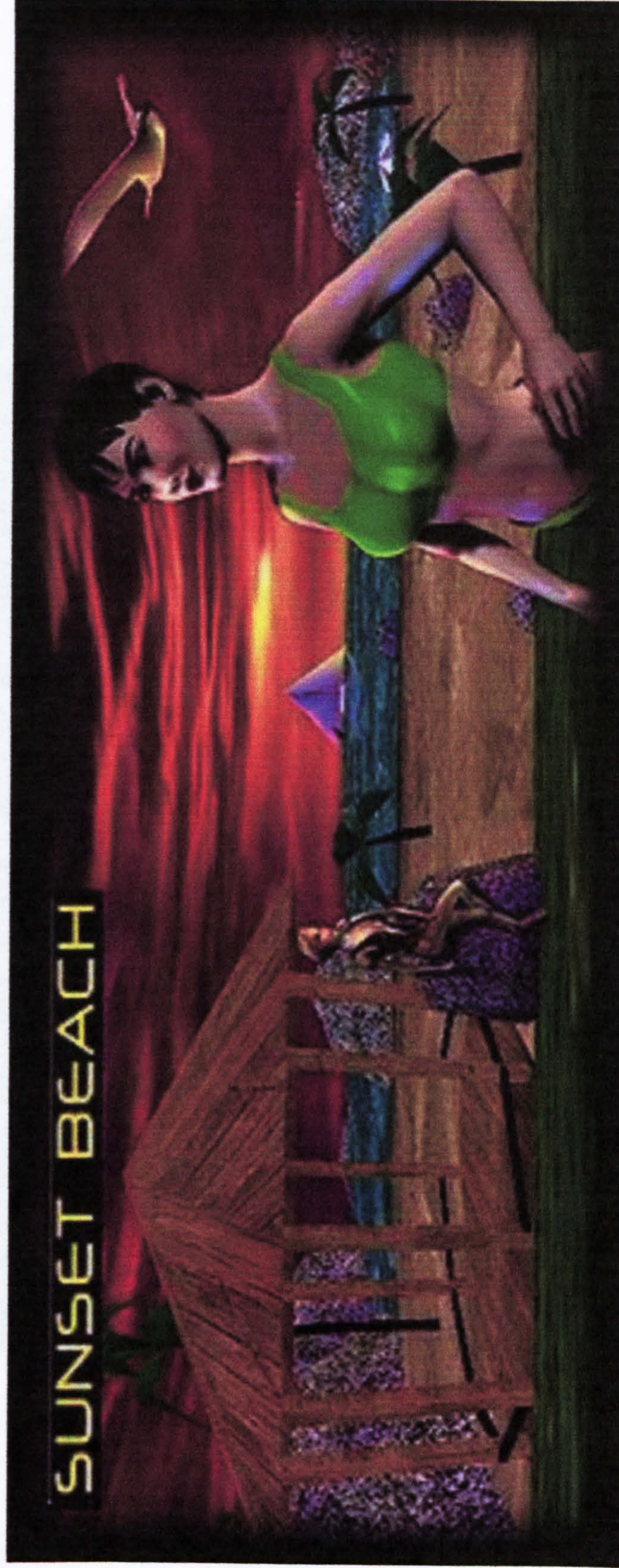




Figure 5: 3D Screenshot: The Plaza

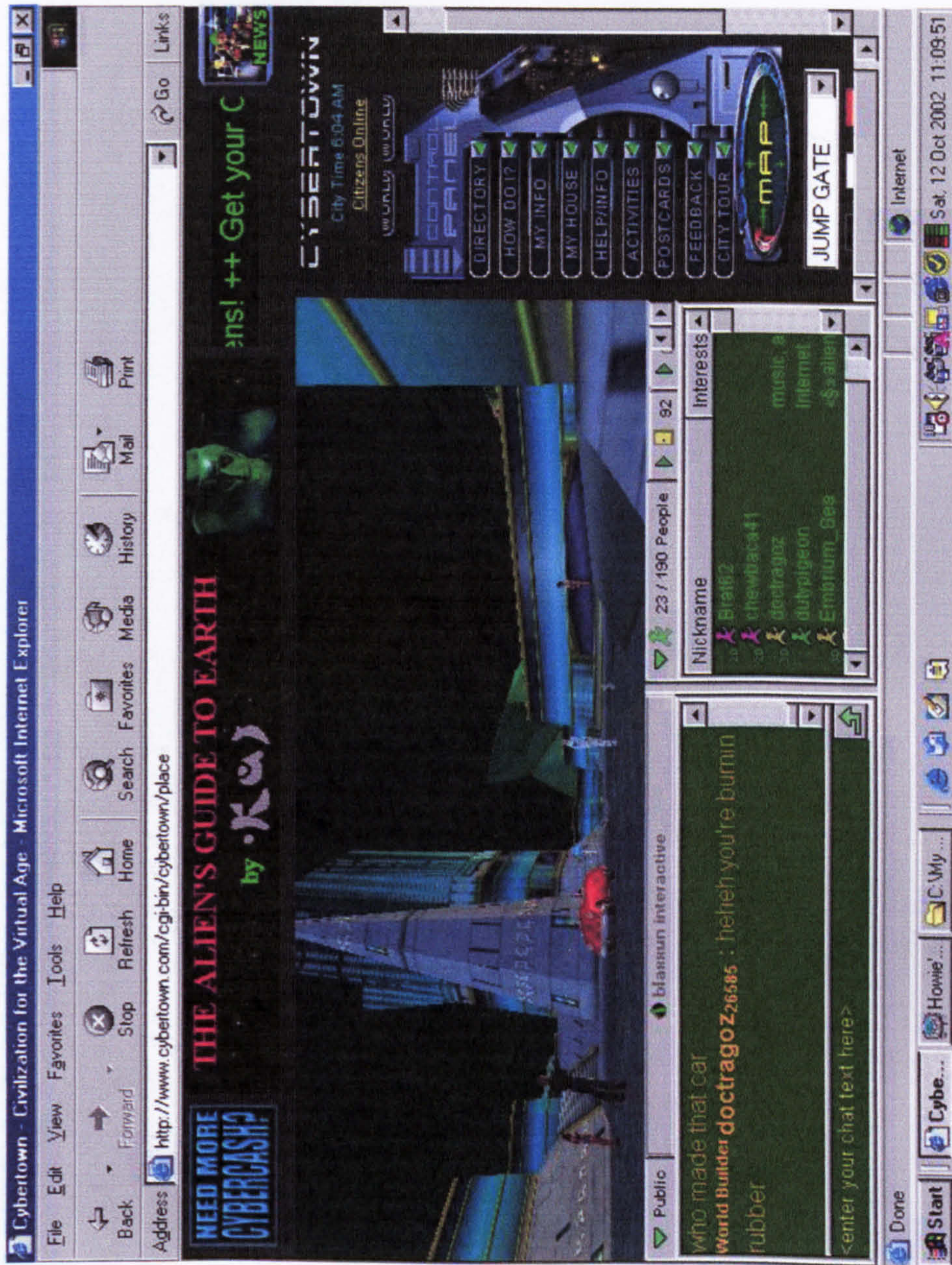




Figure 6: 3D Screenshot of Sunset Beach.





Although it cannot be captured in screenshots, visiting in 3D brings the scene alive with movement. The 3D animation is enjoyed by many residents because you interact in a 3D environment using avatars that are three-dimensional computer representations of an object on the screen that graphically represents the user in an interactive virtual world. The user can move and control this object. 'Avatar is a Sanskrit word that refers to the incarnation of God, but is more commonly used to mean a manifestation of self' (Klang, 2004: 390). In Cybertown these avatars are not necessarily human representations, but can be aliens, objects or animals etc. As will become apparent in the 3D screenshot of the Plaza the effect of this is twofold: first, you can actually look fellow residents in the eye as you both have a conversation; and second, you can occupy the same place and move around Cybertown together. Yet avatars are more than that, since their users invest them with meanings. As such they potentially become meaningful selves within their particular locality. As Klang *et al* explain:

The avatar is not only the physical representation of self within the online environment but also a social being within its own social circle. (Klang, 2004: 391)

As this random selection of resident's comments illustrate, the idea of occupying a 3D world has a certain appeal:

*Viewing one another's avatars adds to the total image of the person.*  
[gienah]

*It's better to walk up and actually talk to someone rather than just seeing a name.* [hoedus]

A major problem with running the software that enables 3D mode is that it makes large demands on computer hardware that includes things like processor

speed and memory. These demands can sometimes overload the computer and result in a crash. A crash is when the computer becomes hopelessly locked up and refuses to respond to your keyboard or mouse commands. This is obviously very annoying in the middle of a conversation. Other problems, such as the computer becoming very slow to respond in 3D mode (or lag) makes 2D mode much more attractive to the majority of residents in Cybertown as it is both faster and easier. As a result, most of the day to day social interaction occurs in 2D, although the feeling remains that 3D would be preferable if it did not cause the computer to crash. This irritation with the problems of 3D interaction was often expressed, as these extracts illustrate:

*I would love to chat in 3D more but it often crashes me so I stay in 2D.*  
[menkent]

*I freeze in 3D so have to use 2D.* [kuma]

*I daren't step into 3D or my computer will crash.* [archid]

*3D crashes my system and causes my system to lag terribly.* [capella]

The view you have on your screen when visiting the Plaza in 3D is similar to that for 2D, although the image that you see above the dialogue box is not static or lifeless. The Plaza, like many of the public places is quite large, and as you move around you perceive the view through your avatar's eyes. This view changes as you move in different directions. Moving the avatar in straight lines is easy, you just move the screen cursor with your mouse and your avatar tracks the route. Other kinds of movement are more difficult and must be practised.



The 3D screenshot in figure 5 is more interesting than the 2D one in figure 3. Note the four people stood talking or walking around in the image above the dialogue box. These are avatars; the car in the foreground is also an avatar, making five people present in 3D. When you use your computer mouse to move the curser over the individual avatars a little pop-up is activated that gives you their name. As in 2D you can see the dialogue boxes where the text appears, the control panel and the citizens list. Every place in Cybertown has its own unique panorama, as demonstrated by this 3D beach screenshot:

As can be seen in figure 6, I was the only person on the beach at this particular time, and this view is the one through my avatar's eyes. The tide here comes in and goes out just like a real beach and people can also dress their avatars up in beachwear if they want. The beach also has a beach-hut where people can congregate (you can see it in the distance to the right of the large palm tree). Other 3D places have multiple rooms, for example all homes have bedrooms, basements, living rooms, kitchens and gardens.

As evidenced by the previous selection of residents' comments the choice between 2D and 3D mode tends to be largely based on ease of use rather than preference. Nevertheless, residents do persist with their attempts to interact in 3D, and many of them get dressed up and use 3D for larger social occasions such as birthday parties, discos, Christmas parties or just chilling out in each other's homes. The following photograph shows three friends and myself on a girl's night out. Our favourite haunt was the Jacuzzi, partly because we associated it with being a calm and restful place, and partly because of the fun aspect of trying to steer your avatar into a tub full of water.



**Figure 7: Girls Night Out – Relaxing in a Jacuzzi**



*The screenshot shows, from left to right, zosma, acamar, myself and sarin.*



Although you cannot walk through walls or the side of the Jacuzzi it is possible to get stuck in them if you move too fast and then you have to try and retrace your steps until you are out in the open and can try again. One interesting addition to the 3D experience is the voice synthesiser that allows you to hear the conversation as well as read it. It attempts to add an extra dimension to 'being there' but doesn't quite succeed for several reasons. In face-to-face conversation we tag specific sounds to specific people in two ways. We watch their lips move or we recognise familiar voices (Cohen, 1984; McNeill, 1992). In Cybertown neither of these are possible. First, the lips of the 3D avatars in Cybertown do not move, the only way to 'tag' speech to a person is to read the text on the screen because it tells you who is speaking. Second, there are only eight vocal choices, therefore, in a room containing more than eight people at least one voice will be duplicated, if not more, making it difficult to follow the conversation. As one resident *anilover* says 'in large places it is hard to keep up with the chat because of the voice thing'. The default voice is male, so if you do not make a conscious choice then you automatically speak with a male voice. Still in the development stage, the voice synthesizer cannot reproduce intonation and fluidity, resulting in very monotone speech that seems to detract from the speech rather than give it an extra dimension. Although the voice synthesiser does not convey emotional clues and can be quite flat and boring to listen to, what is more interesting is the range of voices available for residents to choose. There are eight voice choices, called:

- full male
- full female
- male
- female
- aged male
- aged female

- child
- whispering female

At first glance this appears to be a very gendered choice in an environment where gender is not necessarily actively performed, for example, why is there a whispering female but not a whispering male? This was a question discussed only briefly during my stay in Cybertown for three main reasons: partly because these voices had not yet developed a range of options complex enough to deal with human vocal interaction; partly because many computers did not at that time have the ability to reproduce sound; and partly because most of the people I was familiar with preferred to use 2D. However, the answer to this limited choice of gendered voices may be related to the cultural experiences of the software designers who made these particular vocal choices available. As I explain in further detail subsequently, the technology that underpins the development of Cybertown is socially constructed, and as such, is designed to conform to ideas about what its designers want. However, it does serve to further illustrate the many small ways in which this particular virtual community is embedded in offline life – it is, as my research indicates, not ‘set apart’ from the real world. The outside world contributes to the Cybertown way of life rather than ‘intrude’ on it. However, what is also interesting is the fact that there is a choice of voices to use, and I remember one evening when several friends and I were gathered at *zosma*’s house experimenting with this voice software when it was new. There were six of us, *gianfar*, *acamar*, *kajam* and *kaid*, *zosma* and myself. We all tried each of the voices. You can attach female voices to male avatars and vice versa, which we did. Also when all six of us chose to speak using ‘whispering female’, we all sounded the same. It was impossible to



link one voice to any particular person, hence the unanimous opinion that these voices did not enhance 3D interaction at all. After that occasion which was early on in my research I never again used the voices, neither did anyone else I knew. Of course there are other ways of using sound to enhance the experience if your computer had a sound card, for example, when visiting the beach in 3D it is possible to listen to the sounds of the waves. In addition discos and dances held in Cybertown were usually accompanied by music playing in the background. For Christmas parties there would be carols and for birthday parties popular music. Often these get togethers provided the ideal opportunity for those with more experience to help teach those with less experience to live in Cybertown. However, the most desirable and elementary skill is that of being able to chat in 2D.

### **How to Chat in Cybertown**

The dynamics of chatting is very similar in both 2D and 3D. In both instances ordinary chat is typed into the text box below the dialogue box and then the return key on the keyboard is pressed. This 'sends' it to the chat window where everyone present can read it. There are various options that allow you to change the font, colour or size, or even use small images called emoticons within the text window. These are a part of the unique language that has developed within Cybertown, and there are a number of special keyboard shortcuts (see glossary) that make using this language easier. For example, typing '#pink' into the text box followed by your comment would turn the comment pink when it appeared

in the dialogue box. Typing ‘pink#’ would turn it off again. Two shortcuts are illustrated in the following examples:

Text as it is typed	Text as it is seen in the dialogue box
#pink hi everyone	Hi everyone
:)	☺

Often one of the more experienced residents would give lessons in using these keyboard shortcuts and in other things like HTML (see glossary). Later, after I had been living and working in Cybertown for a while I also gave lessons. The language itself is remarkably versatile, a theme I return to in chapter four.

As in other social situations, there are several different ways to speak to people in Cybertown. One is simply to join in the general chat that can be seen in the text box particular to the place that you are visiting. Three other options are to whisper, invite someone to PC (private chat) or ignore them. The first of these, whispering, can be very useful if you want to speak to a friend without anyone else listening to what you are saying. The whispered text only appears in the



text box of the sender and the recipient, so only two people can see it, much like a whisper in 'real' life. Choosing a recipient to whisper to involves using the mouse controls. You take the cursor to the list of citizens present and right click on the name of the person you want to whisper to, and choose 'whisper'. PC is slightly different as you invite them to chat privately and they have the option to refuse. In PC only the private dialogue is visible in the text box. It is a bit like shutting everyone else out and retreating into your own private world where just the two of you exist. This is where it differs from whisper mode in which all the dialogue from everyone present is seen as well as the whispered dialogue, which is simply marked as whisper. So whisperers are still aware of the conversations that are going on around them, but private chatters are not. It is possible when watching the text box on the Plaza that there will also be several PCs or whispers that are unheard/unseen by you.

Dialogue in Cybertown flows in and around these different levels of privacy, much the same as in real life. For example, if you attend a meeting offline and are following the agenda and listening to the speakers you may also lean towards the person next to you to make a comment. Sometimes you have a short personal conversation about your private life or make a date later for coffee. In Cybertown it is much the same. In all of the staff meetings<sup>2</sup> I attended I was engaged in whispering at some point. Sometimes it was fairly innocuous, such as with *zosma* or perhaps another friend inviting me back to their house later. Other times it was to discuss policy issues that were under review, or to agree or disagree with what was being said. However, all these modes of dialogic

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<sup>2</sup> Staff meetings are a regular feature of working in Cybertown. Where I worked they were held weekly, and were an important dynamic in (re)producing notions of community and belonging (see chapter six).

exchange are dependant upon using the keyboard and mouse, your computer's data input devices.

Keyboard and mouse use are an integral part of the mechanics of conversation in Cybertown, and although usually slow at first, people become more fluent with practice. The greater the coordination between hand and eye the faster the chat. Behaviour in chat, however, is governed by general Internet 'netiquette' and more specifically a Cybertown etiquette that citizens learn. It is cited officially as the first rule of the Cybertown Constitution (reproduced in full in Appendix C):

**In communicating to others in Cybertown follow customary manners as they are (or at least as they should be!) followed in real life. In other words don't insult other members, don't make statements that are grossly offensive including blatant expressions of bigotry, racism, hatred, or profanity and don't indulge in abusive or harassing behaviour or personal attacks. This includes not indulging in racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious slurs, disruptive behaviour of any kind or making lewd comments.  
(The Cybertown Constitution)**

Breaking the constitutional rules can result in penalties ranging from a simple warning to being banned from Cybertown completely as rule three explains:

**These actions include gagging offenders, removing them from the community for a certain period of time and, in extreme cases, exiling them forever.  
(The Cybertown Constitution)**



## **Movement Between Places**

As well as choosing whether to use 2D or 3D, the residents of Cybertown have a host of different places in the city they can visit, depending on what they want to do or whom they are meeting. Moving between places in Cybertown is called navigation, and is achieved by using the Directory link on the Control Panel (figure 8) that is in the right frame of the browser window. Each of the other buttons on the control panel also has a specific function that is for the most part self-explanatory. Clicking on the large oval 'map' symbol towards the bottom of the control panel leads to a map of the city shown in figure 9. On this map each of the names is a hyperlink that directs you to that specific place. Above the map symbol on the control panel are nine other links, the first of which is the most widely used. This is the Cybertown directory. Moving over this link with your mouse activates a pop-up list of more links that are arranged in four groups: links to the ten different colonies in Cybertown that contain private homes; links to information sources such as the Daily News (Cybertown's own newspaper) and the calendar of events; links to the public places, such as the Plaza, the Mall and the Beach; and lastly, links to resources such as the Post Office and the Library. The other link most widely used on the control panel is 'my house'. This link is unique to each individual, leading to his or her private home. Everywhere that you visit in Cybertown there are message and information boards. This includes everyone's home, Blocks, Neighbourhoods and Colonies as well as the Plaza, Café and Beach. Anyone can post content onto a message board but these messages are governed by the same rules that apply to chatting<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C for a list of these rules.



**Figure 8: The Cybertown Control Panel**

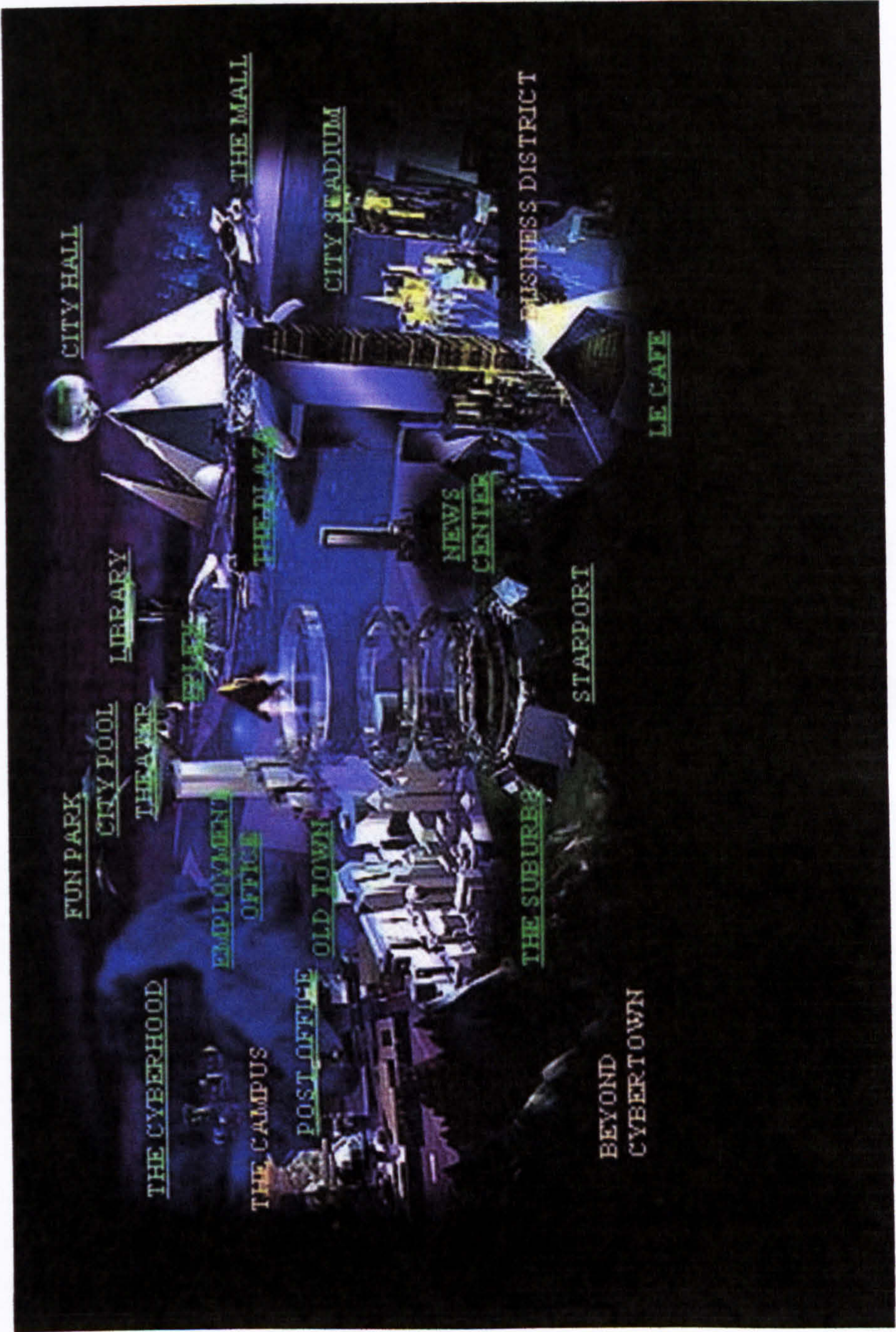


The message boards are very important sources of information. Staff members are employed in Cybertown to check message boards regularly in the Colonies and Neighbourhoods and other living areas for content. Their remit is to locate anything that has content contravening Cybertown regulations. As well as monitoring the content, they delete older messages to enable new messages to be posted in the spaces. In many respects Message Boards are the arteries of Cybertown. They are an indicator of the activity levels of the city and many contain a lot of information. The Library message board, shown in figure 10, gives details of an upcoming poetry competition for Halloween.

These boards are not limited to advertising competitions. At Christmas, New Year, Thanksgiving and Easter these boards are alive with colour and music. Usually one person from a pool of local Neighbourhood staff will have been made officially responsible for the board's content, and everyone in the



Figure 9: Cybertown City Map





Neighbourhood goes along to admire them, as they are a focal point of community life.

Although populated by those who have immigrated from all over the world being in Cybertown is not limited to those who have officially immigrated. It is possible simply to visit, and visitors can be seen in the list of names box next to the dialogue box marked by the appellation 'visitor'. These visitors to Cybertown can only look around; they cannot talk to anyone, earn or spend Cybertown cash<sup>4</sup>. There is a democratic political structure within which official residents can run for the positions of a City Mayor, a City Council member, and various other public roles<sup>5</sup>. Any resident has the right to vote or run for public office, and there is a City Hall (see figure 11) where public meetings are held. Those staff members who are CLs (Colony Leaders) automatically serve on the city council.

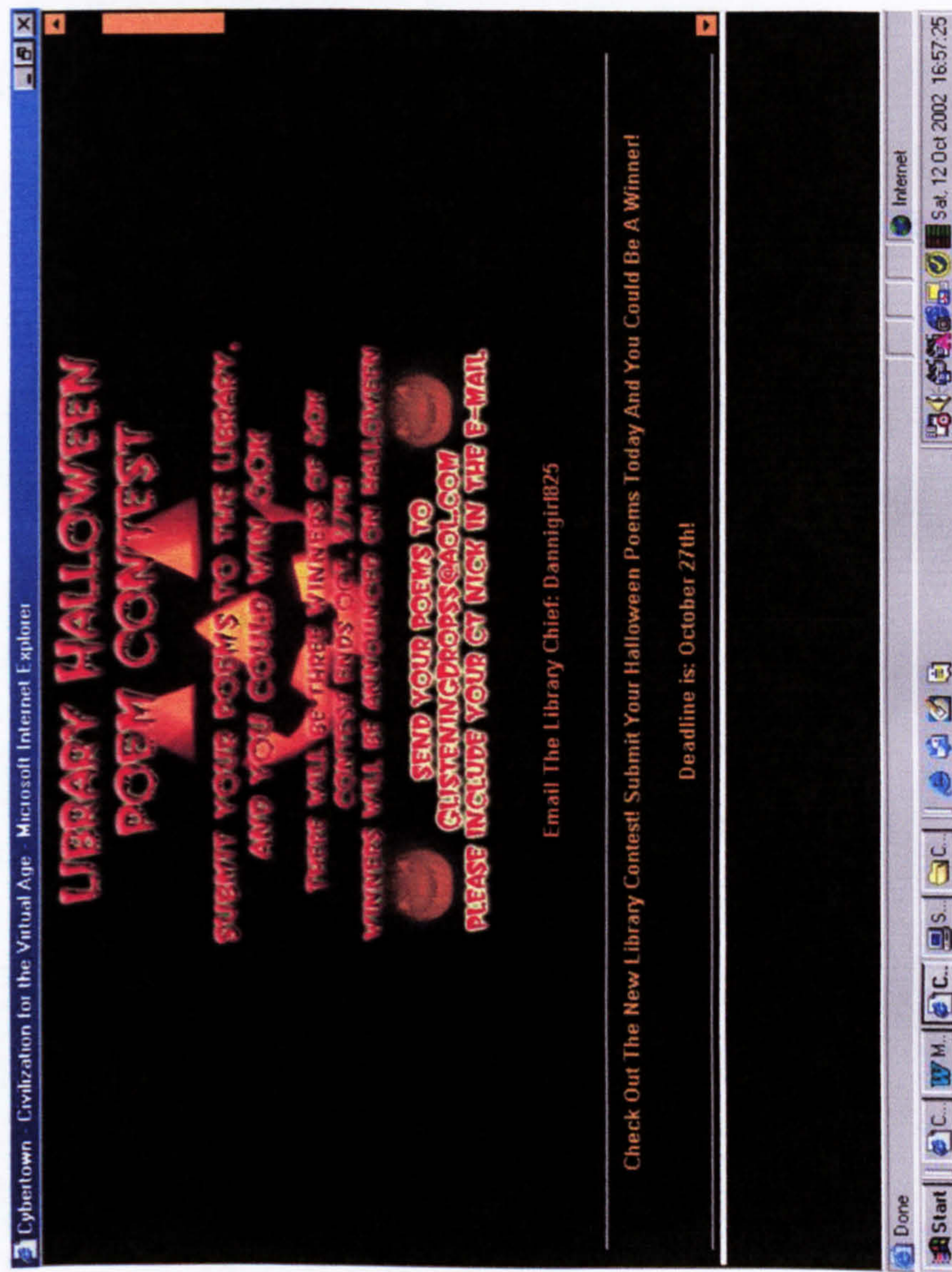
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<sup>4</sup> Citycash (cc) is the currency of Cybertown. It is earned in two ways. As a default mechanism everyday residents visit, or, by being employed, a subject I return to later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B for a list of jobs.



### Figure 10: Library Message Board Advertising Halloween Poetry Competition





**Figure 11: City Hall 2D image**





## **Cybertown Housing**

Each resident has their own private house in Cybertown. Every one of these houses is unique only in the personal touches that their owner bestows. Standard details about the resident are displayed on every house - the name of the resident, their experience points and their immigration date. Residents can add email and home page information if they wish. The amount of money shown in figure 12 can, however, only be seen by me. Anyone else who visited my home would not be able to see how much money I have. While in their own home, a resident can also see their Cybercity balance, but this information is not displayed publicly for others to see. Again this privacy of banking details underlines the similarities with the 'real' world. My house is decorated with a picture of the world, and you can email me or link directly to my own personal web site. There are rules and regulations regarding the posting of images and even web page addresses anywhere in Cybertown, for example no pornographic images or links to pornographic sites are allowed. In this case it is the ninth rule of the Cybertown Constitution (reproduced below) that is in force:

In building your dwellings in Cybertown, the above rules also apply. In other words you cannot furnish your spaces with textures, texts, objects or images that would be considered offensive, illegal, pornographic, racist or that violate copyrights.  
(Appendix C)

Most residents give their house a name on moving in. They also have the option to add their email address and hyperlinks leading to other websites, for example their personal home pages. The majority of residents also add a personal image that is visible when their home is visited. Figure 12 shows a screenshot showing

my present house in Cybertown. It is called the Wishsong Research Centre, and you can see a picture of the world that I have added as my image.

Citizens can decorate their Cybertown home in 3D with items bought in the Mall or the Fleamarket. 2D houses cannot be decorated. There are choices of different 3D homes that vary in size from small to large. They have different numbers of rooms and some have patios and gardens. As the Cybertown description explains:

Cybertown features technological advances like “shared-state” environments where your actions with objects will be seen simultaneously by people in the same environment from anywhere in the world. For example: when you move the sofa in your living room, your guests will see where you put it and know where to sit. You can secure your house so that only your friends can visit. The identity established by your avatar - which can be completely customised - is also maintained from community to community.  
(Appendix A)

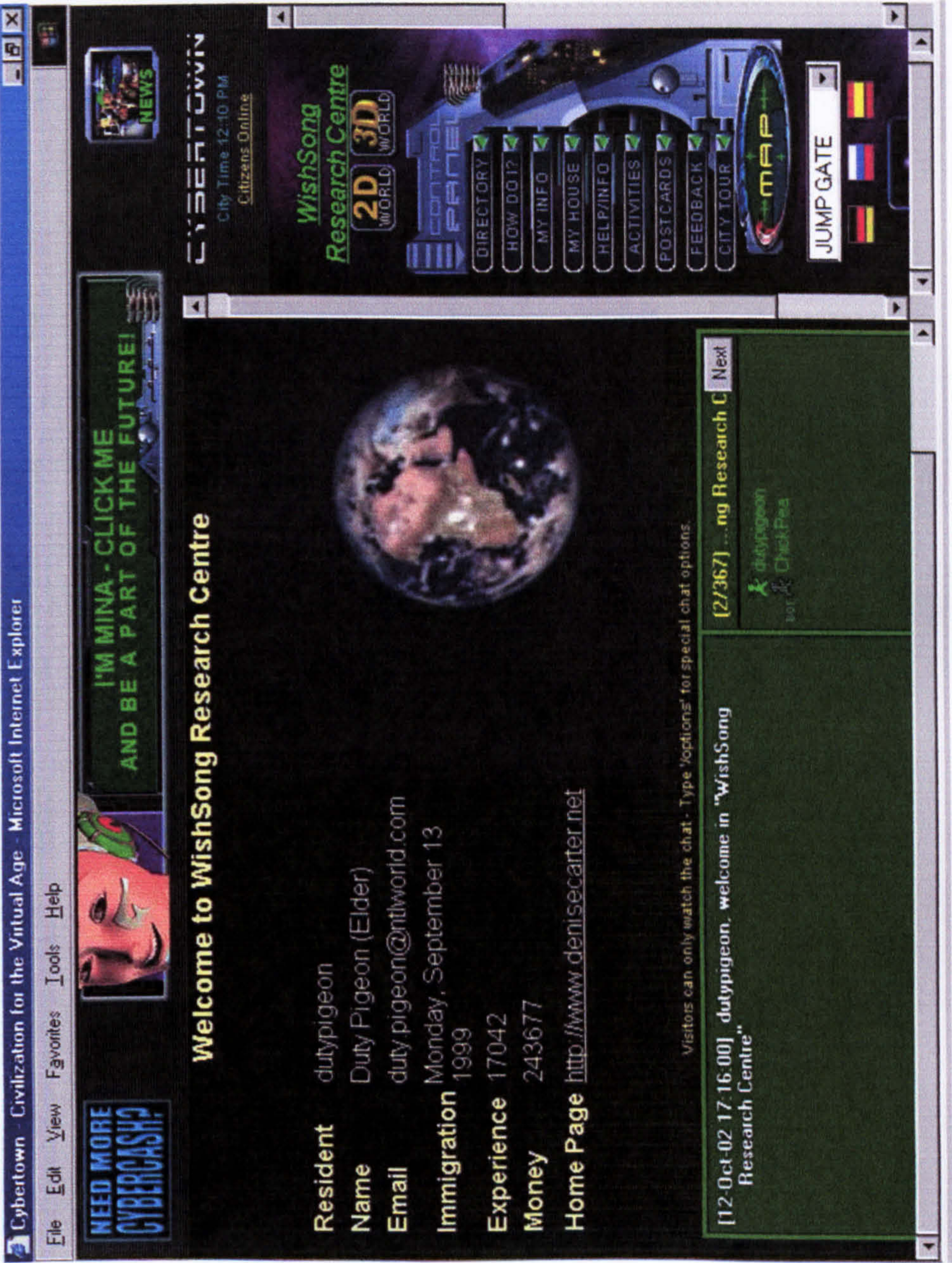
Of course, moving the sofa is not an easy task<sup>6</sup>, but one over which lot of fun and merriment can be had. For a while I was known as ‘*duty* who gets stuck in the walls’ and attracted lots of people (at one point, eight) who came to watch me hang a picture. Residents buy their furniture in the shopping Mall, where there is a range of shops that sell goods as diverse as kitchen tables and garden ponds. They pay for their furniture with their citycash. In addition there is a gift shop, with people often browsing – as *caph* explains ‘when I find something that suits a friend I always give it to them...and I have received many in return’. This notion of gift-exchange between friends is one I return to in chapter six.

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<sup>6</sup> Furniture and other items in Cybertown are moved by right-clicking on them and selecting ‘take’ to pick them up, and then right-clicking on them and selecting ‘drop’ to put them down again. Often it is difficult to judge perspectives in the 3D environment and therefore it is also difficult to select the correct position to drop them.



Figure 12: Wishsong Research Centre in 2D





Everyone's house has a message box and an inbox. The message box is where all the public announcements go, and the inbox is for personal mail. Personal images are often on view in both of these boxes as well, and sometimes music. Most residents take part in house decorating competitions on festive occasions like Christmas and Easter. Fairy lights twinkle and carols are playing. Sometimes world events provoke a response that prompts other types of images being posted as their house image. For example after the September 11 bombing in New York, many residents displayed images similar to that of the patriotic ribbon shown in figure 13.

**Figure 13: Example of US Patriotic Ribbon**



Sadly, one of the other images from that time, and one which I will always remember, is the house of a Cybertown colleague who was killed on September 11 (figure 14). Her name was Kirsty Howe and she was, like me a Neighbourhood Deputy, her Cybertown nickname was *webebop*. Outside of Cybertown she worked in one of the twin towers, and was a mum with a husband and two young children. Some time after her death her husband visited us in Cybertown to inform us of her death. At the time he said Cybertown and



the people she had known there had been ‘as important to her as those she knew offline’. It was a wonderful sentiment that illustrates how Cybertown was a part of Kirsty’s ‘whole world’. Her Cybertown house was used as the setting for a memorial service attended by over a hundred people and her message board was full of condolences from the people she knew in Cybertown.

Each home also comes complete with virtual pets, known in Cybertown as bots. These bots can be named by the resident/house owner, and can be configured to respond automatically to visitors. For example, you can get your bot to ask visitors to leave you a message. If you look at the screenshot of my Cybertown home (figure 12) you can see my pet bot is called Chick Pea. When in 3D bots also have their own avatar and can interact with their owners.

The houses themselves are located in the suburbs. They are clustered together in Blocks of about 40. Each Block has a name. Figure 15 shows a Block called Virtual Reality with my house ‘Wishsong’ marked within a red circle. It is in the third row down and fourth from the right. The house itself is a hyperlink, and clicking on it permits entry. There are thirty-six other houses in the Block with three free spaces. Any Cybertown citizen can move into one of these free spaces.



Figure 14: The Death of Kirsty Howe



The poor quality of the screenshot is because it was taken on an early CMT (cathode ray tube) monitor, with a more primitive screenshot utility.



The way that the Cybertown suburbs are organised makes it simple for each resident to have a unique Cybertown address. Between 40 and 50 Blocks are grouped together to form a Neighbourhood, again with its own name. Figure 16 shows Technology Neighbourhood, which contains eight Blocks. One of these is called Virtual Reality - where my house is. Between eight and twelve Neighbourhoods are grouped together to make a Colony. Figure 17 shows Sci-Fi Colony, which contains twelve Neighbourhoods. Following this layering it is easy to work out my unique address in the format nickname/house name/Block/Neighbourhood/Colony. In this example my address in Cybertown is Dutypigeon/Wishsong/Virtual Reality/Technology/Virtual Worlds.



### Figure 15: Wishsong in Virtual Reality Block

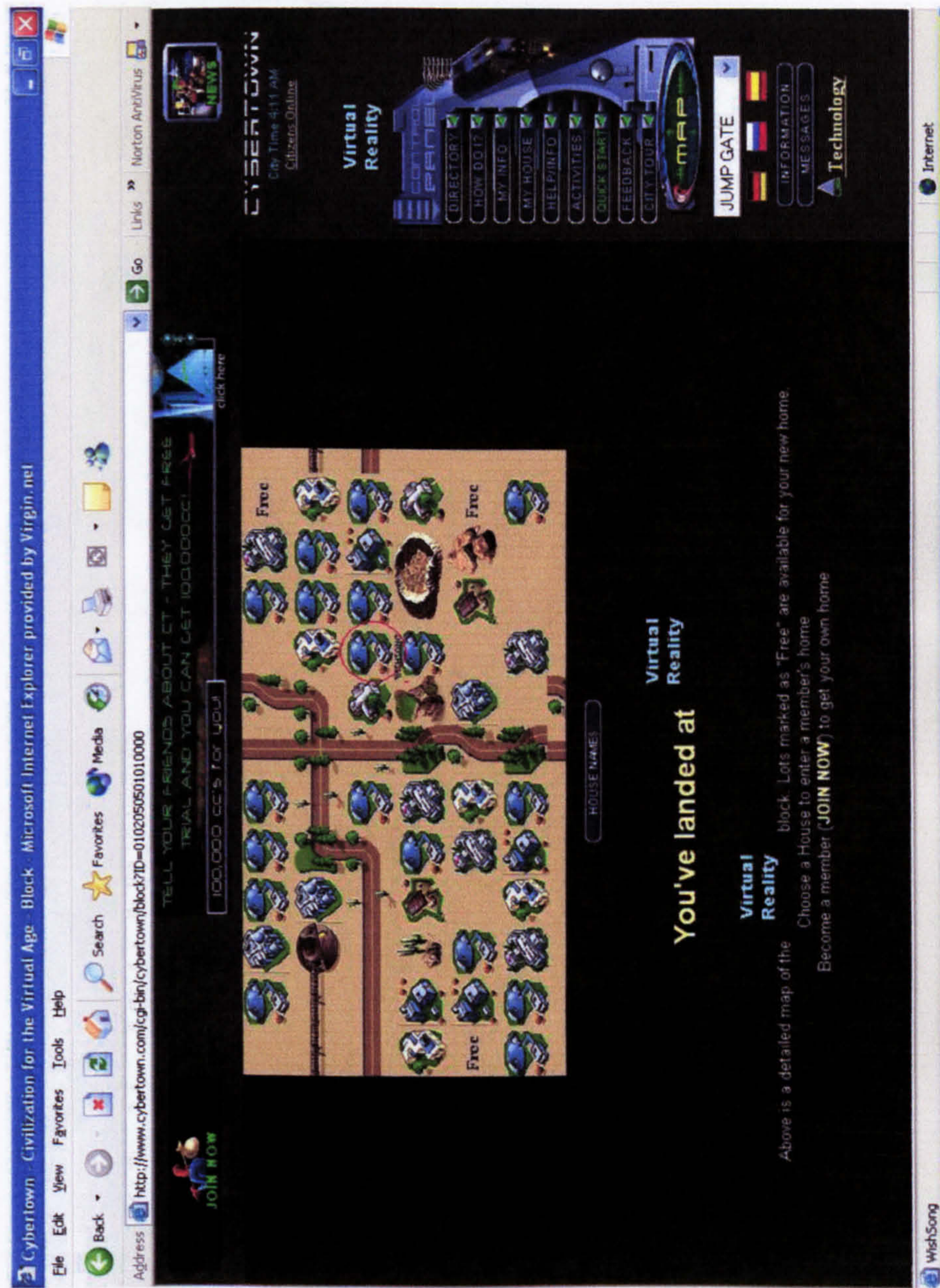




Figure 16: Technology Neighbourhood

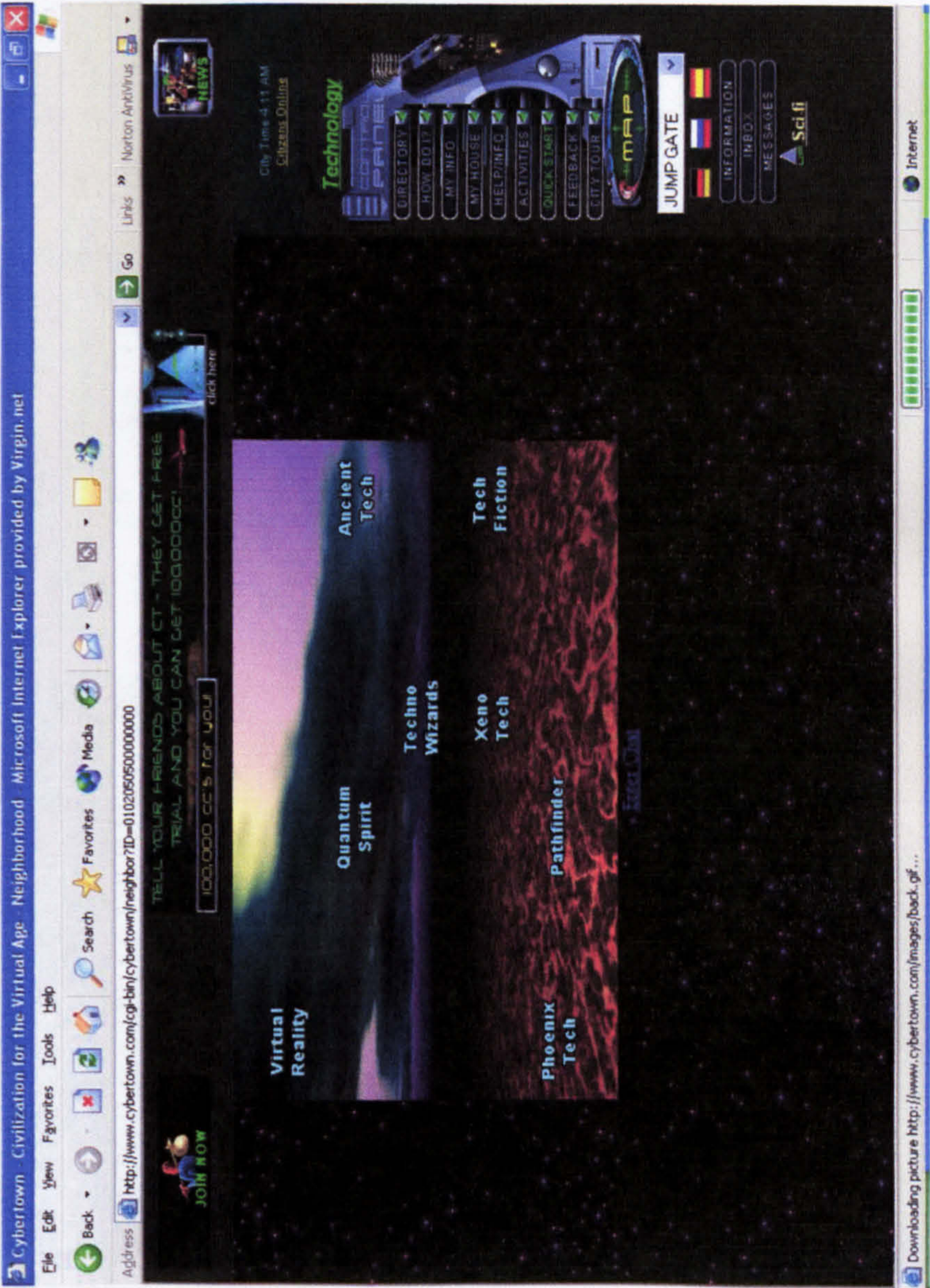
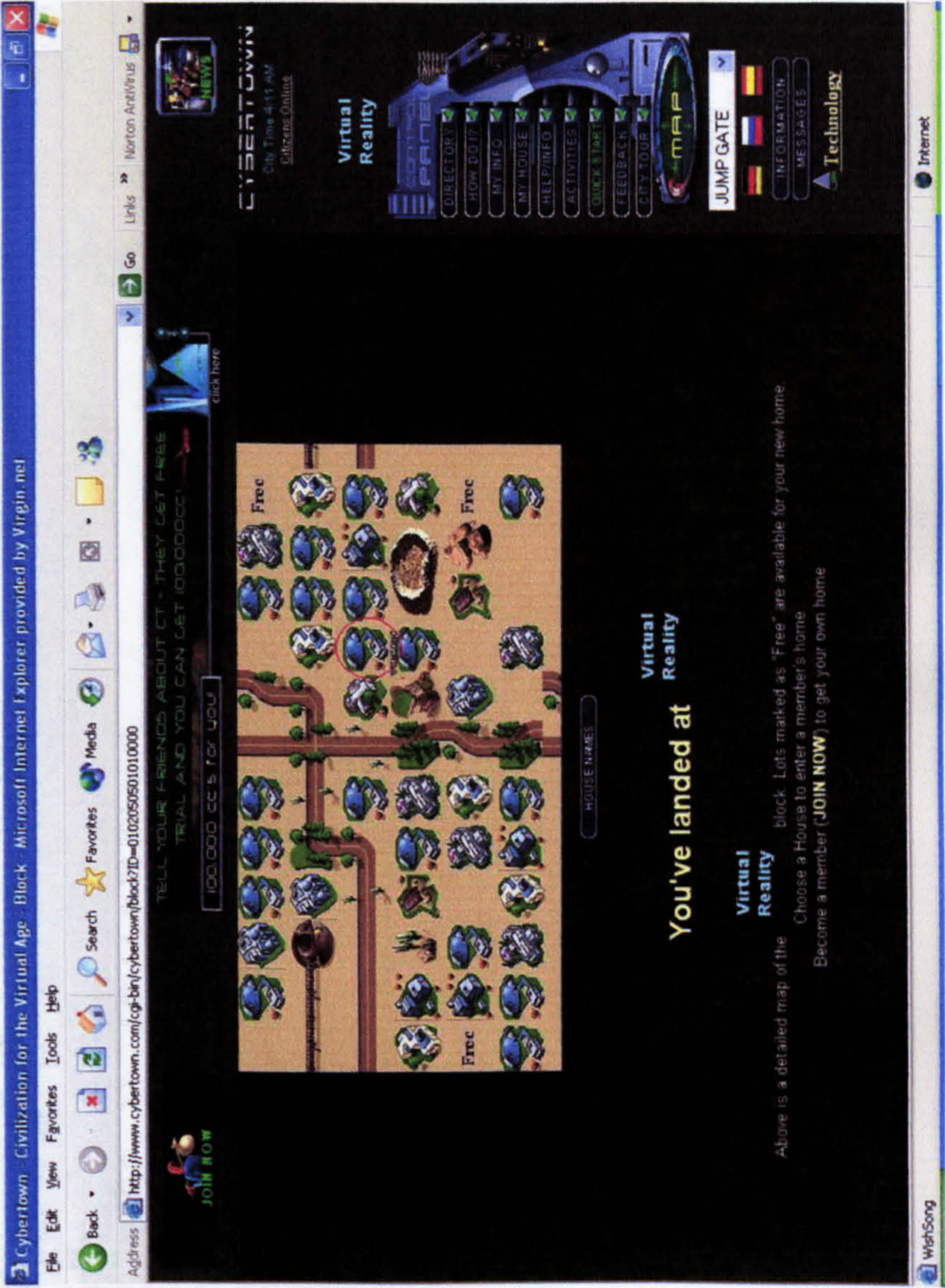




Figure 17: Sci-Fi Colony





## Working in Cybertown

Equally important to moving around in Cybertown, talking in Cybertown and owning your own home in Cybertown is working in the city. Work is a forceful element in furnishing cohesion to Cybertown life, both economically and socially.

You earn virtual “city cash” by visiting Cybertown everyday... there is a whole social and economic structure in Cybertown and you can participate in it with other people from all over the world.  
(Appendix A)

Those who live in Cybertown earn citycash as long as they visit Cybertown everyday. Alternatively they can work in order to increase their income. Residents are hired for particular jobs that take responsibility for public or private spaces. A comprehensive list of jobs is provided in Appendix B, although most employees start out as Block Deputies (BDs). Residents apply for jobs at the Cybertown Employment Office, but jobs are often sought informally on the Plaza. In the following typical extract you can see how NightmareElvez arrives on the Plaza with 60 experience points and asks if anyone is hiring. Notice they ask twice before they are noticed and answered by both Paladin\_uk and Donnyoo7. The conversation centres on NightmareElvez’s request until, after getting directions to Fantasy Neighbourhood in Sci-Fi Colony they disappear from the Plaza and the conversation. To make the conversation easier to follow I have picked out the relevant parts of conversation in bold:

**NightmareElvez [60] : anyone hiring**  
[Club Assistant] kissaboo [76] : dont no where i am  
ToxicFumes [100] : i'll find you!!  
[Club Assistant] kissaboo [76] : crying  
[Club Assistant] kissaboo [76] : sob  
[Club Assistant] kissaboo [76] : sob



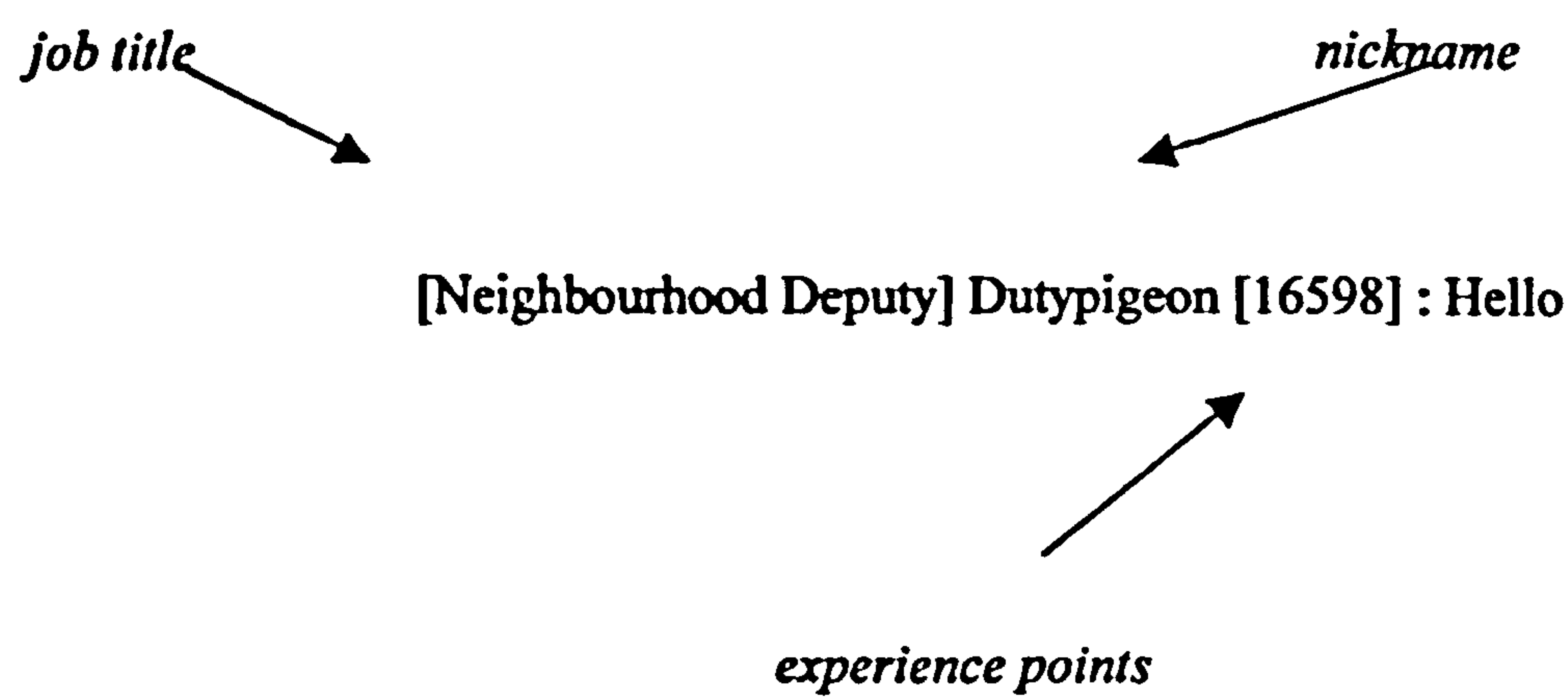
[Club Assistant] kissaboo [76] : im lost  
ToxicFumes [100] : how'd you get here?  
darae123 [55] : what is that star thing?  
[Club Assistant] kissaboo [76] : thats what i want to know  
darae123 [55] : hi kissaboo  
ToxicFumes [100] : it's my aura  
[Club Assistant] kissaboo [76] : hahaha  
NightmareElvez [60] : is anyone hiring  
darae123 [55] : hi blaxsoft  
[Club Owner] Paladin\_uk [524] : nightmare,what you looking  
for?  
NightmareElvez [60] : a job  
[Neighborhood Deputy] donny007 [19657] : nightmareelvez  
fantasy is hiring but u  
need to fill out a job frm 100 and fantasy app.  
NightmareElvez [60] : where  
[Neighborhood Deputy] donny007 [19657] : go to scifi colony  
in jumpgate and  
select fantasy

As with any job application process, informal interviews are conducted, and background checks are carried out prior to a more formal private interview that does not necessarily result in a job offer. This is often to do with a lack of Cybertown experience, although in Cybertown experience has a slightly different meaning to in everyday life - i.e. in Cybertown you can get experience points just through showing up rather than being a job applicant with five years practical experience of working in Cybertown. When you are chatting to someone you can tell immediately if they are a newbie or if they are more experienced and the first rule of recruitment is to check the experience points. Anyone with less than one hundred, or ten days worth of visits has not been in Cybertown long enough to demonstrate their commitment to the city. As a result those with fewer experience points were always least likely to be hired.

Experience points are crucial to the life of Cybertown in several ways since they indicate residency time. As I explain in later chapters, time is a significant



element in the development of trust, intimacy and friendship. There often seems to be something almost complicit between the recruiter and the recruited, as if the promise of intimacy, of something more is both actively sought and given. In this Cybertown is a continuation of real life. Even as social life is experienced in a wide variety of groups and communities in real life, Cybertown is yet another place for this to occur. For instance, if I want to join a social club or a sporting club in real life I would go off and fill in an application form, then wait to be accepted. In Cybertown this acceptance is partially accomplished by putting your roots down in the suburbs and becoming a resident. Cybertown jobs are positions of power that vary according to the job status; greater power equals greater responsibility and greater rewards, both monetarily and in social status. If a resident is hired, their job title is affixed to their username so that their social status is easily apparent to all who meet them. For example if I was present in the Plaza and said hello, this is how it would appear in the text box:





The structure of the employment system includes an advancement scheme with an inbuilt incentive that rewards appointees with privileges and higher status. Experience points and Cybertown cash are earned simply by visiting Cybertown everyday. Different jobs are rewarded by different earning levels and experience points. Residents can use their citycash to buy goods and services in the mall and around the community, and those who are actively participating in the community by taking a job or, performing a function such as Neighbourhood or Block Leaders can earn even more credits. There is also a system of special awards, rather like the UK's honours list. For example Elders are citizens who have been members of the community for more than a year and who have proven themselves valuable to the community<sup>7</sup>. To gain elder status you must apply (or be nominated), and have your application supported by your Colony Leader. Once this status is awarded it automatically includes a higher rate of credits for the same activities. I was awarded Elder status as dutypigeon in January 2089 (Cybertown time), for serving the community. I had worked first as a Block Deputy (BD), then a Block Leader (BL) then finally as a Neighbourhood Deputy (ND).

Cybertown has a pyramid structure that is characterised by staff promotion and reward, as illustrated in diagram 2. Although differing in levels of responsibility these jobs were basically about upholding the City Rules by checking properties, Blocks and Message Boards. The ethos of the jobs includes a willingness to help others within Cybertown. Part of the employment duty includes having access to certain internal levels within Cybertown that allows anyone in these

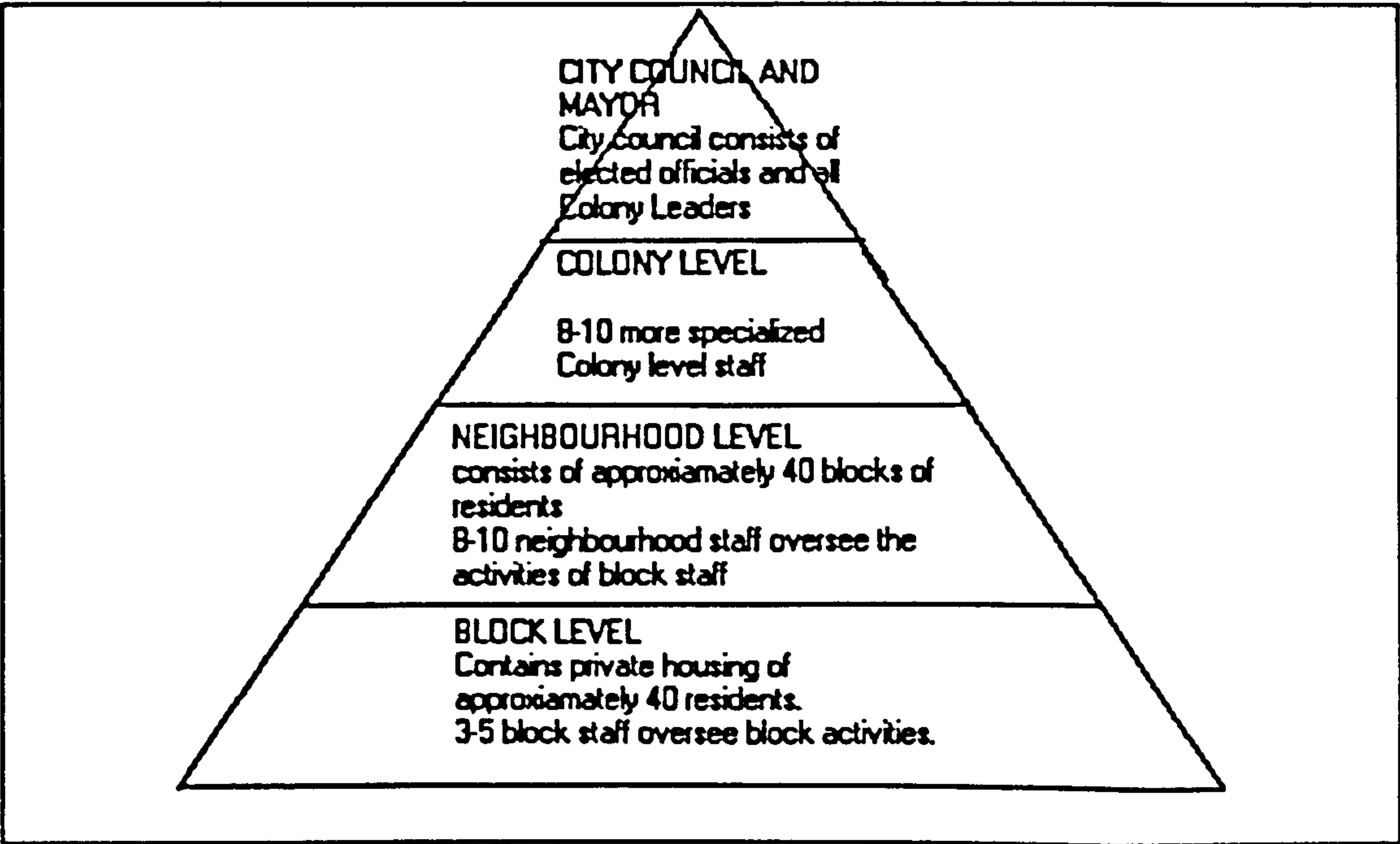
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<sup>7</sup> There are a whole range of awards that may be made including Elder and Templar – these are explained in more detail in later chapters and also listed in Appendix E.



staff positions to accept or deny images and message board content. One important task is to support all members within their Block. Helping others is an important part of being a Cybertown resident. It acts to cement community feelings and social relationships, subjects I return to in later chapters. In addition to the personal involvement of those staff members who offer help, Cybertown itself also offers help with various actions, such as finding a house and moving around. This kind of help is available by pressing the fifth button on the control panel (diagram 1) eliciting a pop-up information sheet. Interestingly these information sheets are available in several languages: English; German, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Finnish etc.

**Diagram 2: Pyramid Structure of Cybertown**  
(illustrates staff hierarchy and position of residents)





## Citycash

Cybertown has an elementary economic system that facilitates the performance of commerce within the City. Residents automatically earn experience points just by coming to Cybertown (10 per day). Those who have a job earn 21 points every time they visit, plus each job earns from 20 to 34 experience points per week depending on the job. Certain amounts of experience points are necessary for someone to qualify for certain jobs. The amount of experience residents have is seen as a measure of status and is displayed in brackets after your name. In this I have 17042 experience points:

[Neighbourhood Deputy] Dutypigeon [16598] : Hello

Every resident automatically earns Citycash (cc) just by going to Cybertown (50cc per day). If you have a job, you earn 336cc every time you visit. Plus each job earns from 240cc to 400cc per week depending on the job<sup>8</sup>. Residents can then use their citycash to purchase new objects in the shopping Mall, or trade their objects in the Fleamarket. They can even build new objects, and if they are accepted, sell them in the Mall. *zosma* was an artist who sold paintings to residents to decorate their homes. Some residents go even further and build houses or even new Colonies (these residents are often employed as World Builder<sup>9</sup> or Master World Builder). The continued expansion of Cybertown

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<sup>8</sup> These rates of pay can be seen in Appendix D.

<sup>9</sup> The World Builder's job description includes such things as building new areas, buildings, attractions, objects - including furniture and avatars - and features to add to the community, helping promote the community, repairing and maintaining the community etc (see Appendix B).



results in a constant ebb and flow of residents between new and old Blocks, Neighbourhoods and Colonies that in turn gives rise to a rich pattern of life.

### **Cybertown: The Function of Place**

Continuing the discussion begun in the introduction, there is a relationship between place, individuals and behaviour, and this relationship acts in a way that is mutually reproductive. However, there is a fourth element that is important, and that is function, the need to understand what function particular places have. Everything that we study is emplaced, place is space filled up with people, practices, objects and representations (Casey, 1993; Geiryn, 2000). In this respect Cybertown is no exception. Like the rest of the world, Cybertown is not a simple place. As a city it is not a single, social landscape/place inhabited in only one particular way and neither does the (re)production of Cybertown overall as a 'real place' occur in a simple manner. Rather, it is dependant on the particular cultural values and practices that govern the organisation and use of each of its diverse social landscapes/places. For example, Cybertown's residents not only choose whether to be there in 2D or 3D, but like cities all over the world they choose which places in the city to visit. The range of choices are all recognisable: visiting your friend in their home for coffee; staying in your own home; going to the beach for a picnic; or going to the Café etc. These places in Cybertown are made and understood through the embodied practices of the residents there, even as these places help to make those embodied practices (Giddens, 1984). Consequently each place stands in a recursive relation to the other, and people identify as places those spots that they go to for some

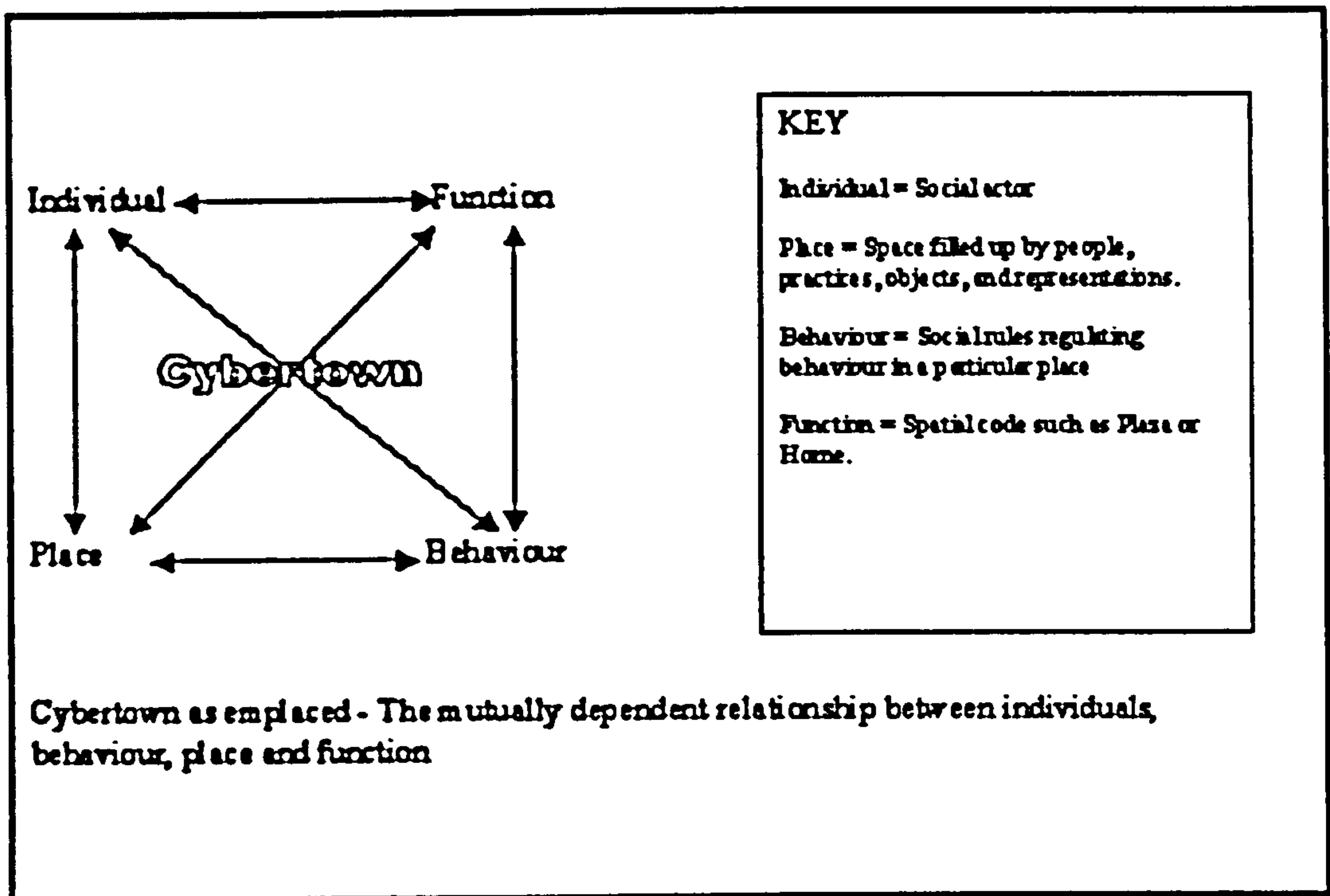


particular purpose or function (Gieryn, 2000: 472). For example the names 'Plaza' and 'Home' are spatial codes that not only assist in the construction of meaningful places, but also suggest the appropriate social behaviour for each place. Lefebvre's (1974) notions about social space being a social product can reinforce our understanding of different places. If, as he suggests, social action creates social space (and thus places) then different places must be produced by a different set of social actions or behaviours. Thus behaviour and function are mutually reproducing. There are different social rules regulating behaviour in the Plaza or the Home. But the title or name of the place indicates its function, and therefore appropriate behaviour there. Likewise, the performance of this appropriate or acceptable behaviour also reinforces the status of these social landscapes, and as such contributes to both their construction as a social places and their position among other social places.

As can be seen from diagram 3, the emplacement of Cybertown is arrived at from an understanding of place, behaviour, function and the individual actor. Therefore place in this context is not merely a framework within which actions take place, but also a force with detectable and independent effects on social life (Gieryn, 2000: 466).



**Diagram 3: Cybertown as Emplaced**



Within Cybertown the different social landscapes can be roughly divided into public and private spaces, of which the Plaza is an example of a public space and the Home is an example of a private space. Within wider debates in the social sciences, the impact of this divide on culture as lived experience has never achieved conceptual 'closure' among contemporary social theorists, mainly because the boundaries between them are not absolute. The ideological divide between public and private spheres is, however, a major concern of many feminist theorists including Pateman (1983) and Landes (1998), whose literature provides a wealth of information about its impact on western capitalist society. Baudrillard (1983b) offered an extreme view of how postmodern society has seen these distinctions between public and private dissolve and an individuals private secrets and public life become the same thing. However, my research led



me to take a more commonsense approach to the public/private divide in Cybertown. Commonly private space is where personal relationships are mediated among people who are known to each other, and which also have an element of emotional meaning. In contrast public spaces are where strangers, non-family or non-friends interact with less intimacy. This commonsense usage of public and private spaces is reflected in Cybertown, and again underlines its alignment with other social spaces. My research illustrates that in Cybertown private spaces tend to be those in which close social networks and ties such as friendship develop. By contrast, more transitory relationships characterised by 'chat' occur in the public spaces. However, in functional terms there are different types of private and public places and the boundaries between them are not fixed and unchanging. They overlap and interweave depending on the various ways in which those places are organised and used. Private places can also be communal places and public places can also be private. For example if I go to the Plaza in Cybertown with a friend, I am reproducing a private relationship in a public place. The boundaries between these public and private places are subjected to constantly changing demands that are informed by the realities of our everyday social lives, for example what people do in that particular place, and what kinds of social relationships dominate or are supposed to dominate there. In later chapters I draw on my interview material and original ethnographic research to offer one explanation of how Cybertown's inhabitants negotiate these changing realities in their daily lives, and in the course of doing so move freely between real life and virtual or cyber life.



Meanwhile this first section of the chapter has made it clear that life in Cybertown is indeed negotiated on many different levels. The next section explains how the residents of Cybertown play/perform themselves in new and different ways. Furthermore, this performance is mediated through the meanings that residents apply to the relationship between Cybertown's geographical spaces and the social relationships that develop therein. Their expectations, both in terms of geographical spaces, and what kind of social relationships they expect to develop strongly affects what they find there.

## **Section Two: The Environment and Social Practices**

### **Relationships in Cybertown**

The residents of Cybertown take their knowledge of the rest of their social world with them and apply their understandings of it to Cybertown. This effectively makes Cybertown part of their real world by drawing the two closer together. This effect is amplified by the particular way in which Cybertown is organised into public and private spaces, and acts to promote a two-tier system of relationships among individual residents. Within these two areas the expectations of relationships, their negotiation and outcome are different. One type of relationship occurs wholly within the public spaces of Cybertown especially the Plaza, the Shopping Mall, the Fleamarket and to a lesser extent the Café and the Beach, and is more superficial, involving a more itinerant population. Cybertown residents call this interaction in public spaces 'chat'.



Another type of relationship occurring within the private spaces of the suburbs, in the Homes and Neighbourhoods, involves a more static/fixed population and is most often represented by the term 'friendship', although this in itself means a variety of things, as my analysis will illustrate in later chapters. These two areas, public and private, within Cybertown are not mutually exclusive, and movement between them is unrestricted. However, my research has focussed primarily on the relationships formed in the Neighbourhood areas, although these relationships might be seen as a progression from those negotiated in the public areas, a matter I expand on in later chapters. Similarly these relationships may migrate from one place to another within Cybertown, and also outside of Cybertown into other areas of the Internet, or in some instances offline into 'real life'.

As I explained earlier real is a term frequently employed as a descriptive category among the residents of Cybertown. However, real is employed in a number of ways and its meanings are contextually dependant. First, it is used simply to differentiate between offline life, as in RL (real life) and CT (Cybertown life), and does not oppose them by suggesting that one is real and one is not. It simply draws a boundary between two places by naming them, and in recognising that boundary allows people to move between the two. It does not imply that Cybertown is not part of real life, or that the social experiences in Cybertown are not real. Second it is often used to describe an object, a place, an emotion, a social relationship or a person as real. Baudrillard's (1983a) notion of the hyperreal makes it clear how this is possible – by collapsing the distinction between real and not real. As a result the residents experience



Cybertown as a place that is no less real than anywhere else. Consequently, as later chapters explain, their understanding is that Cybertown is a 'real' community, the people they meet there are 'real' people and the friendships they form there are also 'real'.

However, there are some residents for whom Cybertown is not real. Within Cybertown the reaction to these people who do not recognise it as real tends to be one of incredulity mixed with the firm belief that these people do not truly understand Cybertown - if they did they would know that it is real. The minority of people who do not believe that Cybertown is authentic are not marginalized by those who do. Instead attempts are made to show them the truth that Cybertown is a real place. This truth is not taught or imposed: it is experienced and articulated through the creation of networks of social relationships and through community building projects and making friends, the subject of later chapters. These social relationships may also move offline. For example when *zosma* visited me at Home in Lincolnshire, UK, we still went to Cybertown to speak to our mutual friends, yet we were together in my home. This situation generated a great deal of excitement among our friends and acted to normalise everyone's Cybertown and offline relationships. In effect we showed that it is possible to move relationships between different social settings. Several offline meetings between residents were closely watched in this manner. Many friendships in Cybertown begin with chatting in public spaces<sup>10</sup>. As I mentioned earlier, new residents of Cybertown are called newbies, and their first experience of Cybertown is their arrival in the Plaza. On my visits to the Plaza during my

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter six for an in-depth analysis of Cybertown's unique friend finding expeditions in its public spaces.



fieldwork there were never less than thirty people there, the numbers usually approached one hundred or more. Although having no experience of Cybertown itself, my research indicates that newbies are often quite experienced Internet users who have arrived in Cybertown with particular expectations of the social relationships to be made there. This is often articulated as 'wanting to make friends' as opposed to simply 'chatting', and reflects a willingness to form deeper, more satisfying relationships than is possible in the more superficial chatrooms (see glossary). Chatting on the Plaza does not satisfy the need for deeper, more meaningful relationships. Like Plazas in cities all over the world the population there is ever changing. After the first few weeks I rarely visited these public spaces unless I was looking for newbies to draw into the more intimate networks of relationships that existed in the Neighbourhood where I lived and worked.

My research reveals that the primary reason why people live in Cybertown is to widen their social circle by meeting people and making friends. However, their expectations of meeting people, and the negotiation and realisation of those expectations take place on many different social levels complicating what at first glance seems a simple procedure. This multiplicity of expectations about life in Cybertown includes assumptions around space and place, reality and virtuality/play, community, hope, new relationships, friendships, world knowledge, networks, support and leisure. Human relationships in Cybertown are formed and maintained in similar ways to those in wider society.



What Cybertown residents call friendship is in fact an umbrella term that comprises an intricate variety of human relationships. Equally importantly, these notions of friendship are related to, and mutually dependent on notions of community, often working in tandem to produce a particularly effective 'social glue' (Pahl: 2000), issues I deal with more specifically in later chapters. However, relationship forming is dependent on the presence of people, thus the most pressing question at this stage is to understand where those people come from. In other words it is necessary to capture the essence of those things that drew them together in the first place. By asking the residents why are you living in Cybertown, and what drew you to Cybertown in the first place, a picture has emerged that positions Internet use in several dominant categories. Of these categories, chat, information, and games were all important, and each appears to have its own place on the Internet, for example chatrooms, search engines, and MUDs and MOOs. However, in describing more specifically the best things about Cybertown, the themes most frequently used by residents were that Cybertown is a real place, that they valued the real friends they made there, and enjoyed meeting new people. These three notions echo those issues that I summarized in the introductory chapter: understandings of place and space; dualism between real and virtual/imaginary; and the extent of the influence of the Internet on social relations. High levels of satisfaction were often articulated with Cybertown friendships and, as I have already explained, during interviews very close comparisons were drawn between Cybertown and real life. What was interesting was that this connection drawn between Cybertown and 'being real' was often justified by opposing Cybertown to being 'a game' rather than 'not real'. As a result of these oppositions the 'realness' of Cybertown was



(re)produced, and the idea of ‘game’ became equated with the virtual/imaginary, a situation that many residents were more than happy to explain to me.

### **Real Play or Playing for Real**

*It's not your normal means of fun (who would want to get a job online, where you actually have to work, and don't get real money, lol<sup>11</sup>. But it still is fun. I think it might be the community that makes Cybertown appealing. If Cybertown didn't have the REAL people that it had, and just had "bots" instead, it definitely would not be worthwhile, and as popular. So, I guess its the real people, and real events that draw me to Cybertown - it's a place NOT a game.*  
[sadr]

What was clear to me from living and working in Cybertown was that the more ‘real’ Cybertown was believed to be, the more ‘real’ the relationships formed there could also be. Certainly my analysis of friendship in chapter six discusses how the ‘realness’ of Cybertown endows both greater value to, and satisfaction with, the relationships formed there. Despite this, there is evidence that some Cybertown residents who had a high satisfaction with their relationships also thought Cybertown was a game to be played. For each of these residents their justification for this was that Cybertown might be a game but it is almost real. *markab* is one of the latter, although more eloquent than most – here is what she had to say:

*Cybertown is a wonderful game so to speak. I have a whole life there. It is an extension of my real life. It is more personal than email. A direct communication with fun...they are real because the people there are real. I am not playing with a computer id, but real breathing people like myself. It is a game and then some.*  
[markab]

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<sup>11</sup> Lol is an acronym that means Laughing Out Loud.



In chapter one I tendered the notion that Cybertown represents a natural progression from 'game' to 'real', a progression that is illustrated by the interweaving of the notions of real, play and game in resident's descriptions of Cybertown like those above. It is Huizinga's (1950) analysis of play that is the most useful starting point for unpacking the complex relationship between these concepts, since he identifies a distinction between the first two, 'real' and 'play'. Huizinga's (1950) classic definition of play distinguishes play from what is real, by the quality of pretence against what is intuitively known to be real. Furthermore, intuition is that element of personal experience that enables the individual to reflexively orientate themselves in respect to what is real. Simply put, we know the difference between play and our experience of the real world. Yet Cybertown appears to draw the two together. *markab* offers an account of play in Cybertown that is irrevocably interwoven with real experience. This is further complicated if we throw the latter notion 'game' into the pot, as a yet more intricate picture emerges. When considering the seemingly close notions of game and play, it is obvious that all games are play, but not all play is a game. The difference between them is in the orientation of pretence to reality. *markab* perceived time spent in Cybertown as a play, but only very few residents I spoke to perceived it as simply a game. In the light of this, applying Huizinga's formal characteristics of play to Cybertown becomes problematic on four counts. First, he regards play as being a free activity that is both 'not serious' and stands consciously outside 'ordinary life' (1950: 14), something that Cybertown patently does not do. Those who work in Cybertown are earnest and serious folk, regarding their input into their community as being very important (see chapter five). Second, for Huizinga the activity of play earns no material



rewards or profit, yet my empirical data shows that the rewards of friendship, knowledge and community are very tangible for many of Cybertown's residents. Third, play takes place within designated boundaries of time and space, according to fixed rules therein. This premise can be applied to many activities in varied social spaces, Cybertown included. Last, play promotes the creation of social groups that are separate from the 'common world'. It is clear that what residents meant by Cybertown being play must be very different to what Huizinga imagined, since they equated their experience there with play, and yet strongly orientated themselves to reality, sometimes drawing no distinctions between the two. In other words, sometimes there was a boundary and sometimes not. Here it is the notion of separation and boundaries that are problematic, and it is Baudrillard's (1983a) critique of the modern world and his notion of a more radical form of play that I draw upon to explain this. Baudrillard (1983) suggests that our experience of the world is primarily playful, and that not only do we no longer know what is real, but that 'the real is no longer possible' (1983a: 38). For example, if in Baudrillard's opinion Disneyland is no less real than America (1983a, 1996) then Cybertown itself can be no less real than the rest of the world:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that it the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real. (Baudrillard, 1983a: 25, original brackets).

Simulation, 'as it threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary' (Baudrillard, 1983a: 25), accomplishes the collapse of any distinction between Cybertown and real life rather than their reproduction.



The relationship between the Internet and play in the context of Baudrillard's work has been considered before. Aycock (1993) argued that Baudrillard's notion of play could be developed to show how virtual culture extends the idea of play beyond virtuality to everyday lived experience (Aycock, 1993: n.pag.). In Cybertown, the distinction between play and real appears to be conditional on the presentation of Cybertown as 'real', the presentation of self as 'real', the types of human relationships formed there and the way in which these issues are interwoven with other real life experiences. Not one of these four concepts stands alone, instead they are incontrovertibly woven into the rich fabric of life in Cybertown. The bringing together (or universalisation) of Cybertown and real life is forged through these concepts. As ever, the dichotomy between real/imaginary is in attendance. However, looking at the geographical or spatial practices in Cybertown informs us of those processes through which this universalisation is reached.

### **Conclusion: Cybertown Is A Real Place**

As I have already explained, Cybertown is a place where technologically enabled landscapes/places are inhabited by real people, and there is a relationship between the geographical and social aspects of Cybertown. Later chapters explain in more depth how this relationship is demonstrated in various ways as the residents of Cybertown interact both with each other and their environment. However, this chapter has explained how the status of Cybertown as a place is arrived at by analysing how it is both produced and (re)produced by the people who live there. Cybertown does not exist in a vacuum. It exists on



the Internet whose history and development was wholly reliant on the application of western communications technologies. As such Cybertown's structure and function are also dependent on the ways in which western society is perceived and reproduced. This perception of Cybertown as a place is further affected by changes in the perception of place and space, and the relationship between real and virtual/imaginary. On a more mundane level Cybertown is created as a place because the people who go there identify it and name it as one despite the fact it can only be reached through the mediation of Internet technologies. As Gieryn explains, 'without naming, identification, or representation by ordinary people, a place is not a place' (2000: 465). As well, the residents of Cybertown stress how real Cybertown is, as opposed to it being imaginary or virtual or play. This echoes Lefebvre's (1974: 135) view of space as a social product. He argues that rather than space being *a priori*, a vacuum waiting to be filled, it is produced through social action. More importantly space resonates with postmodern ideas about the collapse of boundaries between the real and the virtual (Baudrillard, 1983a; Bauman, 1998; Best and Kellner, 1991). This collapse results in the residents understanding of their online life feeding back into their offline life, enriching their experience of both, as Cybertown becomes increasingly embedded in their daily lives. Consequently both online and offline experiences are considered to be real in the sense that neither is less real than the other.

What adds an extra dimension in embedding Cybertown within its' residents everyday lives is that the landscapes of Cybertown are based on other landscapes that they already inhabit e.g. the Plaza, a Beach, the Employment Office, the



Council Chamber and the Suburbs where people live. Consequently the residents' knowledge about how to inhabit them is grounded in their own common sense or subjective experience about how the 'real world' works. Additionally, the same 'vocabulary of place' (Adams, 1997), is used when in Cybertown as in the rest of everyday life. Adams' (1997) discussion of the 'vocabulary of place' explores some types of metaphors commonly in use in cyberspace, and suggests that these metaphors provide a starting point for the construction of meaning. According to Adams (1997) positional metaphors such as 'online' and 'offline' indicate connectedness and place metaphors like 'cyberspace' indicate equivalent space that allows 'opportunities for movement and interaction' (1997: 155). Later chapters explain how many residents use these metaphors inherent in everyday language to describe or explain Cybertown in exactly the same way as any other place they visit.

These everyday metaphors also function as the equivalent of Lefebvre's 'spatial codes' (1974: 135). The 'solidarity' (Lefebvre, 1974: 135) of these residents collective recognition of Cybertown leads to what Augé suggests is the 'founding of places' (1995: 51) in the same way as places are founded offline. As a result, Cybertown becomes a function of its description as a 'small town' or a 'community' and its construction as a place by its residents is accomplished by their unanimous agreement to call it a place. Not only does it become a town but also it becomes a 'cyber' town in recognition of the 'cyber' space within which it is situated. Cyber is a prefix that is getting more popular to describe a person, place or idea as part of the world of networked computers. Cybertown's inhabitants experience such a sense of 'being there' that they conceptualise



Cybertown in spatial terms even though cyberspace itself is based on connectivity rather than physical space. Although Cybertown inhabits cyberspace it constructs imaginary landscapes and employs practices that enable it to mimic the materiality of physical space and consequently reinforce its alignment with everyday life.

This alignment is again reinforced by the different social rules regulating behaviour in different places, because the title or name of the place indicates its function, and therefore appropriate behaviour there. Likewise, the performance of this appropriate or acceptable behaviour also reinforces the status of these social landscapes, and as such contributes to both their construction as a social places and their position among other social places. Consequently the emplacement of Cybertown is arrived at from an understanding of place, behaviour, function and the individual actor. Lefebvre's suggestion that the everyday descriptive, sometimes metaphorical terms used to discriminate between spaces, such as room, street, shop, community, town etc. 'serve to distinguish, but not to isolate, particular spaces' (1974: 135). The spatial codes and place metaphors correspond to Cybertown's specific functions, assist the ordering of its relationship with other social spaces, and establish a relationship between the geographical and social aspects of Cybertown.



## **Chapter Four: A Sense of Culture, Language and ‘Being There’**

*Language represents, embodies, constructs and constitutes meaningful participation in a society and culture. It also assumes that a mutually intelligible symbolic and ideological communicative system must be at play among those who share knowledge and practices about how one is meaningful across social contexts.*

(Morgan, 2004: 3)

### **Introduction**

Anthropologists have rigorously explored the importance of language and its links with ethnography since Hymes first published his paper ‘The Ethnography of Speaking’ in 1962. Consequently language competence is recognised as being a significant ‘ritual act’ (Goffman, 1969) that facilitates two things: first, the ethnographers engagement ‘from within’ the culture they are studying (Garfinkel, 1967: 76-77); and second, the authentication, augmentation and expedition of a thick description of that culture (Geertz, 1973; Saville-Troike, 1989; Agar, 1986):

It is likely that only a researcher who shares, or comes to share the intuitions of the speech community under study will be able to accurately describe the socially shared base.  
(Saville-Troike, 1989: 4)

The Internet presents a unique challenge to ethnographers in that it is symptomatic of the conflicting forms of written and oral experience (McLuhan, 1962) that elucidates contemporary social organisation. This is true in Cybertown where the written word is the key means of communication, and presents the epistemological problem - how can I make sense of a culture that does not use verbal communication? Unsurprisingly, written words are often seen to be either lacking in emotion, or lacking the ability to convey emotion



without being supported by sight or sound. For example if someone says they are sad, it is a much more believable performance if their words are accompanied by the sight of tears and the sound of sobbing. Yet in Cybertown these physical modalities of speech are to all extents and purposes absent. As a result, in Cybertown, words have had to be transformed. They, like the verbal modes of speech that Reisman (1974) describes below, also express larger meanings in cyberspace. Words have become emotive and descriptive, active and performative. Thus my earlier question - how can I make sense of a culture that does not use verbal communication is largely irrelevant: instead the problem is one of showing that this is communication like in any other 'real' place. Consequently the examples given in this chapter illustrate how, in Cybertown, words paint pictures and sing to you:

The conventions that order speech interaction are meaningful not only in that they order and mediate verbal expression, but also in that they participate in and express larger meanings in the society that uses them. (Reisman, 1974: 86)

My experience in Cybertown bears this out, as throughout my research I engaged with the residents of Cybertown on a daily basis, during which I would become immersed in the written textual dialogue peculiar to that place. It is to a large part through observing, participating, noting and analysing this everyday written dialogue that my understandings of Cybertown culture have emerged.

In Cybertown, as in other places language, is sensitive to its context of situation or register. This is the concept traditionally used in communication studies to refer to the situated meaning of language, sometimes also referred to as 'stylistic variation' (Agha, 2004). Register varies not only because of who we are, but



also between the different situations we find ourselves in (Montgomery, 1986: 101-120). The study of linguistics informs us that language itself is the synthesis of both spoken and written discourse. These discourses of language are both formally and consensually agreed within society. They are components of meaning production through which we recognise each other as human, and actively (re)create community (Gumperz, 1977; Hymes, 1962; Montgomery, 1986; Saussure, 1974; Saville-Troike, 1989; Volosinov, 1973). Becoming proficient in language, and learning the context or situated meaning of language is essential to the process of ethnography. Otherwise how can we as ethnographers portray an authentic version of the culture we are studying? A major difficulty is to ensure that our accounts are not weakened by being a 'linguistic outsider' (Agar, 1996; Okely, 1996). While learning to live in Cybertown as a newbie I had to learn the language of Cybertown. However I was not disadvantaged because this state of affairs was common to everyone. No one is born in Cybertown; instead as I explained earlier, everyone joins the community as a newbie. Therefore my position in Cybertown was interesting from an ethnographic standpoint. I was not doing ethnography 'at home' because I was in an 'other' place. Yet I was never a linguistic outsider in the sense that Agar (1996) or Okely (1996) describe because everyone entered the community with the status and knowledge of a newbie. In Cybertown the use of a written discourse, or text is one of the key linguistic means of giving and receiving information, of (re)producing community, of recognising reality, of recognising each other as human and of organising encounters. Everyone had to learn this language and it was always a certainty that my grasp of it would eventually be equal to any other resident of Cybertown. This meant I would be



able to use myself as a 'source of information and interpretation' (Saville-Troike, 1989: 108).

As I have already explained, in Cybertown written discourse transcends spoken language. This could be problematic, as McLuhan (1964) explains in his discourse on early electronic communication. He demonstrates the differences in perceived meanings when we substitute a picture of the Stars and Stripes for the words 'American Flag' on a piece of paper, suggesting a resultant loss of the 'rich, visual mosaic' of meanings the image would have provided (McLuhan, 1964: 92). However, historians and ethnographers doing historical ethnography do very well without any of this (see for example Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992). Instead historical ethnographers use the written word in historical documents and books to reconstruct processes of cultural and social change. Similarly the absence of the spoken word in Cybertown is not an epistemological barrier. Faced with the fact that the performance of text is one of the key ritual acts through which to (re)produce community in Cybertown, the issue becomes one of how I can credibly interpret the description of reality that was afforded by it. The answer is that in Cybertown a new written textual discourse has developed that is far richer in many ways than the offline written word. As such, the first part of this chapter explains some of the theory behind language, speech and text, and outlines the properties of this new category of dynamic textual discourses I learned in Cybertown, whose co-performance, with other residents allowed me to accurately describe what was happening there.



The second section of this chapter briefly explains what it means to live in Cybertown. By asking the question what does it mean to say you are there in Cybertown when you are here in front of your computer screen, it analyses the position of individuals in cyberspace: that is, their position as social bodies. Consequently this section lays the foundations for the analysis of community and friendship in later chapters by building up a picture of how technological engagement is structured by underlying cultural knowledge and discourses of identity, community and friendship.

## **Section One: The Language of Cybertown**

### **Speech and Text: Performance and Reception.**

Word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant... Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other'... A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another.  
(Volosinov, 1973: 86)

Theoretically speaking, the two linguistic discourses of 'speech as language' and 'text as language' can be differentiated by their ownership of distinct modes of performance/production and consumption/reception. However, both speech and text carry different kinds of communicative loads that impact on the interpretation and meanings assigned to them. Yet they are similar in that they are both tools used to sustain and reproduce culture. Performance and consumption are always expressed in relation to one another and it is in this respect that 'word is a two-sided act' (Volosinov, 1973: 86). For example, during a face-to-face (FTF) conversation speech is performed synchronously, rapidly, dynamically and sometimes recklessly, to an audience that is situated in



the same time and place. As a result, it is actively received and consumed by its audience, who then actively perform responses<sup>1</sup>. In FTF both the performance and its response may consist of verbal speech, physical gestures, or more usually a mixture of both (Culler, 1976; Saussure, 1974). Conversely, writing is quiescent and asynchronous. It is produced for an audience in a different time and place. It is produced at a speed agreeable to the writer. It may also be planned and edited before it is transmitted, as in the case of this thesis or a book etc. Similarly its reader decides the speed of its consumption. For example I may read a chapter of a book before retiring for the night, effectively elongating my consumption of a book over several days.

This variance in the production and performance of 'speech as language' and 'text as language' generates differences in the way that speech and text are used, and in some measure also determines the context of their use. The lexicon and grammar of both are different. Text is planned and edited where FTF speech is performed dynamically. In consequence my explanation of these aspects of performance, the synchronous and asynchronous, in different contexts, also provides us with background knowledge about a new kind of textual discourse that has developed on the Internet, and in Cybertown, and can convey an equally rich mosaic of meaning to that of FTF speech (Herring, 1996; Yates, 1996). Not only is one language developing, but also this new kind of discourse is beginning to cross cultural and language boundaries, as Paolillo states:

Using Internet Relay Chat (IRC), people who are located in geographically distant locales, who are of different national and linguistic backgrounds, and who might otherwise never come into

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<sup>1</sup> See Goffman's (1969) dramaturgical analysis for an in depth discussion of the presentation of self afforded by the performer/audience interaction.



contact, can engage in real-time interactions that resemble the immediacy of in-person face-to-face encounters.  
(Paolillo, 1999: n.pag.)

### **Context: Asynchronicity and Synchronicity**

There are different forms of electronically mediated communication that are performed in different contexts. The main distinguishing feature of these is the primacy of text. There are however variations between the presence and absence of synchronicity. One of these, email is asynchronous in that it does not depend upon users being connected to the Internet at the same time. It is a method of sending basic text files from one computer to another almost instantaneously, although the message may not be read until the recipient checks their email weeks later. Email is basically 'one-to-one' private chat, although messages may be sent to more than one recipient at a time. Mailing lists are an extension of email. Each list has a central email address and everything sent to that address goes to everyone on the list (one-to-many), eliciting a kind of passive networking that on its own may give the individual a superficial sense of community, but more often results in a stream of unsolicited, unrelated communications<sup>2</sup>. However, in the case of the Cybertown community, email performs a vital reinforcing function, often bridging the gap between online and offline community, a notion I develop in later chapters.

Email is generally accepted to be less structured and more relaxed regarding rules of spelling and grammar, although this of course differs according to the

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<sup>2</sup> The electronic equivalent of junk mail commonly known as 'spam'.



context in which email is used. Email messages are mostly plain text files. There is no need to worry about fonts, letterheads, logos, typesetting, justification, signatures, print resolution etc. Correspondence is distilled down to its essence - words. Emails have certain strengths; they can be sent anywhere at anytime with relative ease and are cheap for businesses and corporations to use (no stamps, envelopes, post etc.); any computer file can be attached to any message (you can send documents, photographs etc.), and all messages sent and received can be filed using very little disk space. There is a huge debate taking place at the moment about whether employees should use work time to create private email, and firms are threatening to read email and sack employees who do this (Ward, 2002).

Although email is used in Cybertown, interaction in the community itself differs from email in many ways, not least that that Cybertown allows the synchronous exchange of text through a particular method of performance and reception. My research illustrates that generally its residents use text as the key linguistic device through which to perform and interpret their understanding of the social world they inhabit. But, as I explain, the text they use is not simply the written word; it has developed a more dynamic form whose co-performance allows the (re)creation of culture and community by use of text as both language and ritual act.

### **Text as Language and Ritual Act**

My earliest impression of Cybertown was that it appeared to offer only simple text as the way to convey personality, self, mood, status or emotion, which



seemed an impossible task. Hence investigating the status or performativity of that text was of paramount importance to my research. Goffman (1969) suggested that the written word was only one of many ritual acts that both reinforce and recreate social orders. Written words do this by representing those 'fronts', 'settings' and 'vehicles for conveying signs', that facilitate thick description (Geertz; 1973: 5). I learned that in Cybertown - a text based cybercommunity - the status of text is privileged in that it is the key ritual act that can perform the function of thickly describing. Consequently the written word has evolved into an 'interactive written discourse' (Werry; 1996), with a shared contextual frame, through which cybercommunity is collectively articulated and imagined.

This shared contextual frame allows non-verbal cues to be substituted by relational cues that can be performed, either by using words, syntax or language, or by using emotive icons (emoticons). Acronyms are also used frequently to reduce typing time and thus speed up communication. There are four basic ways to use text: to describe physical actions; to describe feelings and sounds; to emphasise; and as shorthand for descriptive terms. The rules of grammar have also been radically altered.

### **Describing Physical Actions: Emoting**

In Cybertown asterisks are often used as parentheses to describe physical actions such as \*hugs\*, or \*sobs\*. In conversational mode, if Alice for example typed \*sobs\*, a reply might be 'There...there...there....\*hands Alice a tissue\*'. These



relational cues transmit the notion of Alice being upset and of a sympathetic reply. Hence performance and consumption are always expressed in relation to one another as I explained in an earlier section. In Cybertown the identity of every resident is always displayed in the same manner. Preceding the name there may be a job title, in brackets, because Cybertown employs its residents in different capacities to perform specific jobs. If there are no preceding brackets/job title then the resident is not employed. Then the residents name is displayed. Finally, the numbers in brackets after the residents name refer to experience, or attendance. Those with jobs earn ten or more experience points per day (see earlier chapters for a discussion of status and position). Those without jobs only gain five experience points per day. It is possible therefore to tell at a glance if someone is new to the town because they have a very low experience points total. Generally residents cannot have a job until they reach a certain experience level. The following is an example from an actual Cybertown chat log and although I have changed the names, I have left everything else intact. In this posting *nec* \*chases kitty\*, and kitty \*runs\*. *kitty* is actually responding in character as a kitten by running when chased. This notion of creating action is known as emoting. It is used extensively in Cybertown to construct a physical context for communicative acts:

[Block Deputy] Nec [489] : \*chases kitty\*  
[Club Owner] Kitty [3230] : \*runs!\*

This exchange was followed by a further 25 postings before we hear what happens next:

Block Deputy] Nec [489] : now where'd kitty get to?  
[Club Owner] Kitty [3230] :\* hides behind the tree\*



Another 4 postings later, *jay*, another resident present notices the interchange between *nec* and *kitty*, and expresses amusement. By acknowledging that *nec* is chasing *kitty*, *jay* is helping to build a common sense of reality (Correll, 1995):

[Security Officer] Jay [6884] : lol@ kitty

This exchange is interesting because it demonstrates how easily Nec and Kitty constructed a physical context for their communicative act. Together they constructed a tree, and in addition Jay acknowledged the existence of that tree as she laughed at their antics.

Here are three further examples of emoting. Notice the high level of experience points of the participants. It is unusual to find inexperienced participants emoting physical constructs in Cybertown:

#### Example 1

[Neighbourhood Deputy] Wolf [6044] : \*passes coffee to Ark\*

[Neighbourhood Deputy] ark [4122] : Oooohhh thanks Wolf \*g\*

#### Example 2

[Neighbourhood Deputy] Wolf [6044] : \*passes fishermens friend\* try this

[Neighbourhood Deputy] dutypigeon [6035] : thanks.....wngffty....odoserjf.....\*spits it out\*...yuk!

[Neighbourhood Deputy] Wolf [6044] : \*runs\*

#### Example 3

[Neighbourhood Deputy] Wolf [6044] : \*pats everyone on the back\*

[Neighbourhood Deputy] dutypigeon [6035] : \*cough\* \*cough\*....not so hard!

### Describing Feelings and Sounds

Sounds are often written or spelled. This allows the audience/receivers to draw their own conclusions over what is meant. Word length and capitalisation are

frequently used to alter meanings enabling the performance to become more dynamic.

Examples of this are:

- Using 'Hehehehe' for laughter, rather than typing 'I am laughing'.

However, 'hehe', 'hehehehehehe', 'heehee' are different laughs. Capital letters may also indicate volume or loudness. So 'hehe' is a short laugh, 'HAHAHAHAHAHA' is something more like a loud belly laugh.

- Using 'Grrrrrr' to indicate annoyance, rather than typing 'I am annoyed'. As before, different levels of annoyance can be indicated by word length and/or capitalisation. Thus 'grrr', 'Grrrrrrrrrrrr' and 'GRRRRR' are all different.

The physical effort involved in producing these different levels of emotion is very small. Typing 'Grrrrrrrrrrrr' rather than 'Grrrrr' merely involves keeping one finger on the keyboard 'r' a second or two longer! This is illustrated in the following examples, randomly taken from chat logs, full context is not given, their only purpose to illustrate how feelings and sounds may be described.

Example 1:

**[Block Deputy] tra [2586] : \*yawwwwwwn,,, good morning peoples :-**

Example 2:

**[Club Owner] mck [1923] : hehe**

Example 3:

**cosm [50] : I want an avatar BOOHOO!!!!**

Example 4:

**[Block Deputy] Nec [489] : oooooooooof!!!!**



## **Emphasis**

One of the most basic rules of netiquette (Mann and Stewart, 2000) is that connected with using uppercase or capital letters. It is considered bad manners to conduct conversations in capital letters, for that denotes shouting. However, to use capitals to emphasise feelings and sounds is acceptable, as in ‘I am SO tired today!’ Notice also the exclamation mark that conveys further emphasis. For yet more emphasis you could type, ‘I am SOOOOOO tired today!!!!’. This repetition of letters that creates the elongation of words is a common strategy in interactive written discourse (Herring, 1996; Werry, 1996). This elongation of words combined with repeated punctuation marks takes very little typing skill. These following examples are again taken out of context:

Example 1:

**Wolf [6044] : \*YELP!!\* I am calling the RSPCW**

Example 2:

**Wolf [6044] : Get Well Soon Kitty \*BIG HUUUUUGS AND SLURPIES\***

Example 3:

**Soc [2653] : BANG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

Example 4:

**Dre [2057] : whazzzzzzzzzzzup!**

In this next example a newbie (only 5 experience points) is gently told the rules about use of capitals:

**Car [5] : CAROLINA\_CRUSHER  
Car [5] : BIGCHU  
[Elder] Tox [9232] : lower caps please Car**

**Car [5] : QUIZMASTERBIGCHU**

**[Elder] Tox [9232] : lower caps please Car, in CT caps means u r shouting :)**

## **Shorthand Descriptive Terms, and Acronyms**

These are keyboard-produced icons that conjure/emote a description of a physical condition. Because of the use of keyboard they are mostly read sideways as in the case of these five examples:

<b>:-) or : )</b>	<b>a smiling face</b>
<b>;-) or ; )</b>	<b>a winking, smiling face</b>
<b>:-( or : (</b>	<b>an unhappy face</b>
<b>8-)</b>	<b>someone wearing glasses</b>
<b>:-P</b>	<b>someone sticking out their tongue</b>

In this next example two friends are smiling at each other when they say goodbye.

**[Block Leader] perp [3316] : bye duty :)**

**[Neighbourhood Deputy] dutypigeon [6035] : bye perp :)**

Acronyms are useful keyboard shortcuts such as, LOL for ‘laughing out loud’, ROFL for ‘rolling on the floor laughing’, TY for ‘thank you’, BTW for ‘by the way’ and AFK for ‘away from keyboard’. They have developed in response to the immediacy of conversation coupled with the slow pace of typing at a keyboard. Again acronyms can be rendered in upper or lower case for different emphasis, illustrating different levels of emotion or performativity. In the first example *cra* is telling us he will ‘be right back’, ‘away from keyboard’ for a few minutes. It is good netiquette to inform people you are away from the keyboard and prevents you being labelled as a ‘lurker’.



Example 1:

**[Block Leader] cra [2018] : hmm will brb afk for a few mins**

Example 2:

**[Block Deputy] wolf [395] : LOL**

Example 3:

**[Block Deputy] bnl [3090] : omg mad i love that av! ROFL!**

Notice also the lack of capitalisation and personal pronouns in these examples.

This is partly because this newly developed dynamic text is typed on a keyboard attached to a computer terminal by individuals who generally have no prior training in keyboard typing. Consequently they do not generally type very quickly, and the use of acronyms and keyboard shortcuts combined with the lack of capitalisation speeds up the conversation making it much more dynamic. Even so, in Cybertown individuals typically mention that they are talking or chatting, never that they are typing or reading. In three and a half years in Cybertown I never heard anyone use the terms typing or reading in general conversation. This next posting informs us that *th* is very amused about something *nec* has posted. It also nicely illustrates the use of acronyms and description to enhance textual interaction:

**[Block Deputy] th [395] : LOL hahaha Nec**

As well as being shortened, words are often clipped, lending a speech like informality to the written postings. Again this is a simple keyboard strategy to reduce typing time:

**[Block Deputy] th [395] : How r u ?**

**Car [5] : ok ty**

## **Interactive Written Discourse: Grammar**

The written word in cyberspace is built for speed not for show (Hauben and Hauben, 1998). In FTF communication mispronunciation and other verbal errors are glossed over if the meaning is otherwise clear. The same is true in the written conversations of cyberspace. There is often a lack of capitalisation. Typographical and spelling errors are commonplace, but if the meaning is clear, there is no social need to go back and correct them. That would interrupt the flow of 'speech', and alter the tone of the interchange. This is especially important when there are large numbers of people interacting at the same time. Message strings appear in the order they are received by the server, so twelve people having six different conversations can be quite complex to keep track of, a bit like being at a party and joining in every conversation at once. There is simply no time to correct mistakes. With most conversations the personal pronoun 'I' is missing. The technical protocols of chat means that each narration is preceded by the name of its speaker. The reader knows who is speaking, and losing pronouns speeds up the typing.

## **(N)etiquette**

Other rules of (n)etiquette concern such things as flooding, flaming, lurking or spam. Flooding involves repetition to such an extent that the chat screen sometimes becomes filled and unusable; it is an extremely unsociable activity. Here is another example from an actual Cybertown chat log. The interesting one





**[Security Officer] Ja [6884] : co Last warning, Caps and or flooding. if it continues you will be excluded, Thanks CT security**

*co* is actually showing zero experience, and that is reflected in his unsocial behaviour. The interaction between *co* and *ja* is entwined within other message threads, making it more difficult to follow. Note the emphasis on family chat with no inappropriate capitals or flooding. However, as I stated earlier, capitals used for emphasis are allowed. Flaming refers to email, and is therefore not relevant to my study of Cybertown, but it generally involves sending hostile or insulting replies to messages posted by someone else. Lurking is generally observing the interaction on a discussion group without posting messages oneself. Here is yet another example from a Cybertown chat log that illustrates how visitors to Cybertown can be unaware of the rules of (n)etiquette. Visitors are allowed into Cybertown, although they cannot take part in the chat, they can join in to some extent by activating automated chat macros. They are in effect lurkers who may become residents in the future. The following set of postings illustrates the change in attitude to the visitor from possible community member to unwelcome lurker, as the visitor breaches yet another rule of netiquette – ‘thou shall not force thy way into a conversation’. The visitor starts out by waving<sup>3</sup>:

Visitor waves hello to Zoltar  
**[Block Deputy] red [395] : am I still in here?**  
Visitor waves hello to Zoltar  
**nik [0] : hello kitten new here**  
**[Club Owner] Kitty [3230] : no red**  
**[Templar] Pan [11948] : no, red**  
**nas [90] : ha ha ha ha stayin alive stayin alive**

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<sup>3</sup> An automated chat macro is initiated by right clicking on the name of the person you wish to send it too, and then a choice of macros is made before pressing send. The choice of macros includes, waves hello to, waves goodbye to, agrees, disagrees, likes and dislikes.



Seven postings later the visitor is addressed and encouraged to join the community:

**[Block Leader] Tin [2155] :** Visitor you have to become a member of Cybertown, its a great place

Five more postings and *zoltar*, the original recipient of the visitor's wave replies:

**Zol [20] :** hello visitor  
Visitor waves hello to tim  
**[Club Owner] Tox [3230] :** awk whomps necro  
**[Block Leader] Tin [2155] :** hi Zoltar of SS  
**nas [90] :** lol  
Visitor waves hello to timothius  
**[Block Deputy] Nec [489] :** oooooooooof!!!!  
Visitor waves hello to timothius  
Visitor waves hello to timothius  
**[Block Deputy] Nec [489] :** grrrrrr....  
**rho14753 [0] :** options  
**[Block Leader] Tin [2155] :** lol  
Visitor waves hello to nasa\_scientist  
Visitor likes nasa\_scientist

Out of the last fourteen postings, six of them are chat macros initiated by the visitor, and this prompts a response from two well-experienced community members:

**[Block Leader] Tin [2155] :** the Visitor is having fun I see  
**[Templar] Pan [11948] :** may thy hands dropped from waving too much

Of the next fifteen postings the visitor again initiates five chat macros, prompting a further response:

**[Block Deputy] Nec [489] :** i think some one likes you nas  
**[Block Leader] Tin [2155] :** hi sou  
**[Security Officer] Jay [6884] :** Hi visitor  
**[Templar] Pan [11948] :** visitor, just join and u can type

The visitor continues to annoy people and eventually (after 126 postings) is challenged directly:

**[Templar] Pan [11948] :** can u boot a visitor?

**[Block Leader] Tina-Lynn [2155] : one is good Visitor, not a million times lol**

Eventually the Security Officer is asked to 'boot' the visitor (boot in this context has evolved from it's early usage in 'booting' the computer – and effectively means sever the program connections). The Security Officer has the power to sever the visitor's connection with the community. The Security Officer does so, is thanked, and the conversation continues without the visitor:

**[Block Deputy] red [395] : Visitor, what's your problem?**

**[Block Deputy] red [395] : boot them anyway**

**[Block Deputy] red [395] : please boot this person Jay**

**[Security Officer] Jay [6884] : Im ttrying to be fair it takes a min to get the correct 1**

**[Security Officer] Jay [6884] : so be patient**

**[Security Officer] Jay [6884] : I think hes gone:)**

**[Security Officer] Jay [6884] : Back. listens..**

**copr [80] : hello ppl**

**[Block Leader] Tin [2155] : hi there copr**

**[Security Officer] Jay [6884] : hey guys I do my besdt, u want me to be fair dont u??**

**[Club Owner] Kitty [3230] : lol necro**

**[Block Leader] Tin [2155] : Jay you did a great job, thank you**

**[Templar] Pan [11948] : yea sure of cuz, u did good**

**[Block Deputy] Nec0 [489] : no we don't jay lol**

**[Security Officer] Jay [6884] : thanks**

**[Block Deputy] Nec [489] : u did good**

Then one last challenge to the remaining visitors:

**[Club Assistant] tim [278] : Visitors join then you can harrass me with a name then I can come to you cyber home a flood your inbox!!! hahahaha**

## **Sequentiality**

Generally FTF conversation is sequential. Each interlocutor takes turn to submit his or her dialogue. This turn taking is managed through a complexity of signals that may be verbal or physical. These signals transmit a wish to perform, and in



reply permission to perform is granted. The interlocutor moves between being actor and being audience. In cybercommunity these signals are absent. Many conversations are interwoven and juxtaposed in a complex structure of postings. Each posting is listed in the order in which the server receives it. This creates a great deal of overlap and interruption that may be difficult to follow and comprehend. Comprehension is not improved by the need to take your eyes off the screen in order to type and hit the send button. So to minimise loss of continuity the postings are generally kept fairly brief, hence the high number of shortcuts employed, and the brevity of the postings themselves. Postings tend to be staccato style, but may sometimes also be quite fluid and sophisticated. When things are missed it is possible to scroll back, but this tends to compound the problem. It takes a great deal of practice to follow and comprehend this complex conversational structure. However, with practice it may be possible to take part in several conversations at once. Most conversations may be saved in chat logs to be examined subsequently, however, in my experience they tend to be more difficult to follow later. This is because postings for one particular conversation are sometimes minutes apart – and that could mean trawling through up to three hundred postings for a reply to the original question.

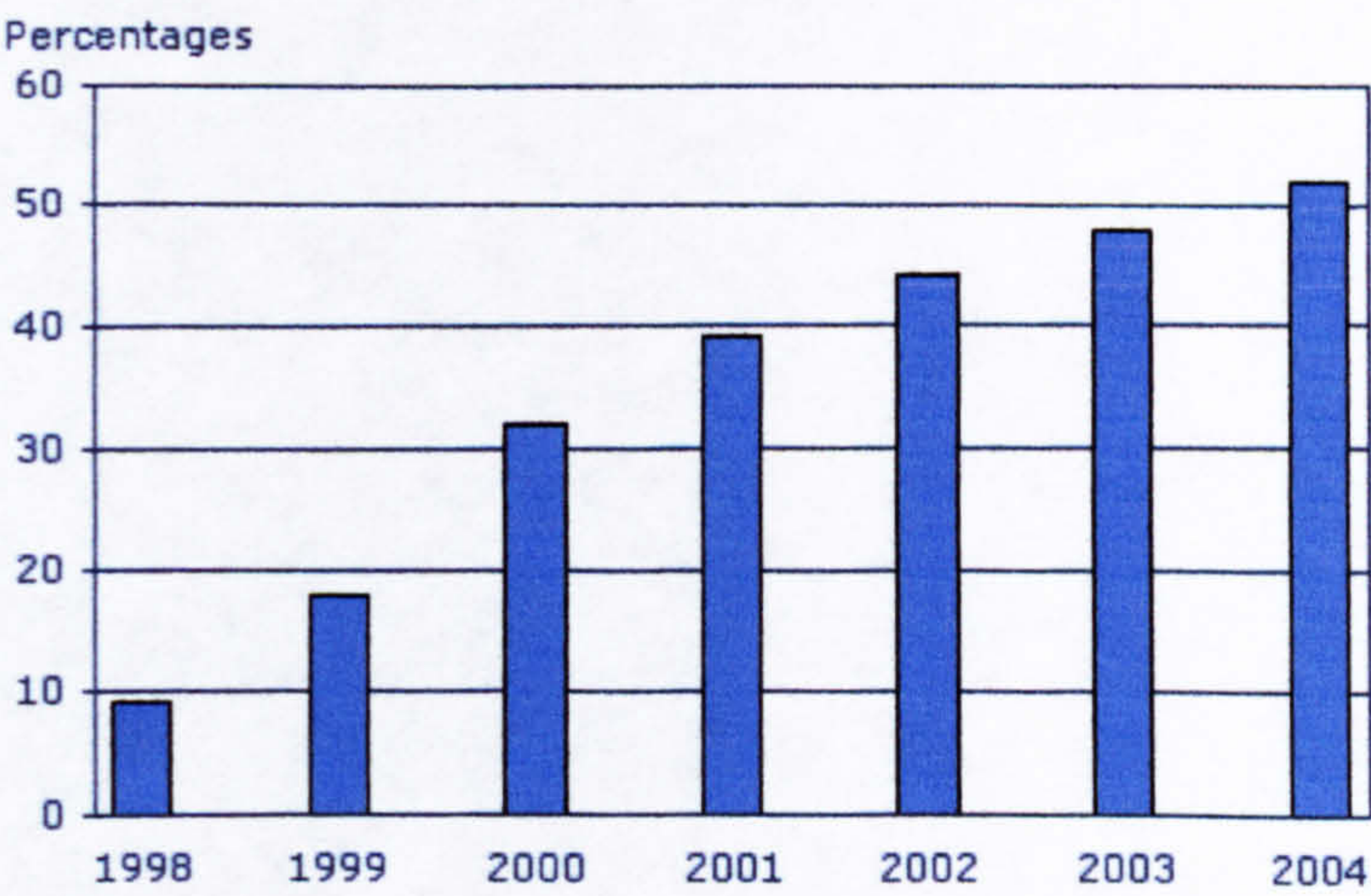
## **Section Two: ‘Being There’ and ‘Being Here’**

Having chosen to practice ethnography in a virtual community called Cybertown, I was still faced with the more routine details to sort out that often concern other anthropologists. Essentially I had to move to a new city and then learn how to live there, an undertaking not without its problems. There were a



whole range of tasks from finding a house, learning to move around in Cybertown, finding a job, learning the language and actually meeting people that I had to accomplish. At the heart of these concerns are the body and language, and their relationships with the real/virtual debates surrounding cyberspace. The study of these relationships is increasingly urgent given the increasing incidence of individual engagement with new communications technologies in contemporary society. The bulk of this increase has been facilitated by the spread of home computer systems with improved software and hardware capabilities (see earlier chapters). Indeed, in the UK alone, latest figures suggest that 52% of the population or 12.9 million people are online at any one time, with many of those living in a virtual community.

**Table 5: Illustrates the Rise in Internet Access in the UK from 9% 1998 (2.3 Million), to 52% in 2004 (12.9 Million)<sup>4</sup>.**



As Internet technologies increasingly mediate social relationships, virtual communities like Cybertown are being produced. These communities are based

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from: <<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=8>>.



on connectivity through computers in conversation with each other, rather than proximity or face-to-face (FTF) interaction (Hillis, 1999; Hine, 2000; Kellog *et al.*, 1992; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1996; Murray, 1995; Rheingold, 2000; Shaviro, 1997; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002).

This development towards inhabiting these new communities on the Internet (or cyberspace) has been compared to the experience of the American frontiersmen of the nineteenth century (Batty and Barr, 1994; Burnett, 1996; Rheingold, 1991), with their pioneering spirit and movement towards a new way of life. Perhaps these new communities even providing an exciting new place where individuals can explore their own identities outside of the constraints of their mundane everyday lives (Turkle, 1995), or as Morse suggests:

The desire for an evolutionary transformation of the human has shifted focus from the preparation for the journey into 'outerspace' from a dying planet to the virtual 'inner space' of the computer.  
(Morse, 1994: 96)

This begs the question of how we can inhabit this 'inner space'. There are two issues when looking at the body and identity in cyberspace. The first is epistemological – if there is no body how can we decipher the culture? The second is ontological – what does it mean to say you are there in cyberspace when you are here? In the first instance we can draw comparisons to the debate begun in earlier chapters about the mythical role of cyberspace in facilitating radical futures: first as a new postmodern place of human interaction and cultural development; and second as a disembedding mechanism that throws doubts on the authenticity, representation and reality of the modern world. Alongside those theorists who were predicting these radical futures were those

(including Haraway, 1991 and Hayles, 1999) who were investing the Internet with the potential for humans to escape their bodies and to become cyborgs. Here Tomas' (1995) explanation of cyborg as a 'particular hybrid mode of reimagining the human body under the sign of the machine' (1995: 22) is useful, since he notes that the notion of cyberspace was first introduced in relation to the term cyborg. These two terms formed part of a cluster of words (others were android, robot, bionic) that were part of a move towards plotting changing thresholds in the history of the human body in the 'perception and social construction of the human body, between conceptions of the organic and inorganic, the body and technology' (Tomas, 1995: 22). As a result, what is being exchanged in cyberspace is not merely information, but also bodies, 'not physical objects, but the information necessary to reconstruct the meaning of the body to almost any desired depth or complexity' (Stone, 1995: 244). This mediation between the body and new communications technologies was predicted to give rise to the transcendence of the body over physical space, resulting in the severing of the body from physical and cultural markers such as gender, race or age and its escape into cyberspace. In other words many of the old assumptions about the nature of identity were expected to disappear in cyberspace. In discussions about the body being left behind/transcended, the physical body is often referred to as 'meat' the dead flesh that surrounds the active mind which constitutes the authentic self' (Lupton, 1995: 100; see also Land, 1995; Sobchack, 1995), a vision that conjures up images of the death of the body. As a result of these debates about computer cultures 'embodiment is often represented as an unfortunate barrier to the pleasures of computing' (Lupton, 1995: 100).



However some theorists, for example (Kolko, 1999), argue that this predicted escape from the material confines of 'meat' into cyberspace resulting in totally technologically embodied cyborgs is also another Internet myth. Like them argue that technological engagement, is instead, structured by underlying cultural knowledge and discourses of identity. Thus, there is a symbiotic relationship between computers and the self that can be likened to any other body/technology association. That is, computers can become extensions of the body image and when used over time the technologies become invisible, 'they become physically invested into the self' (Grosz 1994: 80), a notion I continue to expand on in later chapters. This is a view echoed by Turkle:

As human beings become increasingly intertwined with technology and with each other via technology, old distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex. ...The traditional distance between people and machines becomes harder to maintain.  
(Turkle, 1995: 21)

These views are useful because they point to a blurring of boundaries between computer/self in which users invest certain aspects of their cultural knowledge and discourses of identity when making sense of cyberspace but also, their habitation of cyberspace may be viewed as contributing to individuals' experiences of their identities and their bodies (Grosz 1994: 99, see also Balsamo, 1995; Seltzer 1992). Lupton states the case more bluntly:

While an individual may successfully pretend to be a different gender or age on the Internet, she or he will always have to return to the embodied reality of the empty stomach, stiff neck, aching hands, sore back and gritty eyes caused by many hours in front of a computer terminal.  
(Lupton, 1995: 102)

In all respects Lupton's perceptive insights into the relationship of the body/self with computer technologies echoes the privations of my own (physiological) bodily ethnography. Although never suffering from malaria in the pursuit of knowledge, I did, at one time or another, suffer from all of the ailments listed by Lupton (1995) while practicing my ethnography.

### **Technology and Embodiment**

The body in cultural practice is a bearer of social meanings and signs that symbolically locate it in culture, where it is significant and meaningful (Shilling, 1993; Scheper-Hughes, 1994; Turner, 1996). Three examples of social meanings or 'anchors'<sup>5</sup> that help locate the body are age, gender and race. These act to locate the body in a culture. However, that location within a culture is not fixed. It is constantly updated as the body negotiates experience or receives data (Johnson, 1987, Merleau-Ponty, 1962). That data is important because it includes many of the signs and signifiers that operate to locate the body in culture (Saussure, 1974). It is in the processing of that data (or experience) that culture exerts an influence through its ideologies and norms, resulting in what might be called cultural embodiment i.e. a collective subject position (Featherstone and Burrows, 1995; Hayles, 2000; Haraway, 1997; Hillis, 1999; Scheper-Hughes, 1994). Thus culture can be said to be the body's performative experience of a socially negotiated reality. It is this performative experience that ethnographers strive to interpret by being there (Clifford, 1997; Geertz, 1973; Watson, 1999; Willis and Trondheim, 2000). Yet at first this appears to be

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<sup>5</sup> The role of these social anchors in is analysed in depth in chapter six.



problematic in Cybertown because the body as a physiological entity (or meat) does not physically exist in cyberspace and therefore appears unlikely to be used to communicate signs and symbols that identify culture and community.

However, my research demonstrates how, in Cybertown, cybercommunity is produced within cyberspace its residents extend their bodies through the computer. Consequently The bodies of Cybertown residents, as containers of social meanings and symbols are linked by primarily symbolic exchange rather than by face to face encounters in physical space (Bargh, 2002; Wellman *et al*, 2002; Smith, 1999). Having said that, the residents of Cybertown do 'meet' each other in three-dimensional mode when they operate an avatar.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned in previous chapters, a special interactive software program is needed to run avatars, and they use up a lot of computer memory, making avatars comparatively slow. As a result my experience of 3D and avatars is that in Cybertown they are often only used for celebrations, parties or meetings, and therefore my analysis does not include an in-depth examination of creating a virtual self through avatars that incorporate the realm of gestures and visual representations (however, there is a wide body of inquiry that looks at the relationship between how avatars move and how they communicate, see Bertol, 1996; Damer, 1997; and Kolko, 1999).

The following short extract from my fieldnotes describe the first few moments after I arrive at a birthday disco party held in 3D for Phad to celebrate his second Cybertown birthday (24 months from his date of immigration). I had been in Cybertown only about eight months and was still often very surprised by the events there.

### phad's Birthday

*Tonight I've been to a party unlike any other that I've ever been to. It was phad's birthday and he had a disco at his home. When I arrived the room was fairly full. Out of the fourteen people there I knew seven, acruux, taygeta, acamar, rana, zosma, pollux and canopus. They were all dressed in red, myself included as we had arranged beforehand to synchronise our costumes. taygeta saw me first and came over, 'hi duty, have you got speakers and a soundcard?' she asked, 'switch them on quickly - we have music'. I did as she requested, being surprised by the sounds of an old Beatle's song, Yellow Submarine emerging from my computer's speakers. 'If you have any requests let me know' she added, bouncing off into the next room (in three dimensional Cybertown we can move our avatars in a variety of different ways - fly, float, walk, run, bounce). I switched to 'float' mode and floated across to where zosma and phad were deep in conversation. I 'blew' a kiss to them and they turned to me, 'glad you could make it duty', said phad, 'let's dance'.*

Later in my notes I had written 'I find it very difficult to move around in 3D', but the truth of the matter was that in Cybertown people relied very little on this kind of three dimensional social interaction through avatars, as *canopus* remarked later, 'it's very difficult, 2D is easier - AND quicker', a view generally agreed with by other residents. Indeed, in Cybertown the emphasis is on webs of connectivity (people and computers in conversation with each other) rather than proximity (face-to-face), even if that face-to-face meeting can be mediated through the use of avatars.



Consequently although Cybertown's residents are connected to one another through the medium of computer mediated communications their bodies are hidden from the sight of each other in the sense that they do not employ avatars as representations. Yet I have already stated that not being physically visible to others does not mean that bodies cease to be containers of social meanings and symbols. Indeed, taking this idea a step further it is not unusual in our everyday lives to communicate on a level in which our physicality is not visible/evident, nor is this level of visibility/invisibility constant. It can be linked to two things: what we disclose to, and know about each other. For example strangers writing to each other or speaking on the phone are more invisible and less knowable to each other because neither can imagine the others body or location. In contrast friends writing to each other or speaking on the phone together are more visible to each other by virtue of their history of shared events and by their knowledge of each other<sup>6</sup>. To explain further - by knowledge of each other I include, physical characteristics like age, ethnicity and gender, or other features like family background, likes and dislikes, shared cultural norms etc. A whole host of things that make individuals more visible and knowable to each other, what is in fact an extended web of connections.

Crossing the threshold into a cybercommunity is much different than using the World Wide Web as a repository of knowledge. These two movements are at opposite ends of Markham's 'continuum of connection', where the first is a 'way of being', and the second is as 'a tool' (1999). For example when I use the web

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<sup>6</sup> This active disclosure and 'knowing' of each other is discussed more fully in chapters five and six, particularly in my description of moving online friendships offline.

as a reference tool I remain in the same geographical location, using my computer to connect to the Internet, a tool for the procurement of knowledge. I remain on this side of the computer screen disseminating information. There is no process of movement or transition by which I come to occupy cyberspace.

In contrast, when I belong to a cybercommunity I am belonging to a place where I share a common knowledge of a particular 'boundary', that facilitates a 'consensual hallucination' of that particular community (Gibson, 1984: 51; see also chapter six). So the question is how do I enter this place? Or perhaps how does this place enter me? From my own research experience I know that I go there without leaving here. Paradoxically, like *zosma*, a Cybertown resident who told me 'no problem, I am in both places at once, Cybertown is just an extension to my real life', I am both present and absent in both places. Although there is no geographical movement from one place to another, there is a transition or movement or shift in perspective involved. But how do I explain what processes are involved in the movement from one side of the computer screen to the other? How is this shift in perspective processed? How is it possible to 'leave' the physical body in one place, while inhabiting another place, i.e. physically sitting at a computer screen, physically typing at a keyboard, but 'living in' or negotiating different levels of social interaction in cyberspace. Where in this two-way place between the computer terminal and cyberspace is the threshold that belongs to both worlds? Thus one of the most interesting questions to ask in Cybertown was - what does it mean to say you go to Cybertown when you are still here?



## Where Are You When You Are Online?

*I just am there...I don't really think about it I just am...sometimes if I have to answer the door I leave Cybertown for a bit or make a coffee but I go straight back...I don't think about a boundary.*  
[Acamar]

As Grimshaw reminds us, a particular kind of vision or revelation is required of the anthropologist in the field, they have to 'learn to 'see', to penetrate beneath the surface appearance of things' (2000: 45). On the Internet this 'seeing' is also about learning how to be embodied in cyberspace, or as Markham (1998: 18) explains 'learning how to move, see and hear'. *acamar*'s response was typical of most residents when I asked the question - where are you when you are online? Basically, they simply recognised that they were there in Cybertown without wondering how they achieved it. Like Pollux (46 months) who explained, 'it just happens really', and many of the residents were puzzled as to why I was even asking. These included *keid* who said, 'it is an odd question, as when I'm using a PC I am still me' and continued with their own question, 'when you are watching the TV, do YOU become someone/where else?' My answer was of course, 'no I don't', but still what did come through was a shared recognition that some kind of movement across an electronic frontier between real life and Cybertown was occurring. People were definitely 'going there'.

From a theoretical standpoint, it may be worthwhile attempting to conceptualise all movement across this 'electronic frontier' in terms of crossing a liminal threshold (Turnbull, 1990; Van Gennep, 1960). This would then enable me to construct a description of that singular moment when cybercommunity becomes a place in which individual practice combines with collective practice, thus

allowing the residents of Cybertown to imaginatively experience cyberplace. In the following examples the residents of Cybertown appear to be describing the moment when they open a door and step across the threshold into another place. When moving between rooms in everyday life they never attempt to capture the actual moment of transition. As *phaet* explains, ‘I really don’t have to think about it’. Similarly when leaving real life to enter Cybertown they merely move between one and the other, the moment of transition unimportant, like a switch than is turned on or off:

*When I'm in real life Cybertown switches off, and when I'm in Cybertown real life switches off. [marfak]*

*CT is like a little vacation spot you can go to when you have a few free minutes. [adhil]*

Sometimes they merely described the instant when connectivity is facilitated through technological hardware, software and the computer terminal:

*Well, I sit at my computer and type into the keyboard. [unuklhail]*

*I go to Cybertown through the computer. [baten kaitos]*

*Real life is always here for me. Cybertown is a few clicks away, lol. [meissa]*

Sometimes it appears as if Cybertown becomes embodied within the computer:

*Cybertown sits in my bedroom, while I carry on with my real life. [capella]*

However, for most residents travel or movement is not generally encapsulated into a single moment, but is a process by which ‘arrival in Cybertown’ is achieved and recognised:

*My physical being will always be in one place (RL), but my heart and mind can be in Cybertown. [taygeta]*



In short, my attempts to summarize an explanation of this movement that I am striving for, this simple explanation of how individuals momentarily cross a liminal threshold falls short of truly explaining the processes involved.

Movement has a history (Certeau, 1984; Augé, 1995), it occurs in time and place, and it is the subjective experience of this history that interests me. At any point in the history of this movement between places the individual is in a liminal state between real life and cyberspace. This history cannot be explained in terms of the technological hardware, software, or the computer terminal. Instead it may be explained or 'mapped' through the human agency of interaction or experience that mediates the creation of cybercommunity through consensual hallucination (Gibson, 1984) or collective and individual practice (Certeau, 1984). Therefore we must 'travel by association' across this liminal space, this electronic frontier. Burnett describes it thus:

In order to enter a visual labyrinth you must be ready to travel by association. In effect, your body remains at your computer. You travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and by imagining. The eyes are, so to speak, the royal road into virtuality.  
(Burnett, 1996: 74)

If the eyes are the royal roads, then my research indicates that the written word is the royal language. Words are components of meaning production that constitute a ritual act through which we recognise each other as human, and actively (re)create community (Goffman, 1969). A new dimension of words or text or interactive written discourse becomes this royal language that is the major ritual act through which we collectively (re)create our self and our identity. As Nunes so aptly puts it:

In the virtuality of Internet, our words are our bodies, an *aporetic copula* which forces a re-examination of 'the body' as both physiological (noumenal) entity and phenomenological experience.  
(Nunes, 1995: 325, original italics)

My argument is that the Internet does not lead towards a separation of the real body and the virtual body, but rather to a recomposition of the relationship between the two. The crux here of course is as always - that Internet technologies are not driving this recomposition of the body. Rather they are mediating new modes of information exchange, new ways of understanding and reproducing that which we already are. This notion resonates through my analyses of community and friendship in later chapters. In them I explain how technological engagement is structured by underlying cultural knowledge and discourses of identity, community and friendship. When computer hardware and software come together this creates the technological condition that allows individuals to consider the possibility of establishing virtual communities in cyberspace.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provides an insight into what it means to people to be in cyberspace. In part it demonstrates that questions about how people are learning to inhabit cyberspace cannot be answered with only a few words or paragraphs, instead there are many factors at work. As I have already explained, the Internet itself presents wide and varied opportunities for social interaction, some more consuming than others. In addition, in all of these Internet spheres individuals appear to have a greater degree of independence and autonomy to construct their identity than when they are offline. However, in the first section we have seen how important language is in discussing how people live in cyberspace, how



they communicate and (re)produce themselves. This is because words are the key medium through which this is achieved in Cybertown.

My argument here, and in later chapters, is that the Internet is not contributing to the transcendence of self and the rupture of the real/virtual body, or to a loss of meaning in the real world. Instead, the language of the Internet and the way we become embodied there, allows us to reconfigure cyberspace not as an 'other' place but as another place.

My analysis of Cybertown itself, a particular community on the Internet, points towards Cybertown becoming increasingly embedded in everyday life - a part of our 'whole world', rather than a separated space (this is particularly evident in my examination of community in chapter five). Yet as my research further indicates, in Cybertown the residents are not exercising this freedom to the extent that was predicted by more radical theorists. The residents of Cybertown do not separate out the real and the virtual, neither do they transcend their bodies to wholly inhabit cyberspace. Instead, their engagement with Cybertown through the technologies of the Internet is structured by their underlying cultural knowledge and discourses of identity. Of course there is yet another issue to take into account. Identity cannot be completely separated from the relationship of the individual to the group. While cyberspace is sometimes thought of as a territory with no bounds, the individuals and groups that inhabit it often import real world boundaries to enable them to function, as they have done in Cybertown. In later chapters I discuss how these real world boundaries operate.

## Chapter Five: Community

*If you dream alone it's just a dream. If you dream together it's a reality.*

(Brazilian Folksong)

### Introduction

When asking the residents of Cybertown to explain what they really liked about the place, their overwhelming response was because it was a community. They were using community as a metaphor to describe something about Cybertown that is similar to what we know as community in the offline world. In their eyes, community was a descriptive category that equated a particular set of attributes and meanings with Cybertown. This is particularly interesting given that the debate around 'what is community' has been ongoing in academic circles since the late eighteenth/ early nineteenth century, and we are still without a definition, particularly since the debate has been widened to encompass virtual community. My explanation demonstrates that at the most, the best we can achieve as social theorists is to agree on a range of community characteristics. This suggests that interpreting those practices that show a sense of community in Cybertown will add to the debate about what community is. What is possibly more interesting is why the residents are so concerned with convincing not only me, the researcher, but also themselves that Cybertown is a community. Conversely, it is often the Internet researcher that is criticised for being uncritical about the notion of community:



Their detractors often accuse them of being overly excited to assign 'community' as a descriptor for their favourite and newly discovered online discussion group.  
(Watson, 1997: 103)

However, in this instance it is those who inhabit online space who are using the community metaphor and as a result this chapter concerns itself with explaining: first how it is that community is perceived to be such a desirable attribute by Cybertown's residents; and second, the mechanisms by which they work towards its continued existence.

So what is community? Amit and Rapport (2002) sum it up by explaining that the term community is one of the most difficult and ambiguous terms in the social sciences. Implying that community only continues to exist in general usage because it evokes 'a thick assortment of meanings, presumptions and images' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 13), they conceptualise it as possessing an emotional resonance rather than a utilitarian one. Considering it a 'slippery notion' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 14), they suggest on the one hand that the notion of community is too vague and too variable to be of much use as an analytical tool, and on the other that the appeal of community is dependant on tensions between what they call 'experiences of sociality' and 'platitudes of collective belonging' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 14). This explanation is useful when asking what Cybertown residents consider their community to be. This is because for the residents of Cybertown, it is both a social place and a cultural framework within which sociality is enacted. In other words these two issues come together to facilitate the resident's understanding of community as a meeting of place, people and culture, and one that incidentally exists on the

Internet. On the other hand community in Cybertown can be quite utilitarian, since one outcome of community building is the growth of a specific aspect of social capital, that is, trust (Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 1993). As I explain in the next chapter, combine a high level of trust with a pool of like-minded individuals and this can be translated into close friendships. It seems obvious at this point to state that not all social places on the Internet are communities, and indeed as Papadakis points out it is not obvious why some online groups gel and become communities, while others do not (2003: 45). Much of the debate around virtual communities and the Internet discusses the potential of Internet communication to compliment real-world interaction (Pruijt, 2002). For example, Stone suggests that online communities are ‘incontrovertibly social spaces in which people meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both ‘meet’ and ‘face’ (1995: 85). Certainly my examination of Cybertown reveals two factors that are instrumental in providing the conditions for constituting Cybertown as a virtual community: the first is the formation of social capital and the second is the development of the software driving the technology<sup>1</sup>.

### **Private Social Capital and Trust in Cybertown**

Why do Cybertown residents invest so much time and effort in building their virtual community? The answer lies partly in their accumulation of social capital, and partly in their use of it to facilitate friendship ties. My argument here and in the next chapter is that there is a strong correlation between social

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<sup>1</sup> Previous chapters have explained that the Internet is a social technology that does not exist outside of society and culture (Crang, 1991; Hillis, 1999; Hine, 2000; Keeble and Loader, 2001; Schaap, 2002).



capital, community-building, the formation of friendship ties and trust.

Bourdieu developed the concept of social capital in the 1970s and the early 1980s, connecting it with his theoretical ideas on class. Bourdieu (1986) argued strongly against the view that society can be analysed simply in terms of classes and ideologies. In particular, much of his work concerns the independent role of cultural factors, and Bourdieu uses the key concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' – where fields are sets of relations, and habitus are socially acquired, embodied systems of dispositions and/or predispositions – to explain how status and distinction structure society rather than class. Bourdieu's analysis explains the nature of the power relationships that structure fields. Power relationships are the outcome of individuals manoeuvring for status and distinction, or 'symbolic capital' rather than social capital (1984). According to Bourdieu, social capital is a resource based on group membership – those relationships, networks of influence and support that individuals can tap into by virtue of their social position. In contrast, symbolic capital can be defined as status, accumulated prestige or honour. Importantly, the possession of symbolic capital can shift an individual's position in the habitus.

One example of this kind of social capital might be knowing your boss socially - outside of work – thus being able to gain an advantage by having a direct line to them. From this perspective, social capital becomes a resource that can be used to further/advance an individual's social interests and it is useful currency in social struggles between individuals. Bourdieu (1986) also uses the label social capital to describe networks of advantageous contacts that are created and maintained at both individual and group level. In my analysis of community in

Cybertown Bourdieu's ideas are useful on the one hand because they facilitate an assessment of the symbolic aspect of social capital (of which more later), yet on the other hand they are problematic because they do not specifically address issues of trust. More useful in this respect is Putnam's (1993, 1995, 2000) theory suggesting that trust is one component of social capital that can be exploited in the practice of symbolic power and symbolic exchange (the other components of social capital being reciprocity and social networks). To put it simply, Bourdieu is concerned with distinction and status arising out of conflict and struggle between individuals, whereas Putnam is concerned with connections and consensus arising out of trust.

Putnam's (1995, 2000) innovative work illustrates how social capital represents the foundation of our connections with each other. Drawing on evidence (including close to 500,000 interviews) in the US, Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbours, and our communities – in other words – our social capital is breaking down:

social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them [...] a society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital  
(Putnam, 2000: 19)

The simple argument of Putnam's work is that we need to reconnect with one another, and that reconnecting increases social capital. My argument is that individuals in Cybertown are reconnecting with each other, and, that those connections are facilitating social capital, community-building, the formation of friendship ties and trust. As Wellman and Gulia's (1999) analysis of virtual communities points out:



virtual communities provide possibilities for reversing the trend to less contact with community members because it is so easy to connect online with large numbers of people  
(Wellman and Gulia, 1999: 356)

In one of the few studies I found linking volunteerism in virtual communities with social capital, Ginsburg and Weisband (2002) found that the volunteer effort results in the growth of social capital that increases ties and personal relations to other community members. The potential of social capital to increase ties and personal relations was earlier discussed by Blanchard and Horan (1998). When referring to acts of helping in virtual communities that include giving information and providing social support they explain how a single act of helping can be 'easily viewed by a large community' (1998: 297-298). This is because in virtual communities, information is the main type of help that is exchanged (Rheingold, 2000) - and people often offer unsolicited information and help to the whole group, rather than to a single individual. Thus the outcome of many single acts of helping all seen by every group member have the effect of reinforcing interpersonal ties within that group. This has the knock-on effect of increasing trust among community members. Trust as Putnam (1995: 67) indicates is one of the essential components of social capital. Those within the community also share trust. Fukuyama (1999: n.pag.) builds on Harrison's (1985) concept of the 'radius of trust' (1985: 7-8) to explain how all groups producing social capital have to have a certain circle of trust, that enfolds those individuals 'among whom cooperative norms are operative' (Fukuyama, 1999: n.pag.). Uslaner introduces a similar concept, which he describes as generalised or moralistic trust where he explains how 'X trusts, rather than X trusts Y' (2002: 27).

As well as characterizing the individual's relationship with the collective, the presence of this generalised public trust in Cybertown is one factor that can facilitate the formation of closer interpersonal ties like friendship. The mechanism for this is simple to understand. Most theorists are agreed that social capital rises out of the individual's relationship with the collective, through active citizenship and civic engagement (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 1995). However, social capital is not the only thing that rises out of the individual's relationship with the collective or community. Putnam explains how life is easier in a community where there is a large stock of social capital. This is because 'networks of civic engagement [...] encourage the emergence of social trust' (1995: 67). Yet this public trust can also facilitate trust in relationships between individuals who are within the radius of trust. This is the mechanism that operates in Cybertown to foster the ideal conditions for the establishment of friendship between individuals. Pruijt's (1997) definition here is closest to the way I employ the concept of private trust. In an early paper (Pruijt, 1997) he suggested that the Internet itself was social capital because of its equalising potential. In other words it allows individuals to collectively accomplish those things that would be impossible to achieve alone. Pruijt (1997) talks of substantive technical discussion among professionals that leads to problem solving). For Pruijt 'the capability to overcome these tasks is social capital' (1997: 63). Of course it must be remembered that the Internet can also be seen as a source of inequality that can be manifested through the digital divide (see earlier chapters). More recently, discussing social capital and the equalising potential of the Internet, Pruijt (2002) points out two perspectives on



social capital: the public good and the private good. He suggests that online communication offers isolated individuals opportunities for increasing their private social capital. That is, through participation in communities, they increase the chances for getting in touch with people who share their interests, thus increasing the likelihood of forming friendship ties (Pruijt, 2002).

Isolated workers struggling with some problem can use the Internet search engines, like Google, to find people anywhere who would be likely to be dealing with the same problem in order to share their experiences. More and more, users are creating personal homepages on which they state their professional and other interests. In this way, they increase the chances for getting in touch with people who share their interests. Participation in communities, such as Usenet Newsgroups, can lead to contacts as well. The new contacts can support workers who want to preserve their professional identity in the face of divide-and-conquer organizational politics.  
(Pruijt, 2002: 112)

Social capital, like community, is notoriously difficult to quantify, either by definition or by measurement. As Coleman points out 'social capital is defined by its function' (1988: 98). We see the result of social capital, not the social capital itself. Rather than being a singular entity Coleman describes it as being recognisable by two common elements: the first involving some aspect of social structures; the second is the facilitation of certain actions within the structure, the latter being applicable to both individual or corporate actors (Coleman, 1988: 98). In other words we cannot measure social capital; we can only assess its impact in facilitating certain social actions that in its absence would not be possible. There are links here to SNA (Social Network Analysis), the study of social relations among a set of actors. In SNA social relations can be thought of in terms of dyadic relations, or network variables, for example:

- Kinship: brother of, father of
- Social Roles: boss of, teacher of, friend of
- Affective: likes, respects, hates

- Cognitive: knows, views as similar
- Actions: talks to, has lunch with, attacks

SNA maps and measures relationships and flows between people, groups, organisations, computers etc. What is important is that the nodes in the network are the people and groups while the links show relationships or flows between the nodes. SNA provides both a visual and a mathematical analysis of complex human systems. Wellman *et al* (1997) argue that SNA is useful for the study of computer-mediated communication. However, while much of SNA focuses upon quantitatively deduced models of social structures, my own research in Cybertown is informed by a more qualitative, relational approach, and my focus is on the meanings that Cybertown individuals relate to their social relationships there.

It must be remembered that without certain technological factors the establishment of virtual communities would not be possible. As I explained earlier, software development has been extremely important in facilitating social uses of the Internet. When computer hardware and software come together this creates the technological condition that allows individuals to consider the possibility of establishing virtual communities in cyberspace. The important question here is why some individuals do just that. It seems reasonable to suggest that isolation might be an explanatory factor, not just geographical isolation, but those isolated from the production of social capital. However it is essential here is to remind ourselves, as Schaap (2002: 102) warned, that when exploring social phenomena online we often overlook the fact that the underlying technology is socially constructed. This is because technologies are constituted by the social relations and discourses of everyday life because they are embedded within that life. As Crang *et al* explains, 'technologies are not



self-contained entities that impact on the social' (1991: 2). In fact the designers and developers of Cybertown are embedded in the real world and are both influenced and constrained by the cultural rules and discourses that drive their everyday lives. Hence their community design reflects those discourses. To take the argument one step further, the design affects the way in which the technology is used. When designing software to drive the virtual community of Cybertown its developers are also affected by ideas of what community is, and perhaps more importantly, by ideas about what community should be. Effectively these perceptions of community are incorporated into the design. For example, the following extract taken from the Cybertown information board is a statement of intent about the kind of place that Cybertown was designed to be:

Cybertown is a free, clean, safe community on the Internet...Citizens are actively involved in the social structure of the community and with each other, making Cybertown a true community that is created by its own residents.

(Appendix A)

But we also have to remember that what is occurring is not simply a one-way process. In Cybertown, the design aims about the way in which it is both perceived and (re)produced as community have largely been met. On the other hand, we need to be aware that tools are not always used only for their designed purpose; they can also be used in ways their inventors never envisaged<sup>2</sup>.

Consequently, notions about 'what community is' and 'what community should be' and 'how community is practised' are not only the outcome of design aims, they are also indicative of the everyday practices of the residents of Cybertown.

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<sup>2</sup> I can think of a million and one examples – the shoelace that is used to tie up a pair of trousers, the pencil that is used as a bookmark, the chair that props open a door or is used as a missile etc.

With this in mind I address several key issues that evoke a ‘thick assortment of meanings’ (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 13) that illustrate the residents’ understanding of community. For example, common values and culture, shared identity, affiliation, and support, community norms and the means to enforce them, and reciprocity in social relations. At the same time I explain how residents also continue to emphasize the ‘realness’ of Cybertown as community, once again relating back to earlier arguments about the relationship between the real and the virtual/imaginary.

The first section of this chapter is an overview of literature that addresses the concept of community. I begin by first exploring more traditional attempts at classification (Hillery, 1955; Tönnies, 1957; Wirth, 1938). Following that I link postmodern and late-modern discourses of community to earlier discussions of place and space. While introducing the suggestion that community is better approached as a range of categories, rather than a finite definition (Pargman, 2000), I examine other established analyses that help identify community as a system of meanings (Williams, 1983). And contrast that with the suggestion that community is often perceived as a boundary-marking symbol within which the study of culture is articulated (Cohen, 1985; Geertz, 1973; Howard, 1997). I continue by looking at theories of culture (Bodley, 1994; Cronk, 1999; Tylor, 1871) and the relationship between culture and community.

After that I move on to examine community in Cybertown in terms of the subjective meanings given by residents to community in the context of their lived lives online. This examination constitutes the second section of this



chapter. In offering ethnographic data I illustrate how my research has identified several features of community in Cybertown, and section two teases out some of the meanings given by residents to these themes in the context of their lived life online: The Starting Point Of All Togetherness; A Shared Identity; Social Glue - The Rules That Bind; Community Spirit; Belonging And Affiliation; About Other Cultures and Sociability: A Sense Of Belonging. Like Christensen, 'I have found descriptions and uses of cyberspace that are mostly of a specific, common and practical kind' (2003: 13).

### **Section One: Themes of Community**

There is much debate about what the term community means, and also about 'virtual community' and whether it truly exists or not. The latter has emerged, some suggest, in response to wide-reaching changes in our understandings of the former. On occasion a more simple case is made, such as that by Wellman *et al* who suggest that 'when computer networks link people as well as machines, they become social networks' (1996: 214). Put simply, it is fairly straightforward to visualise a number of computers loosely tied together resulting in the creation of a network of friends, family and other acquaintances. Others believe that virtual community is simply an over-used, inaccurate description credited to CMC (computer mediated communication) when it moves beyond the everyday purpose of communication:

'Community', is quite possibly the most over-used word in the Net industry... the presence of a bulletin board with a few posts, or a chat room with some teens swapping age/sex information, or a home page with an e-mail address does not mean that people are forming anything worthy of the name community.  
(Brown, 1999: n.pag.)

However this argument is founded upon a more long-running debate about the nature and existence of community that has been ongoing since the late nineteenth century. What adds extra complexity is the fact that even before research on virtual communities began at the end of the twentieth century, more general notions of 'real' community had undergone a theoretical shift. Against a background debate about the end of modernity, community is no longer conceptualised in terms of physical and geographical location:

Telephones, automobiles, and airplanes have long meant that it was possible to establish and sustain important social relationships outside of one's immediate physical neighbourhood.  
(Smith and Kollock, 1999: xi)

Although the word community was originally used to portray rural communities, and then later neighbourhood communities there is still no universal definition of the term. Indeed in one early attempt to arrive at a classification, the sociologist Hillery (1955) catalogued no less than ninety-four different definitions. Early twentieth century theorists introduced the idea that community is an older, more traditional, organic form of social organisation (Redfield, 1930). Also that this traditional type of social organisation underwent drastic change during the process of industrialisation and modernisation (Tönnies, 1957; Wirth, 1938). Tönnies contrasted these two types of community, giving the name *Gemeinschaft* to the more traditional form. He supported the idea that this drastic change has led to the more distant, unsympathetic and lonely interpersonal relationships of the modern industrial world. Tönnies dubbed this modern type of society *Gesellschaft*. He suggested that both types of community were based on different social and moral codes. For example, those that prevailed in traditional community are based on the informal codes of



family, kinship roles and custom. Those in modern society are by contrast based on personal ambition, the self and class interests. However, Tönnies dichotomy of community and society or *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* does not tell us the whole story. Without a doubt, community has changed and continues to change yet there is no evidence of the existence of a simple historical progression from traditional community to modern society, as Tönnies seems to suggest. This is possibly because community is not a simple singular description. For example not all traditional communities are the same. In the same vein it must also be noted that not all virtual communities are the same either.

The end of last century saw postmodern and late-modern discourses of community suggesting that the trend towards industrialisation and bureaucratisation has moved even further, not only transforming community but also dissolving it. The shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* is not only complete, but *Gesellschaft* is being overtaken, resulting in a complete loss of traditional norms and values. As a result both individual and group identity is no longer secure. Both are increasingly fragmentary and transitional, calling into question the notion of a fixed, solid sense of self and of community.

Highlighted by a culture of reflexivity this loss of self has been related to new communications technologies and globalisation by Giddens, (1991). What comes out of his argument is that this loss of identity leaves individuals more and more isolated in social terms, 'in the sense of an embedded affinity to place, community has indeed largely been destroyed' (Giddens, 1991: 250). As identity is increasingly disembedded, individuals are freed to search for new ways of constructing identity and community, ways that make them belong and

feel part of a social continuity. As Beck puts it, 'the persons we experience as significant others are no longer restricted to those we know from direct encounters within a local community' (1996: 156). The important thing here is that despite the separation of physical distance, people can now share their experiences through the proliferation of ICTs (information and communication technologies). Again this is linked to my earlier explanation of how changes in modernity have led to a more reflexive monitoring, that has resulted in the transformation of space and place (Cairncross, 1997; Giddens, 1991; McLuhan, 1964), and an increased demand for more fluid social networks (Bauman, 2000). It has been suggested that the natural outcome is that people will now look towards cyberspace in their search for meaning. Many theorists see the virtual community on the Internet as emerging out of this desire, echoing Sennet's view that modern capitalism drives people to seek identity in community:

One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community. (Sennett, 1998: 138)

Yet this still does not answer the question of what community is, only where it can be newly found. At the beginning of this century Pargman pointed out that almost all attempts to define community start from the notion that it can be condensed into a singular 'hard description' (2000: 21). Considering this task impossible, he suggests instead that we consider a 'soft' description allowing us to think about community as a range of categories, rather than a single category:

I instead suggested that community fruitfully could be thought of in terms of category membership. Community will thus not have any absolute, fixed boundaries but instead only more or less central members. The intermediate conclusion is that some instances – some communities – will be less and other more typical and better satisfy community criteria.



(Pargman, 2000: 254)

Other established analyses help identify community as a system of meanings, distinguished by two characteristics: the first is that a community is a collection of members, who, secondly, share common ideas. Even so, neither of these notions are uncomplicated as Williams (1983) explains: on the one hand a community is an actual social group, for example the people of a particular geographical district; yet on the other hand community also refers to a particular quality of relationship, for example a sense of common identity. Williams goes on to explain that although it is possible to quantify who belongs to a community or to generalise about a community identity, it is not possible to do either in isolation. The reason is that these two notions 'bleed together', unevenly and unpredictably, resulting in community becoming understood as a social group that is bound together by a particular quality of relationship (Williams, 1983: 75). This relationship can be problematic, since it may possibly conjure up the image of a number of individuals who have actively decided what community means to them. For this to happen some degree of negotiation and compromise between group members would be necessary, otherwise a sense of common identity could not be achieved. Yet Bauman suggests that the opposite is true - rather than this sense of common identity being the result of consensus or agreement, it is only an 'awareness' that can be conceived as the 'starting point for all togetherness' (Bauman, 2000: 10).

Despite intense debate around these matters of common identity, there is still no definitive answer to what community is. Most often it appears to be a 'convenient analytical metaphor that has been extended far beyond the bounds of

acceptable reasoning' (Howard, 1997: 115). For some, like Cohen, community can act as a boundary-marking symbol, since 'people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity' (1985: 118). As a result of this thinking, anthropologists structure their ethnographic practice round a study of these meanings systems that also act as boundary marking symbols. Consequently they tend to justify their fieldsite as a context for their study of what is 'out there' (Geertz, 1973), often using the fieldsite as no more than a frame within which a study of other cultures is articulated. Subsequently ethnographic fieldwork has tended to occur 'in' communities, rather than being 'of' communities. Yet this framing characteristic of community is itself under debate, leading some to ponder that community can no longer be accepted as simply a 'ready made social unit on which to hang analysis' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 14).

Community also tends to be associated with generally positive attributes such as interpersonal warmth, shared interests and loyalty. As Williams explains, community is a 'warmly persuasive word' that 'seems never to be used unfavourably' (1983: 76). Consequently it follows that belonging to a community can be seen as a desirable and positive attribute. But if community begins with ideas about what community should be, then to know more about community, anthropologists need to know what these ideas are, and why community is such an evocative word. This was a point that Bauman (2000) also addressed in his work. He explained that some words evoke a particular 'feel'; he continued by suggesting that community is a word that has a 'warm' feel:



To start with, community is a 'warm' place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frost day [...] In here, in the community, we can relax – we are safe, there are no dangers looming in dark corners (to be sure, hardly any 'corner' here is 'dark'). In a community, we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken back. We are never strangers to each other.  
(Bauman, 2000: 1)

As can be deduced from this description, belonging to community is good and desirable, and in contrast - not belonging to community is bad. This is because it evokes the idea of a warm, safe and comfortable place with common values and culture. These are important because the interpretation and negotiation of community attributes are manifested through culture:

Culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can causally be attributed; it is a context, something within which [interworked systems of construable signs] can be intelligibly - that is, thickly - described.  
(Geertz, 1973: 14)

Thick description was a phrase first used by Geertz to explain how important the social context of action is. This is more easily explained by looking at the example of a wink. A thin description would be one detailing the physical mechanics of the wink; in contrast, a thick description would be one which aims at understanding the context of that wink, for example it might mean that someone is attracted to us or that they are trying to communicate secretly. The task of the anthropologist is to explain the social context of the practices and discourse, like the wink, that take place within a culture, and this requires thick description. The modern definition of culture, as socially patterned human thought and behaviour, was originally proposed by anthropologist Edward Tylor

and comprises an open ended list with 76 major elements. According to his definition, culture is:

[...] That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.  
(Tylor, 1878: 1)

This definition has been the subject of significant theoretical debate among anthropologists ever since. Table 6 shows the diversity of the anthropological concept of culture.

**Table 6: Diverse Definitions of Culture (adapted from Bodley, 1994)**

<b>Topical:</b>	Culture consists of everything on a list of topics, or categories, such as social organization, religion, or economy
<b>Historical:</b>	Culture is social heritage, or tradition, that is passed on to future generations
<b>Behavioural:</b>	Culture is shared, learned human behaviour, a way of life
<b>Normative:</b>	Culture is ideals, values, or rules for living
<b>Functional:</b>	Culture is the way humans solve problems of adapting to the environment or living together
<b>Mental:</b>	Culture is a complex of ideas, or learned habits, that inhibit impulses and distinguish people from animals
<b>Structural:</b>	Culture consists of patterned and interrelated ideas, symbols, or behaviours
<b>Symbolic:</b>	Culture is based on arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society

These eight diverse definitions of culture relate to the five characteristics of community I introduced earlier in this chapter. This relationship is not



straightforward, since each of these five characteristics can be placed in one or more categories, as can be seen in the table 7. Column three lists the main Cybertown themes that form the basis for my analysis of community in Cybertown.

**Table 7 : The Relationship between Culture and Community**

<b>Community</b>	<b>Culture</b>	<b>Cybertown Themes</b>
<b>1. Common Values and Culture</b>	<b>Normative, Topical and Symbolic</b>	<b>Themes of Community</b>  <b>About other Cultures</b>
<b>2. Shared Identity</b>	<b>Structural, Behavioural</b>	<b>The Starting Point Of All Togetherness: Shared Identity</b>
<b>3. Affiliation and Support</b>	<b>Mental, Functional</b>	<b>Belonging And Affiliation</b>
<b>4. Community Norms and the Means to Enforce Them</b>	<b>Behavioural, Functional and Normative</b>	<b>Social Glue – The Rules that Bind</b>
<b>5. Reciprocity in Social Relations</b>	<b>Historical, Behavioural and Structural</b>	<b>Friendship</b>

What people think and how people act are central to culture, making mental processes, beliefs, knowledge and values significant elements of culture. Often however, the difficulties of studying culture are that people often say one thing,

but actually do another. In other words there is a broad departure between the acknowledged rules for correct behaviour and how people act (Cronk, 1999; Bodley, 1994). Thus it is important to not only listen to what people say, but also to understand how they act, using thick description to capture those beliefs, knowledge and values significant to the culture under study. This discussion of social and cultural norms also feeds back into my earlier comments on social capital because 'effective norms can constitute a powerful form of social capital' (Coleman, 1988: 104). As I have explained, there is a functional relationship between culture and the community/environment, and this is sometimes seen as being reciprocal. For example if we apply Steward's (1955) argument when investigating the operation of cultural and social norms we can argue on the one hand that culture prescribes how an environment is to be exploited, and on the other, that for its successful exploitation the environment prescribes certain ways of doing things (1955: 37-41). As Ingold further suggests, 'culture is a framework not for perceiving the world, but for interpreting it, to oneself and others' (1993: 53), and this interpretation can be laid bare by a thick description of it, as in the next section.

## **Section Two: Themes of Community in Cybertown**

The residents of Cybertown display a number of strategies for both understanding Cybertown as community, and for working towards maintaining that status. This often begins with the simple expedient of telling newbies that Cybertown is a community, as this scene illustrates:



*It was late in the UK, about midnight, and when I arrived in Cybertown zosma, kwibus and artady were sat chatting about their day. All four of us at that time held various jobs working in RP hood<sup>3</sup>. zosma, kwibus and artady had been to the Plaza earlier to look who was around. On this occasion they had met<sup>4</sup> a newbie called perdu and helped her to move into our neighbourhood. Reminiscing about their early Cybertown days, kwibus gently reminded artady, 'I remember when you were always so good to me as a newbie many moons ago. I'll never forget and that's why I try to help other newbies in turn'. This remark elicited general agreement since artady was one of the first residents I had met along with zosma, and they had both helped me a lot too. Just then perdu arrived and was asked what their first opinions of Cybertown were, 'oh, it seems a great place...very helpful...everyone is so full of community spirit'. 'It is', replied kwibus, 'and if you need anything just ask...dutypigeon will help too'. After that perdu asked how to buy furniture so we explained how to work out how much Cybertown cash she had to spend and then kwibus got up and took her to the shopping mall.*

This scene was typical of those played out during my time in Cybertown, revealing close linkages between helping, community and relationships. It illustrates the typical paths taken by individuals towards community building and friendship formation. In this small sample, we have four individuals who

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<sup>3</sup> Hood is often used in conversation as a shortened form of neighbourhood.

<sup>4</sup> These meetings are not always accidental. The next chapter deals with purposeful 'friend-finding' expeditions that are mounted by groups of residents in order to widen their circle of contacts.

not only have close friendship ties, but also work for the community: *kwibus*, *artady*, *zosma* and *dutypigeon*. The first three meet *perdu*, who is then introduced to the fourth, me. Two weeks after this incident *perdu* met another newbie called *sarin*, who was introduced to each of us as well. In this sample there is now a pool of six individuals with ties to each other. These ties are further reinforced by first *perdu*, and then *sarin* taking a job in Real Places Neighbourhood that necessitates close cooperation with the original four. Both of these job appointments were made by one of the original four. At this point *perdu* and *sarin* become part of the collective effort to support and enforce community norms. In addition they are enfolded within a particular 'radius of trust' (Fukuyama, 1999: n.pag.), that can materialize as private social capital to facilitate those friendship ties that I discuss the next chapter.

As well as *perdu* being drawn into a web of relationships, there were positive consequences for the original four helpers. Ginsburg and Weisband (2002) found that helping newcomers produces social capital that can be seen in the residents' socialisation to the shared norms, obligations and expectations of the virtual community. The design of Cybertown itself assists in this process since it is continually (re)constructed as a place that is familiar and that resonates with ideas around the symbolic intimacies of home and of belonging. As I explained earlier, Cybertown is described by its creators as 'a virtual community on the Internet' and as 'a true community that is created by its own residents' (see Appendix A). What appears to be happening in this instance is a kind of auto-suggestion, i.e. if the word community carries with it certain feelgood factors like those I mentioned earlier (warmth, intimacy and belonging) - then being told



that something is a community leads to both an expectation and a belief that those factors exist. Not only that, but it must feel right to call Cybertown a community. As Watson explains:

The primary reason why CMC researchers like Rheingold came up with the community metaphor to originally describe online interaction forums is that it *feels* right. Subjectively, when one looks into a virtual forum, it *feels* like what one knows as a community.  
(Watson, 1997: 105, original italics)

To explore this tendency to associate Cybertown with community I asked residents to describe Cybertown. What was notable about their answers was that those whose descriptions contained the word community were using it as a positive, desirable adjective. This of course is exactly what Williams (1983) and Bauman (2000) were suggesting, that community is most often seen to be a positive feature. Despite this the residents themselves often had problems explaining exactly what community meant to them. This is no surprise given the difficulty that theorists have in describing community even after more than a century of study and continuing revision of the concept. However, what was most obvious was that their answers most often associated community with the two categories I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: the experience of sociality; and the notion of collective belonging. The following remarks illustrate this well:

*Cybertown is a community. I have a home there.* [phaet]

*Cybertown is a community place...on the net.* [heze]

*Cybertown isn't just a website – it is a community.* [sadr]

*It's a structured community, where you give and receive from others.*

[dabih]

*It is an online community where all is like in RL. [zosma]*

Even those who did not mention the word community were still associating Cybertown primarily with these same two features. For example, *porrimer*, one resident explained, ‘it is a great place to meet people’. *acamar*, another long-term resident, says ‘it seems like a small town where everyone knows each other’.

To further explore the relationship between community and culture outlined earlier in table 7, I also began discussing with the residents whether they perceived Cybertown to be a community, and if they experienced a sense of community in the context of their lived life online. The question of exactly how they experience this sense of community is one I address later in the chapter. First, my preliminary enquiries only attempted to identify whether a sense of community was present or not. Adhil (24 months) is only one of many residents I interviewed about Cybertown, yet her comments are typical:

*I love Cybertown because it is populated with wonderful caring helpful people who care about their community and are dedicated to keeping it a friendly place. [adhil]*

In this extract *adhil* identifies herself as a member of this community by expressing warm feelings of belonging and love towards it, much the same attributes that Williams (1983) and Bauman (2000) identified as being associated with notions of community. In addition she is a resident who feels an affinity with other ‘wonderful, caring, helpful’ residents. Here we can identify



the two notions of sociability and collective belonging that Amit and Rapport (2002) described as being essential to our understandings of community. In particular the emphasis on friendship is interesting, and is a major theme of the next chapter. However, what is most noteworthy about *adhil*'s comment is the recognition that belonging to caring friendly communities is not easy. It necessitates hard work and commitment to shared ideals to keep communities in this state. As I will explain, simply attaching the label 'community' to a gathering of individuals is not enough to make it a true community. There is also a need to consider what the social practices are that illustrate this sense of community. In this respect *adhil*'s questionnaire answers gives us an important clue; she has a job in Cybertown. For many residents, being employed in Cybertown equips them to actively participate in community-building practices. Saying that 'we as members of the community will not tolerate actions that are not nice', *adhil* is declaring that her recognition of ownership and shared ideals are highly significant to her. Later she explained to me how she actively works to uphold them by willingly giving up her time to work as a Neighbourhood Deputy because, 'the rules are there to enforce a family, friendly community'.  
[*adhil*]

Two strands of thought can be identified from all of these comments so far: first that Cybertown is recognised as a community by its residents; and second that they also recognise it as a place. With regards to the latter point this is simply further confirmation of my earlier argument that Cybertown is a place that is no less real than any other experienced by its residents, and reminds us of Lefebvre's (1974: 135) view of space as a social product. Rather than space

being *a priori*, a vacuum waiting to be filled, it is produced through social action. However, as we are aware, simply asserting that somewhere is a ‘place’ or a ‘community’, or indeed a ‘community place’, does not make it so. Hence the important question to consider at this point is what are the social practices that illustrate this sense of community? In order to do this it is helpful to consider the notion of community as incorporating a range of categories such as was suggested by Pargman (2000). This is because in Cybertown several themes do run together, collectively resulting in a common understanding of community and culture. These themes can if necessary be further grouped into Amit and Rapport’s (2002) two broader categories of sociality and collective belonging. However, in order to facilitate a more intensive understanding of what is happening in Cybertown I will examine each of Amit and Rapport’s (2002) range of categories independently, even though it must be pointed out that in reality these categories run together so closely as to be almost impossible to tease apart. Discussed earlier in this chapter, and further illustrated in table 7, these categories can be generally identified as common values and culture, shared identity, affiliation and support, community norms, and finally, reciprocity in social relations. Elements of the first of these, common values and culture, can be seen in Cybertown residents’ common understanding of Cybertown as being a community. The second, shared identity (table 7) forms a basis for the community-building practices that are explained in the next section.



## **The Starting Point Of All Togetherness: A Shared Identity**

*Everyone was at the staff meeting in the Real Places (RP) neighbourhood staff house. There was quite a lot of noise because people were busy saying hello and catching up on news before the meeting proper began. I caught sight of zosma and shouted 'hi!' She didn't hear me because of the sheer volume of noise – there were nearly forty of us and our conversations were tumbling up the dialogue box so fast it was difficult to keep up. naos the Neighbourhood Leader (NL) got up to speak, beginning with the good news first: 'Welcome to RP hood staff meeting. I have a special announcement to make - congratulations to segin who has been awarded a special prize for contributing most to our community'. Everybody clapped and there were whistles and shouts from the floor. segin had developed a neighbourhood newsletter - filled with notices, gossip and handy tips for navigating Cybertown, and decorating homes. He distributed it weekly to all those who lived in RP. These kinds of strategies were considered valuable for producing and maintaining our community identity, as were the weekly staff meetings themselves. Every member of staff was expected to turn up, effectively ensuring that everyone got to know each other. Because of the differences in time zones these meetings were held 9pm GMT one week and 6am GMT the next to maximise attendance.*

*After this special announcement we got down to the business of organising a neighbourhood party. These occurred on a regular basis*

*(every six to eight weeks) and were seen as beneficial because they involved everyone in the hood. At these parties old friends could catch up with news, and newbies could be introduced to everyone else in the hood. Organising these neighbourhood parties was a job for those who worked in RP, and there was usually no shortage of volunteers. At this particular meeting various tasks were allocated, for example decorating the staff house, sending invitations to ordinary residents and VIPs, arranging the music, advertising the event on notice boards, and finally organising games and prizes. After the meeting some staff members drifted away, but others stayed to talk and plan for the party. It was June, and the last party had been in April at Easter time. centrop was excited because she was in charge of planning the notice boards, 'we need to make sure that everyone knows what a nice place RP is and get some community spirit going'. Asked what that meant, she explained how it was important to let everyone know how we all 'pull together' in RP. This was because 'everyone knew each other and was so friendly and helpful that RP was a great place to live'.*

Excerpt from field log, June 2002.

What I have just described is a typical staff meeting. Throughout the three and a half years of my fieldwork I attended them on a weekly basis. What these meetings have in common can really be condensed into two general themes: first the staff members' expression of shared identity, the second of the community characteristics identified in table 7; and second, their willingness to invest time and effort in community-building practices. The first of these, a shared identity,



has been explained by Bauman (2000) as being more of an awareness of a common identity rather than something that can be reached through negotiation, agreement and consensus. In other words it is the starting point of all togetherness rather than the end result. He further describes it as being a pre-existing condition and therefore non-negotiable. In explaining what is happening in Cybertown Bauman's (2000) account is useful because from his standpoint we can see that everyone at the staff meeting lived and worked in the same neighbourhood, and as a piece of information this is non-negotiable - it is a known fact. As a 'starting point for all togetherness' (Bauman, 2000: 10), working in Cybertown, and recognising the resultant shared identity can be seen as providing a platform from which community building practices can be launched from within the Neighbourhood. In other words – a shared identity – the second of the community characteristics that I outlined in table 7 is related to the structural and behavioural definitions of culture. This ties in to my earlier observations that this sense of common or shared identity is *a priori*, as evidenced by interviews and also in the more mundane everyday conversations between residents. From these we can appreciate that a sense of belonging is a common trait, and also that there is a great deal of pride and delight in that belonging. If we start from this point, what then becomes interesting is that somehow this sense of belonging is translated into a process of community building that moves on from that shared identity. This process is particularly evident among the staff members, in the positive way that community spirit is encouraged through loyal service to the community over time, but also through their community based projects such as neighbourhood parties and newssheets like the one that *segin* was involved with. As well as identifying the second

characteristic of community at work here, shared identity (table 7), we can also identify other characteristics of community at work here: common values and culture; affiliation and support; community norms and the means to enforce them. This reinforces my earlier statement that the five characteristics of culture that I identified in table 7 are impossible to tease apart.

### **Senior Staff 'All Change'**

This extract from a neighbourhood newspaper reports on staff promotions and movement within a neighbourhood called Real Places (RP). The tone is positive, friendly and encouraging, and also illustrates a selection of those five characteristics of community, in particular, affiliation and support:

*Well, it has been all change once more in the RP Senior staff. Our illustrious NL zosma has been given a promotion to Colony Deputy (long overdue - Ed) and naos has been chosen to succeed her. zosma was the driving force behind the turnaround in RP's fortunes as a hood. She is a very passionate and motivating person, who genuinely cares for those around her. This shines through as she surrounds herself with people who care as much as she does. This is obvious in her choice for NL. naos was the obvious choice for NL of RP, she too cares a great deal for everyone around her and goes to great lengths to be there for people. Her attitude will guarantee that RP continues the success that zosma began.*



*zosma will be missed around the hood, but dD, our Colony Leader, has seen fit to allow her to look after Real Places with her colony level duties, so she will still be around.*

*At the ND [Neighbourhood Deputy] level there have been a number of changes, boozyBird, ear, colpaz, chattery and jaeTee have all left their positions, colpaz to pursue other opportunities and boozy, ear, jaeTee and chattery are very very busy RL at present. We hope to see them all around the hood though and wish them all the very best for the future. annec, brOdLe, nightwolf123 and kitty all move up from BL [Block Leader] positions to ND positions within the hood. Maintaining the hoods [sic] drive of promoting from within. Congratulations to all of you.*

*Each member of staff brings something different and unique to the hood and with the team now in place, there is no stopping us!!*

*phad (ND Real Places / Editor In Chief RP Times)*

*naos, the newly promoted NL of RP also wrote an article extolling the friendliness of Virtual Worlds and how she was made welcome and got to know people there. She sees the staff as a team who pull together, with them contributing something special to a sense of shared identity in Cybertown. But, there is more here, because*

## **naos Story**

*When I first came to Cybertown I started in a neighbourhood where I talked to no one but the BL of the block I lived on. I was soon given a job but I felt ready to move up from BDs...so I started looking for a BL position and came across someone in the Employment Office and was told go fill out an application in Virtual Worlds. So I did.*

*Zosma hired me as BL of New Jersey and after two weeks of being a BL I became ND.*

*At first I wasn't sure if I was truly ready for this new position, but with lots of patience from Zosma and Phad and them answering my millions of questions I got the hang of my job quickly.*

*To my surprise and pleasure I became a trainer and began hiring and training people. I will have to say this is my favourite part of my job since I get to meet the new staff and make new friends. When I first came to RP it was in the process of being rebuilt. I look at it now and say wow!! Look at how far we've come.*

*I work with the best people and have the best NL I have seen. She is always there for questions and everything is soooo organized. Where else are forms and the hood home site updated as quickly as you can say jackrabbit. If you don't know Phad is responsible for that. I don't take this for granted especially with friends and family outside our hood, and see the disorganization and upper staff not being there for residents or staff. Now I feel truly at home in Real Places and its sooo nice to walk*



*into a party or room and be given a warm welcome by all. Which I hope others feel this too.*

*The warmth here was started by our wonderful NL and has continued down the line. Even when I venture out of the hood people are begging me for positions here since they have heard nothing but wonderful things about our wonderful hood. Unfortunately they usually want BL or ND and I take pride in promoting within and I can't hire NDs so that one isn't even an option.*

*But in closing I just wanted to say thanks to everyone for being great and making me excited about logging into Cybertown everyday.*

**Naos (ND Real Places)- taken from the RP Hood message board**

Cybertown residents portray not only this sense of belonging and commitment, but also a sense of not wanting to leave. Residents exhibit a long-term commitment to Cybertown, on average my respondents have lived in Cybertown for 28.86 months. Of my 86 respondents only three (3.5%) had lived there less than 12 months, with the longest living there for 57 months. Even *maculoso* (1 month) had this to say, 'being in Cybertown involves a specific commitment to the 'town' itself'. As we saw in the previous examples much of this commitment is reflected in service to the community, particularly through taking on jobs in maintaining Cybertown as a clean, family environment, and this service is 'rewarded' by both Cybertown cash and by status. As *zathras* said, 'Cybertown is a community with a unique socio-economic system'.

Yet this is not the full story. Such close ties of ‘belonging to Cybertown’ develop that residents feel very proud to have been chosen to work in Cybertown. For example when I asked residents what were the best experience they had ever had in Cybertown, nineteen (22%) mentioned something to do with their jobs there. Of these experiences there appear to be three categories; getting a first job, getting promotion, or being specially rewarded as an Elder or a Templar (see Appendix E). *fomalhaut* felt particularly proud after a few months in his first job as a BD when his BL moved to another block and asked him to move too ‘because he liked the way I worked’. My research indicates that working in Cybertown is a very social activity, illustrated by *wasat*’s proudest moment. It was, as he explained, ‘the day I got my first job, working for the two people that are now my best friends in CT and real life’. Others suggested that receiving a job promotion was their best experience as in the following examples:

*Becoming NL in Real Places.* [acrux]

*The day I made ND.* [caph]

*When I got my Arcade Chief job.* [gienah cygni]

*When I got my first ND job.* [hadar]

*Getting my neighbourhood deputy job...and a responsibility I enjoy.*

[homam]

*So far, being promoted to ND.* [lesath]

*My first promotion from BL to ND.* [tabit]



One resident, *phaet*, who could not decide whether it was his promotion to BL or being awarded Elder status that was his proudest achievement. Being granted Elder or Templar status is worthy of comment because it is a very special reward, it is not awarded automatically, it has to be earned (Appendix E). Not only that but you have to be nominated for ‘excellent and contributive behaviour’ (Appendix E) and your Colony Leader has to sanction your application. Furthermore there are strict rules that remind everyone:

These titles are a privilege and are by no means automatically awarded and even after being awarded they may be revoked by a majority vote of the Council for actions or public communications unbecoming their status.  
(Appendix E)

The position of Elder or Templar is bestowed in a ceremony held in the City Hall, and the Honourees are given a special avatar that reflects their new status. Residents place great value on these awards. On one occasion I accompanied *zosma* to receive her Templar status. There were about a hundred people in the City hall, although not all of them were there to receive an award. Cybertown’s Mayor, *hawk*, and the City Council were presiding and in the crowd I could see *phaet* who had come to pick up their Elder status. *hawk* called the awards one by one from a roll of honour, and each was accompanied by cheers and shouts of congratulations. Many of the honorees went on to private celebrations after the public awards were over. RP hood hosted a party for its own honorees, among them *zosma*, *phaet* and *zathras*.

Later, when I asked *zathras* how his life in Cybertown has changed, he explained how he enjoys the ‘extra respect’ that this status in the community gives him, saying ‘I feel extremely proud; I have worked hard to keep Cybertown a happy, safe, friendly place. This makes me feel like I have

succeeded' [zathras]. During my own fieldwork I worked long hours with other city employees and was similarly honoured when I was awarded Elder status. It was a proud moment for me and my name is still written in the list of Cybertown Honourees<sup>5</sup>.

### **Social Glue - The Rules That Bind**

The unique self-regulating system in Cybertown encourages the community members to take hold of their community and to police and maintain it in a form they find acceptable. As well as producing social capital, this fourth community characteristic, effective norms (table 7), are also very important in fostering a deep sense of belonging and affiliation. The city awards status and receives loyalty; it gives safety and is celebrated in return. Cybertown residents love their city. In order to gain a fuller understanding of these issues I asked the residents why they liked spending time in Cybertown. Typically the responses confirmed the following:

*I feel important, I have a job, and I am important to the block I run.*  
[phaet]

*The people, and the responsibility I have as a contributor to the city.*  
[phad]

*The people and my job ...mainly the people. They make you laugh + cry + smile and just generally make me happy to be in Cybertown.*  
[mekbuda]

*It is very sociable and there are lots of nice people and its fun talking to them, working with them etc.* [churner]

*I get a feeling of belonging to a special group.* [jubbah]

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<sup>5</sup> Full list is available from: <[http://www.cybertown.com/dailynews2/HighRankList\\_2089.html](http://www.cybertown.com/dailynews2/HighRankList_2089.html)>.



These ideas all combine to result in a level of commitment to the community that is admirable, although occasionally some are concerned whether others give too much time, for example *acrux* who worries 'how much time online some of these people must spend to achieve what they do in Cybertown'. And indeed some do spend a great deal of time per day. Of those I interviewed, the average time per day spent in Cybertown per day was 3.19hrs, with the shortest only 30 minutes, and the longest 10 hours. When asked if their time spent in Cybertown was too long 73% typically said no. Most enjoyed their time spent working or meeting friends. *porrimer* (4hrs per day) said 'I don't think there is such a thing as too much time when you are having fun and meeting great people'. Of the remaining 27% who agreed that they did spend too long in Cybertown, various explanations were given to rationalise their commitment to Cybertown. For example *acrux* (3hrs per day) explained:

*Yes it's a long time but it's time well spent, I like the people, the interaction, the work and the friendships. I like to feel as I am really contributing to the community.*  
[acrux]

Others were more ambivalent and yet are keen to spend even more time there, as Maia (1hr per day) explained:

*The answer is both yes and no. Yes: if you are taking too much time out of life and its getting in the way of other things. No: I don't let it get that way, and sometimes I find I don't spend enough time there because I miss contact with my friends and that's often the only way to get in contact with them.*  
[maia]

My research indicates a strong relationship between the time spent online and involvement in the community, a notion expressed clearly by *adhil* (2hrs per day), 'I would like to spend more and become more involved in the community'.

This comment was quite typical of the conversations I had throughout my time in Cybertown. Indeed for my interview as a BD I had to commit to spending at least an hour per day in Cybertown. This commitment grew as I moved further up the employment ladder.

As I explained in earlier chapters, working in Cybertown demands a particular level of commitment, and duties – which mainly include patrolling your own ‘beat’ and checking that no-one is breaking the rules that ensure a friendly safe environment. In addition there are the weekly staff meetings. There was a general staff meeting for all staff, and also one for NDs and above. These were times of affirmation of community ideals (as in the staff meeting I described earlier), raising problems and chatting, as well as the official business.

Occasionally input was asked about the suitability of job applicants, and about staff performance. In some cases personality clashes between workers would be discussed and people changed partners so as to always make the work environment happy and friendly. On one such occasion I was the ND covering a block in which the BL constantly complained about their BD not completing their designated tasks. It was easy to switch the BD to work in another block with another BL and the problem was eliminated. Those with greater commitment to Cybertown were rewarded with a promotion, which often demanded even more time to be spent online.

Thus when these daily figures are combined with the longevity of Cybertown experiences, in which the typical Cybertown citizen has lived there over 28 months, a picture begins to emerge of strong commitment to Cybertown ideals.



Time spent online is a major factor in allowing trust and commitment in personal relations to develop (Clark, 1998; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Whitty, 2002), a theme I expand on in chapter six. Yet time spent online also allows a more personal relationship to develop between the individual and their community. This coincides with the time element involved in being awarded special status in Cybertown, where for example as Elder, you must have at least 5,000 experience points and a minimum of one year valuable contribution with good record, (remember that experience points are earned by visiting Cybertown every day, and the amount earned rises the higher up the employment ladder you go). For the next award, Templar, 10,000 experience points and at least two years valuable contribution with a completely clean record are needed. Hence not only do residents visit Cybertown over long periods but they also invest a great deal of time in committing to the community ideals and constitution for which the community rewards them with special status.

In providing an official framework of rules that govern behaviour, the city constitution (see Appendix C) - Cybertown itself is being prescriptive. Yet it also does something very important - it hands over those rules to the residents themselves and makes every single one of them accountable, because the people in Cybertown are 'the ones dynamically creating the content' (Cybertown Constitution, Section 5, see Appendix C). Employees and ordinary residents are aware of the rules. Working towards upholding those rules as we have already seen fosters a true sense of community spirit among employees. Consequently, the particular roles and meanings surrounding the Cybertown constitution and its enforcement by a community workforce are performing a similar role to

friendship in Cybertown (see chapter six). These rules are uniting the community under an umbrella of social and moral codes that are cohesive in nature and thus provide a very important function as social glue (Pahl, 2000). Similarly, it is those relationships that are conducted within the particular city guidelines and workplace that lead to a collective 'sense of belonging, the starting point for all togetherness' (Bauman, 2000: 10). These ideas are reflected in the following fragment, a short piece about community spirit written by an Ambassador for Cybertown called *jaber*:

### **Community Spirit**

*A few words of wisdom someone once told me...*

*When you first found out about Cybertown, you probably joined straight away, not fully understanding what it was all about. Then you probably went berserk moving from block to block, to see where you wanted to live. Probably within a day or two someone may of [sic] offered you a job, as long as you moved into their 'block'. After this novelty wears off, you will probably discover the Flea Market, and then start buying and selling like there was no tomorrow, and this will probably be a lot of fun. Eventually you will get bored with this, and then log in a bit less often each week, until a time comes that you just cannot be bothered, after all it is all fake really.*

**WRONG**

*There is a side to Cybertown that is not fake, there is a side to Cybertown that you cannot see, cannot truly hear, cannot touch, but it is real, not*



*fake, there is a side to Cybertown that is priceless, guess what that is - Community Spirit, Friendship, even Love (for some).*

*How do you obtain these lofty ideals? simple...follow these steps;*

*1) Use your Block Message Board to talk to people and read other people's messages.*

*2) Use your Neighbourhood Message board as well*

*3) Visit peoples houses and leave them messages.*

*4) When someone in the Neighbourhood goes to the trouble to have an auction, party or competition at their place, go there, visit them and join in the fun.*

*What else can you do?,*

*THINK BEFORE YOU JUMP, here is an example*

*When someone offers you a job outside your block, stop and think. Why are they offering you a job?...They probably do not know you that well.*

*If you are interested in a job, talk to your Block Leader first. You might find out that they happen to be looking for a Block Deputy. If you are a Block Deputy already, well there are quite a few blocks in your*

*neighbourhood, and I am sure your Block Leader would love to see one of their Block Deputies get promoted within the hood. A manager or leader is there to inspire, motivate and develop their staff. A BD*

*becoming a BL is a compliment to the BL who managed the previous BD as well as recognition of that person's abilities.*

*Lets be fair here, everyone wants to have a better job, and if you have the ability and the will, you will be encouraged to progress, develop and grow.*

*If you are a Block Deputy, you are a mentor to the residents in your Block, but if you are already doing it anyway because you 'enjoy it', then why not try to make it official and join the team.*

*Personally, I look at Cybertown as a place to meet people, and if there is no one around then by all means do a bit of buying and selling to pass the time, or tour the 3D worlds, or play some of the games, etc. But the sooner you understand the true and priceless quality that Cybertown really offers then the more you will really become truly immersed in it.*

*It's a place where the jobs exist to make it easier for friendships to be formed. It's a place where community spirit is fostered and grown. It's a place for having fun...being active and meeting people...you never know who you may meet or how valuable a friendship will be formed unless you try.*

**[jaber]**

Earlier chapters have explained how Cybertown is similar to many other large cities in the world. Yet unlike other cities of its size in the world it has a system where the inhabitants themselves actively police the city in order to maintain their shared ideas of community. To further explore the relationship between the rules of the community and residents' perceptions of community I asked what their thoughts were on the Cybertown constitution, a set of formalised rules governing behaviour there. As expected the responses reflected the interdependent nature of the two, because the rules helped maintain the residents' ideas about what community meant to them:



*They are there to protect us, particularly the younger members of the community...like in real life people don't always go by society's rules, if they did I'd be out of a job. [acrux]*

*Also the members of the community will not tolerate actions that are not nice! [adhil]*

*We have things we have to uphold to be part of this community. We are needing guidelines in life. Basically the golden rule is be nice to others respecting who they are and their opinions. You have free speech as long as it is respectful. No foul language, or abuse to people and you could not be invited to stay anymore if you don't respect the people there. [markab]*

*I believe that Cybertown maintains a fair and dispassionate approach to every citizen. Each citizen can live by those rules and regulations just as in any real world constitution. As with any other set of rules they can be used to prosecute rule breakers or they can be used to protect those whom they serve. [zaniah]*

Interestingly, the residents' ideas also sometimes appear to reflect a more nostalgic view of the community that can be seen in the efforts of its residents to enforce them, as well as in their comments to me:

*I think it's a really marvellous idea to think that a world so perfect could be created. [polaris]*

*I chose to 'live' and work in Cybertown because I felt it is a great way to communicate with people I'd otherwise never meet and make friends all over the world, no matter what race, nationality, age, social status or sex they have. [zaniah]*

In another typical comment, wezn goes a step further and suggests that relationships in Cybertown might even be organised more perfectly than in other places, and that there is a lesson to be learned from it:

*It's a world of people who come from a world of different lands, and join together as if we were all one of a kind. It's a place where there is no bashing of races, creeds or religions. People live together in a community of harmony and love. Much of what the real world could use a lot more of [wezn]*

## **Belonging And Affiliation**

The third characteristic of community, belonging and affiliation, is the subject of this section. As we have already seen, Cybertown does have private houses that are set out in blocks, neighbourhoods and colonies etc. It is primarily the job of block deputies (BDs) to encourage both a sense of belonging, and of community in these small places that lead to a larger sense of community. And they have a certain role to play in doing so. This is partly the terms of their employment. Each resident who chooses to have a house has an address engendering a sense of belonging. A place to put roots down. In part Cybertown promises these people that they WILL make friends in Cybertown.

BDs are encouraged to introduce themselves to everyone on their block, as illustrated by *jaber's* explanation of community spirit (see page 262). They are also aware of when people move in or out, and how many empty houses they have. Conscientious BDs win prizes, and may scan their blocks every day to check who is around. When a previously empty house becomes occupied they go along to leave a message of welcome, and they often check their blocks to see if residents are actually present in their homes by making personal visits. Again they may organise get togethers and invite people to chats with other block members.

They may also actively recruit newbies in the same way as friend-finding expeditions. BDs are required to inhabit the block they look after. Newbies are not only greeted but see the 'friendly' face of Cybertown that its more



experienced residents promote. Newbies are given help/assistance in html coding and uploading images to their houses, and they are offered their BD as a contact point - a bit like a support worker or social worker. These newbies are then taught about friendship and community in Cybertown. This has the effect of creating a pool of residents from which new BDs are often selected. BDs are trained to promote a particular image of Cybertown, similar to a corporate image. They are proud of Cybertown and its friendliness and the work they do.

### About Other Cultures

Cybertown offers a rich kaleidoscope of different cultures living in harmony mainly because of the constitution, since 'Cybertown includes a set of Colonies where people are not discriminated against on the basis of personal beliefs, sex, age or race and a place where people are not attacked for these things' (Section 2, see Appendix C). This has the effect of promoting several of the community characteristics outlined in table 7: common values and culture; shared identity; affiliation and support; and community norms. It is the ability to enforce these norms and to prevent discrimination that helps to maintain Cybertown as a community. My research indicates that discriminatory incidents occur only seldom, with *zibal* explaining, 'I'm Jewish and have never had any problems'. However another resident, *canopus* has suffered problems in the past:

*[...] Being German there are several prejudices to deal with and I encountered them even in Cybertown. I just entered a room and when I mentioned I'm German some guys just shouted, "Heil Hitler damn Nazi" to me or called me a "German being". That wasn't nice for sure but things like this luckily doesn't really happen a lot in Cybertown [...]*  
[canopus]

In the main residents are encouraged to share information that hopefully leads to the removal of ignorance, consequently promoting understanding and removing bigoted antiracial feelings. One of the major ways in which this information is disseminated is through the sharing of RL celebrations such as Christmas, Yom Kippur or Ramadan etc. Residents overwhelmingly support these ideas, as *kajam* explains 'I feel that, Cybertown being as much of a culture mixing pot, its great', a view seconded by *hoedus*, 'there are people from almost every nation around the world I can think of...it's great'.

Whenever there is a celebration of like Christmas the residents decorate their homes, and the staff decorate the message boards and organise parties, gatherings and meetings. Often competitions are held to see who can broadcast this information best, as *gianfar* explains:

*We often run story and poetry contests which give the citizens a chance to explore and display their inner feelings about these holidays. Many who come here do not have someone to share these holidays in real life ...Cybertown gives them the opportunity to share them with their online friends. [gianfar]*

Similar competitions are held between blocks and neighbourhoods to discover whose message board is the best. For example at Christmas, message boards and homes are decorated with Santas and snowmen and even Christmassy music are linked into the pages. Not surprisingly these events last for 24 hours, making it more fun as *acamar* explains:

*We all join in from everywhere...on New Years Eve we all celebrate all night 'cos some are in yesterday and some in today.... but in ct we are all in the same time. [acamar]*

These linkages to everyday life are also found in other ways, such as celebrating both RL birthdays and Cybertown birthdays (these are the anniversaries of the



immigration date). These reinforced links to everyday offline life result in Cybertown becoming a part of that everyday life, as *lesath* says, 'It's a part of my 'world'-why wouldn't such things happen in CT as well?' *procyon*, agrees, 'I think its great :) we all live in real life and we can all share our festivals and holidays together', as does *sargas*, 'holidays help to bring in the air of pulling in chronological and real events inside the virtual world'.

## **Real Events**

Occasionally external happenings create a wave of action in Cybertown. For example the events of 91 resonated through Cybertown for many weeks. One unfortunate consequence of this interweaving of on and offline worlds resulted in the sacking of BD *phisk*, who had posted a controversial message about 911 on the message boards, which reads as follows:

*To all,*

*Yes what happened Tuesday was a terrible thing. Myself I am not surprised the United States takes it in the butt again. How many US citizens have been kidnapped... what about Locaee, Scotland... How about our Navy ships... How about our embassies in other countries... What has the US done??? Busted a few guys and put them in prison for the rest of their life... What is not understood with these extremist groups is that they want their ideas to become the world's ideas and any other people are infidels. So things have escalated to the point of no return. Myself personally genocide is a wonderful thing and all these groups*

*should be hunted down, every man woman and child. Feed them all pork and pop a cap in their ass.*

[phisk, BD]

Yet *phisk's* sacking was not automatic, several days of discussion preceded it with many other members of staff upholding the right to free speech, and appreciating that his initial hurt and anger at such an atrocity may have prompted his response. His refusal to temper such statements with compassion and hope led to him being sacked on 30 September. The community had taken action to uphold the standard of the community.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has examined the reasons behind Cybertown residents' use of the community metaphor to describe a set of attributes and meanings applicable to Cybertown that are similar to what we know as community in the offline world. Against a background debating the end of modernity, community is no longer conceptualised in terms of physical and geographical location, and both individual and group identity is no longer secure. Sennet's (1998) view that modern capitalism drives people to seek identity in community, can be extrapolated to help us understand virtual community on the Internet as emerging out of this desire to relocate individual and group identity. By locating this argument within the wider theoretical debate around community this chapter has recognised a range of community characteristics that can be widened to encompass virtual community. These are: The Starting Point of All



Togetherness; A Shared Identity; Social Glue - The Rules That Bind; Community Spirit; Belonging and Affiliation; About Other Cultures; and Sociability, and a Sense of Belonging. More importantly this chapter has explored the reasons why the residents are so concerned with convincing not only me, the researcher, but also themselves that Cybertown is a community, concluding that they gain certain advantages from this position. Although they tend to assert virtual community as possessing an emotional resonance rather than a utilitarian one, they understand community as a meeting of place, people and culture. Here my examination of Cybertown revealed two factors that are instrumental in providing the conditions for constituting Cybertown as a virtual community: the first is the formation of social capital; and the second is the development of the software driving the technology. My argument here and in the next chapter is that there is a strong correlation between community-building, the formation of friendship ties and trust, since as I have explained (Putnam, 1995: 67), trust is one of the essential components of social capital. All groups producing social capital have a certain circle of trust that enfolds those individuals 'among whom cooperative norms are operative' (Fukuyama, 1999: n.pag.; see also Harrison, 1985). Private social capital emerging out of public trust in Cybertown is one factor that can facilitate the formation of closer interpersonal ties like friendship.

## Chapter Six: Friendship in Cybertown

*If I had the to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.*

E.M. Forster, Two Cheers for Democracy.

### Introduction

In much the same way as residents insist that Cybertown was a ‘real’ community, they are also emphatic about the ‘realness’ of the friendships they form there. Indeed every aspect of friendship in Cybertown is highly prized and celebrated. From meeting friends, making friends and looking for friends to moving friendships offline - these experiences are widely shared with others. Moving outwards from intense dyadic relationships friends are introduced to other friends resulting in an ever-increasing network of social relationships that strengthen the sense of belonging and shared identity in Cybertown. Notions of friendship and community are strongly related and interdependent in Cybertown lending support to Pahl’s (2000) suggestion that friendship itself may be a particularly potent form of ‘social glue’ (2000: 5). At the same time it is also a reflection of Aristotle’s more classical view of friendship in which friendship involves ‘sharing in a common project: to create and sustain the life of a community’ (Smith and Smith, 2002: n.pag.). As with community, the debate around ‘what is friendship?’ has never reached closure in that there is no absolute definition yet available in anthropological literature. For this reason Cybertown is extremely interesting. There appear to be such strong bonds of friendship and the residents seem so certain of what these bonds mean that their



explanations of this phenomena feed back into contemporary debates about friendship, enhancing what we already believe to be true.

However, in Cybertown friendships are the predominant type of relationship and it is interesting that many of the friendships begun in Cybertown are successfully moved offline. This is because it prompts us to ask why friendships are moved offline: or indeed, to ask what this tells us about what might be missing in offline life. As with my earlier analysis of community, social capital may be an important factor. I have already explained that although social capital is a difficult factor to measure, its presence can be detected in various ways; that is, because it increases personal ties and trust at both group/community and individual level (Putnam, 1995). My analysis indicates that in Cybertown individuals are coming together in a virtual community on the Internet resulting in an increase in their experience of social capital. Following Pruijt's (1997; 2002) line of reasoning this has two observable outcomes: first the increase of public good social capital exhibited through community-building that I explained in the last chapter; and second the increase in private social capital that gives rise to successful friendships and their movement offline that I explain in this chapter. Yet more is at stake here because this movement offline has the further effect of increasing social ties and private social capital offline as well as online. As said before this increase in social capital cannot be measured but the resultant increase in personal ties and trust can be identified by investigating what the residents of Cybertown themselves understand to be the outcome of negotiating, maintaining and moving their Cybertown friendships offline.

Much of the research in this area has been involved looking at how online interaction can increase social capital in offline communities (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; Wellman and Hampton, 1999a; Wellman *et al*, 2001), particularly in the area of education (Daniel *et al*, 2003; Timms *et al*, 2003), where the offline community is already established and the online community is merely an extension of this. Pruijt himself looked at the already established community of computer professionals (2002), concluding that many workers can benefit by connecting to their peers in the same organisations, particularly with the increase in social capital. However, there is little or no research in looking at what happens to social capital on/offline if it is the virtual community that is established first as in the case of my own research. By addressing this deficiency this chapter adds a vital dimension to the ongoing debates around social capital, personal ties, trust and friendship in virtual communities and in 'real world' communities.

This chapter begins with an examination of a range of contemporary theories of Western notions of friendship (Allan, 1989,1996; Bell and Coleman, 1999; Jerrome, 1984; Pahl, 2000; Rawlins, 1983, 1992). This examination establishes an understanding of the nature of friendship before moving on to determine the nature of online friendship. Here I tease out some of the general themes associated with friendship as a relational and contextual notion: its nature as voluntary, informal and private; ideas of trust, reciprocity, intimacy and disclosure; and friendship as sanctuary or social glue. After that I introduce Giddens' (1991, 1999) notion of the free-floating pure relationship, and offer



Rawlins' (1983, 1992) interactional analysis of dialectical friendship as a counterpoint to Giddens work.

Continuing this theme, and developing a more in depth analysis of friendship in Cybertown I reveal the complex interaction between trust, intimacy, disclosure and time unfolding as these relationships develop by examining the work of other Internet researchers (Clark, 1998; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Whitty, 2002). Explaining that time spent online is an important factor in the development of sustainable relationships I assess whether Giddens' ideas about pure relationships are the most relevant to an analysis of relationships in Cybertown. In addition I describe and analyse the unique friend-finding expeditions that I experienced in Cybertown. One important concept for friendship in Cybertown is the exchange of gifts, and these can take the form of gifts of time or gifts of objects or artefacts. Therefore the next section investigates the function and meaning of gift exchange in Cybertown. In it I explain how the gift of time can be fed back into wider discussions about modernity and the routinisation and universalisation of time.

Lastly, I look at moving friendship offline. My findings support the view that relationships that begin online rarely stay there (Parks and Floyd, 1996). As such, cyberspace provides ways to widen individual webs of personal relationships, transforming the ways in which we meet, negotiate and reproduce friendship. These friendship relationships are often sustainable offline, a sign that they are not adversely influenced by their movement between online and offline settings. This is interesting because it further suggests that there is little

or no difference between settings, reinforcing the view that cyberspace is becoming increasingly embedded in everyday lives. As Parks and Floyd explain 'if cyberspace is becoming just another place to meet, we must rethink our image of the relationships formed there as being somehow removed and exotic' (1996: 93). Following this line of thought, this chapter reinforces earlier arguments that Cybertown is not a place outside of everyday life, and explains that friendships formed there are negotiated and maintained in similar ways to those in other social areas. As well, I explain how this drawing together of both Cybertown and offline life to become part of the residents whole social world contributes to another interesting development: the treatment of Cybertown as a 'real place' as an enabling factor in the transfer of that increased private social capital, experienced by residents as increased personal ties and trust, to their offline social spheres.

### **Cybertown: The Importance of Friendship**

For the majority of Cybertown inhabitants friendship is very important and indeed much of the ethos of Cybertown appears to be based upon notions about friendship. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the strength and persistence of notions of friendship and friendliness in Cybertown, I began by examining the conversations of its residents in which they often talk about being friendly, or meeting new friends. For example one day on the Plaza I got talking to a resident called *jabu*, who worked as a Neighbourhood Leader - he had also just come to the end of a term as a Cybertown Ambassador, and took the opportunity to explain how friendly Cybertown is:



*Cybertown has enabled me to meet, interact, and become firm friends with an amazing amount of people from all over the world and from all walks of life. I am always looking for the opportunity of making friends and getting to know people more. Cybertown gives me a place for having fun and doing that. That is why I always say...be active and meet people...you never know who you may meet or how valuable a friendship you will make unless you try.*  
[jabu, 48 months]

This tendency to highlight friendship or friendliness is also reflected in the interviews that I carried out. These are extremely interesting since in them every single resident used the adjective friendly or some derivative, whether describing themselves as friendly, Cybertown as a friendly place or even talking about having a friendly conversation. In fact when asked why they lived in Cybertown, more than two thirds (71%) of my informants gave only one of two reasons. The first was making new friends, and the second was meeting established friends. Other reasons included the great community spirit, gaining knowledge about other cultures, having fun, and chatting. In addition, many Cybertown inhabitants also pride themselves that Cybertown is 'more friendly than in everyday life'. This theme of friendship with its warm comforting overtones runs deeply through Cybertown philosophy, in very similar ways to the warm feelings about community that I discussed in the last chapter. As I will explain, these ideas about friendship and community are both closely related and strongly interdependent.

Having discovered the joys of friendship, many Cybertown inhabitants wish to share this discovery with others. As a result many Cybertown inhabitants actively encourage people to immigrate so that they too can experience the wonderful warm friendly atmosphere in Cybertown. For example one third of

the eighty-six residents that I interviewed had been encouraged to immigrate by friends. Many of these in turn invite other friends or mention Cybertown when travelling around the Internet. One example is *acamar*, who not only lived in Cybertown but also had a large circle of friends in a different virtual community. When that community closed down *acamar* persuaded seventeen of her friends to join her in Cybertown, and they duly moved in and put roots down in the same neighbourhood.

This belief in the ‘friendliness’ of Cybertown works in other ways too: not only are people being encouraged to immigrate by their friends who already live in Cybertown, but also any new immigrants or ‘newbies’ are actively encouraged to be friendly and to make friends. This was how I met *jabu* on the Plaza as he was there looking for new friends. In my own case it was *zosma* who taught me how to make friends in Cybertown, because being friendly is seen as an important and positive social accomplishment. Yet in order to analyse these notions of what being friendly or making friends is about, it is first important to understand what friendship is, and to identify some common themes.

### **Friendship: A Brief Outline of Contemporary Theories**

As Bell and Coleman (1999: 3) point out, friendship is often characterised in terms of western/non-western distinctions that loosely follow an informal/formal dialectic. Contemporary western societies tend to define friendship in terms of enjoying each other’s company and find the notion of usefulness or utility difficult to place within friendship unlike non-western definitions. An



interesting explanation of these western/non-western distinctions can be found in Smart's (1999) work on friendship and guanxi in Chinese society. Further, these differences call into question the usefulness of a cross-cultural comparison of friendship patterns. However, since my sample population was predominantly Western with 78% from the US and UK alone, I have confined this analysis to traditional western sociological and anthropological notions of friendship.

Studies of friendship are, according to Jerrome (1984), Allan (1996: 107) and Bell and Coleman (1999) long overdue. In part this is due to the difficulties involved in describing exactly what constitutes friendship, since it is both a relational and a contextual concept (Paine, 1999: 43). However, by looking at contemporary sociological and anthropological texts on friendship it is possible to identify a number of common threads. For example friendship is often categorised as having three essential facets: that is, voluntary, informal, private and personal.

The first of these - friendships as voluntary - means that they are chosen and achieved unlike kinship ties that are ascribed. Friendship and kinship are similar in that both types of relationship will break down if the codes of behaviour governing them break down. The difference between them is in where these codes that govern behaviour come from, and what the consequences are of breaking these codes. For kinship relations there are both social and legal sanctions in place that compel social interaction in particular ways, as for example 'mother and daughter' or 'father and daughter' relations are expected to do. These relationships are highly formalised in both practice and legal

regulations. Punishment for breaking these codes as in the case of sexual relations between father and daughter carry both social stigma and punitive consequences. Similar kinds of social and legal sanctions are not in place for friendship. Instead, Paine (1999: 41) explains how remarkable friendships are because rules are imposed from the inside, not the outside, meaning that they are not formalised by social and legal rules to the same extent that kinship rules are. Yet those rules rely to a great part on a common social and public understanding of what friendship is, a concept neatly summed up in Rawlins' claims that friendship is an 'institutionalised non-institution' (1992: 9). Bell and Coleman explain how friendship thus 'becomes a special relationship between two equal individuals involved in a uniquely constituted dyad' (1999: 8).

In addition, the ties of friendship remain in place only as long as sentiments of closeness are reciprocated for their own sake (Allan, 1996: 84; Giddens, 1991: 90). In spite of ideas of reciprocity there is no compulsion to reciprocate. As Paine (1999) explains each person gives freely of themselves and hopes to receive 'in the same spirit', thus friendship is 'constituted and maintained on the basis of good faith' (Paine, 1999: 42) rather than external sanctions. In other words friendship is a closed environment of reciprocity, trust and confidences that are constantly internally evaluated. As a result friendship changes and develops over time. The reason for these changes as explained by Rawlins in his concept of the 'dialectical theory of friendship' (1992) is a failure to mediate the contradictions inherent in such a relationship, a subject I will expand on later.



Some theorists like Willmott (1987) tend to look at friendship in terms of informal support networks, and their focus is on the influence of class, age and gender in the development of these friendships. Yet friendships may also be seen as a place of sanctuary in today's disembedded society. As Giddens explains (1991), this is often couched in terms of the alienating effects of modern society, with individuals attempting to acquire meaning in their lives by taking control over something familiar in their private sphere, in this case friendship. However, Giddens (1991) suggests there may be another factor involved, i.e. that intimacy has a feelgood factor. He explains it thus:

It is not just based on negative reactions to an enveloping world of large-scale systems and social processes. Privacy makes possible the psychic satisfactions that the achievement of intimacy has to offer.  
(Giddens, 1991: 94)

Despite these explanations it may be that the notion of friendship itself is changing. B. Anderson's (1999) account for the Social Affairs Unit describes friendship as becoming diluted as it is increasingly pushed out of the social institutions such as business and more often seen as belonging to recreation. B. Anderson (1999) sees this as being detrimental although others see this as a positive attribute, suggesting that one of the defining characteristics of friendship is an eagerness among friends to give up their free time to each other in the absence of external pressures or constraints (Asher *et al*, 1996). This giving up of free time might also be seen as a gift exchanged between friends, a theme I explore later in this chapter. This notion of friendship being mediated in the absence of external constraints seems a popular one. For example, when Jerrome suggests that 'friendship offers relief from the strains of other role performance' (1984: 696), she explains how friendship has become a luxury

whose benefits are social as well as personal. These social benefits are explained in part by Pahl, who as I pointed out earlier sees the function of friendship as acting as an important 'social glue' (2000: 5). Yet others, for example Bell and Coleman (1999) and (Paine, 1999) suggest that by teaching us how others see us, friendships teach us how to view ourselves. Again, this is a notion Giddens expands on in his analysis of the pure relationship, a subject I explain in more detail later in this chapter:

The expectation of intimacy provides perhaps the closest links between the reflexive project of the self and the pure relationship.  
(Giddens, 1991: 94)

Thus so far we can see that friendships in general provide informal emotional support, advice and material help, and yet it remains true that as Allan says, friendship is 'essentially a personal matter' (1996: 107). It is neither formal nor institutionalised.

However, in practice not all of these elements I have already introduced are present in every friendship:

While there are various things that it might be helpful to know about friendship, it is only through experiencing friendship that we can begin to properly understand, appreciate and practice being a friend.  
(Smith and Smith, 2002: n.pag.)

There are instead a range of qualities that are open to individual negotiation and appraisal. For all individuals, 'each of our friendships is seen by us as touching the self in a unique way' (Paine, 1999: 44). As well, friendship is contextual, consequently someone we acknowledge as a friend in one setting may be denied the label in another, an important issue when looking at moving Cybertown friendships offline. This is because movement between social settings may also



disrupt the innate qualities of friendships. To further complicate the matter friendships not only mature over time but they sometimes also ‘run their course’ (Allan, 1996: 95), and changes in friendship ties are routine and normal. In addition, what seems to be implicit within a traditional definition of friendship is the notion that there should be no sense of social hierarchy between friends; it is essentially a relationship ‘of equality’ (Allan, 1989: 20, 1996; see also Giddens, 1991). As I will explain shortly, not everyone agrees with this notion of equality, for example, Rawlins (1983, 1992) suggests instead that it is inequality that maintains friendships in a constant state of turmoil.

Giddens highlights the significance of trust, intimacy and friendship as central objects of analysis when explaining the transformation of contemporary social life. Suggesting that intimacy is replacing the old social ties, Giddens explains how the transformation of intimacy is affecting ties of friendship and uses the notion of ‘pure relationship’ to elaborate on these changes. Giddens (1990, 1991) prefers the term late-modernity to postmodernity, arguing that contemporary society is a combination of modern and postmodern components rather than as an opposition:

I mean by this a relationship based upon emotional communication, where the rewards derived from such communication are the main basis for the relationship to continue. I don’t mean a sexually pure relationship. Also I don’t mean anything that exists in reality. I’m talking of an abstract idea...emotional communication or intimacy is becoming the key to what they are all about.  
(Giddens, 1999: 61; see also 1991: 88-98)

The understanding of cyberspace as a technological factor in the creation of new social spaces represents a paradigmatic shift in the thinking of social scientists. Rather than computer communication being regarded as a tool, it now impacts

directly on how we conceptualise relationships and social life in contemporary society. The notion of the pure relationship is useful for analysing the nature of friendship in cyberspace because the application of computer communications technologies to the exchange of trust and intimacy in pure relationships has implications for the way trust is understood and managed in friendships in Cybertown. Giddens explains that a pure relationship has three core elements, freedom, commitment and intimacy and is not anchored in the social and economic conditions of everyday life but is disembedded or 'free-floating' (1991: 89). In pure relationships commitment replaces these external anchors, where Giddens describes commitment as a 'particular species of trust' (1991: 93) that has to be earned. By contrast, the dynamics of trust in other traditional forms of relationship are embedded in criteria outside of that relationship, for example, kinship ties, social duty or traditional obligation (1991: 6). The third of Giddens' core elements is intimacy, as he maintains that a pure relationship is also 'focused on intimacy' (1991: 94). Again it is 'active trust' within the pure relationship that is important, since active trust brings about disclosure, and disclosure is the basic condition of intimacy (Giddens, 1999: 61). Intimacy, Giddens explains is not the same as privacy. It is one of the rewards that can be gained from the pure relationship (Giddens, 1991, 1999). However, at the same time the only incentive to develop a pure relationship are the rewards that can be gained from it. Hence, although commitment is always actively given it must always be part of an effort bargain (Giddens, 1991: 93) that depends fundamentally on satisfactions or rewards generic to that relation itself. Consequently individuals commit to the values and practices of a particular friendship, and the friendship is reflexively organised (Giddens, 1991: 91). As a



result the pure relationship is a social relation which is internally rather than externally referential.

Intimacy and disclosure have also been discussed by other social theorists. As Rawlins (1983, 1992) points out, if intimacy is the defining feature of friendship, then they are in a constant state of conflict or 'dialectical tension' (1992: 22) because each individual continually faces contradictory impulses to be protective of themselves, yet at the same time to disclose personal information. Rawlins (1992) goes on to explain how friendships are produced, negotiated and maintained through each friend's perceptions of each other. His dialectical theory focuses on understanding the nature of friendship as a product of the subjective meanings given by friends to their friendship within the context of society. In other words friendship is firmly anchored in society by the meanings friends attach to it. Identifying two general categories of dialectics as contextual and interactional, Rawlins (1992) explains the contradictions in each.

Contextual dialectics describe the position of friendship in the wider context of society, namely the dialectic of the public/private. Accordingly these dialectical friendships are firmly anchored in everyday life through the opposition of the public and the private. Interactional dialectics outlines the contradictions of everyday communication faced by friends as they attempt to interpret each other's words and actions in ways that maintain a stable friendship. Perhaps the most important point Rawlins (1992) makes clear is that interactional dialectics have no ultimate resolution, hence friendships are always in a state of instability. For Rawlins then, there is no equality, only an active recognition that dialectical tensions will never be resolved. Hence like Giddens' pure relationships,

Rawlins' dialectical friendships are reflexively organised. This leads to constant re-evaluation of the meanings of friendship within these dialectics. Like pure relationships it is the skills of safe disclosure that are important (Asher *et al*, 1996). Communication within a close friendship usually involves a sense of 'openness, ease and comfort' (Rawlins, 1983: 1), yet we all guard against the opposite being true, because nothing is more dangerous than a friend without discretion (Rawlins, 1983).

Bruneau (1983) suggests that when continued disclosure has raised the relationship to a particular level of trust and intimacy, then and only then does friendship reach what he calls the commitment stage. It is only after reaching this stage that longer and more frequent interaction in other settings can be sustained, and that friends become more relaxed and expressive with each other (Bochner 1984, cited in Rawlins, 1992: 22). This suggests that established friendships could be more easily transported between different social settings.

Although the literature on Internet friendships (for examples see Clark, 1998; Parks and Floyd, 1996) has not yet progressed to the point where we are in no doubt about the specific social tasks involved in making and keeping those relationships, my analysis of Cybertown identifies important needs in the negotiation of successful friendships, in particular trust and time. As well, my work illustrates how those relationships can be sustained and moved into other social settings, usually offline.



## **Friendship in Cybertown**

Even though Giddens (1999) was not specifically referring to online friendships, his ideas about pure relationships seem to be the most relevant to an analysis of relationships in Cybertown. This is because every aspect of friendship in Cybertown is highly prized and celebrated. In other words the residents of Cybertown appear to enjoy friendship simply because it is friendship, as they enjoy what Giddens calls 'emotional intimacy' (1991: 61). This notion resonates back into much earlier sociological explanations of friendship, for example, as Simmel explains:

While all human associations are entered into because of some ulterior interests, there is in all of them a residue of pure sociability or association for its own sake.  
(Simmel, 1949: 254)

In Cybertown the residents do not initially appear to be interested in any external social conditions that apply to their friends, for example gender, race or age. However, my analysis will explain how this circumstance changes in order to allow their relationships to move offline. This lack of external social conditions ties into conflicting debates around the nature of online relationships: on the one hand this is seen as negative, leading to shallow and impersonal relationships online (Clark, 1998); on the other it is seen as liberating (Rheingold, 1991). These debates in turn reflect other more general debates about 'the nature of modernity and the social effects of changes in communication and transportation technology' (Parks and Floyd, 1996: 80). In this respect my analysis initially appears similar to Clark's (1998) study of teenage chat rooms in which she identifies short-term pure relationships that appear to exist purely to gratify

personal intimacy. What is problematic is her discovery that these relationships have neither trust, commitment nor longevity, as such, Giddens would say that they are not pure, since he explains that in the pure relationship social or economic considerations are not important, but trust and commitment are. In fact he states categorically that 'commitment has a central role to play in pure relationships' and continues by explaining how commitment 'is essentially what replaces the external anchors' (Giddens, 1991: 92). In Giddens terms it is clear that the short-term relationship identified by Clark (1998) have neither trust nor commitment, and cannot be the pure relationships she suggests. Contrary to Clark's (1998) findings, my own observations in Cybertown indicate that very strong trust, commitment and longevity are present in interpersonal relationships. They are in Giddens' sense 'pure relationships'. Yet a more interesting point is that there is also a sense that making friends in Cybertown can be seen as a means of escaping the limitations that external social anchors like gender, age or race might impose, a theme Olsen (1996) explores in her paper on pure relationships among Hungarian academic women. That is not to say that in Cybertown the seeming absence of external social anchors equals an absence of identity. The residents of Cybertown have a very strong sense of both self and community identity, as I explained in the last chapter. These are, as Giddens explains, necessary for the formation of intimacy and friendship:

Intimacy...is only possible between individuals who are secure in their own identities.  
(Giddens, 1991: 95)

That the residents of Cybertown do sometimes see external social anchors such as gender, age and race as limitations is confirmed in many of the interviews I undertook. In fact 78% of residents thought it necessary to comment on this



fact. One of the more typical remarks is illustrated by *thabit* (26 months), who suggested that ‘physical contact is not important in a friendship’. Where Clark’s (1998) study group visited their teen chat room over shorter periods (less than 6 months), many of those in Cybertown have lived there for longer periods of time (9 months or longer). It was particularly interesting that many of those who suggested that this initial lack of awareness of any physical or social anchors is the route to more in-depth friendships were long-term residents, who were possibly more relaxed and experienced with conditions in cyberspace. These long-term residents were also the ones who had thought about the processes involved in meeting and making friends in Cybertown, and had successfully moved their Cybertown friendships offline. As one resident explained ‘I think it’s easier to know people at least on one level to a deeper extent than it is in real life’ [*marfak*, 34 months]. When asked what was meant by ‘deeper extent’ he replied without hesitation ‘we have the freedom to get to know each other more in depth without anything else getting in the way... It’s almost like seeing into someone’s soul’. *marfak* was not alone in supporting this view and the following extracts from my interviews illustrate the liberating effect on friendship that is often perceived by residents as a result of an initial non-awareness of physical or social anchors in Cybertown. After living in Cybertown for 46 months, *taygeta* explains:

*When you meet people online, people you cannot see face to face, you can be more open with them, therefore you learn more about them. In this way, you are able to connect with people who are like yourself in many ways. These are friendships that last.*  
[*taygeta*]

These sentiments were reflected by *canopita*, and by both *polaris* and *jabbah*:

*I can make new friends there. The age, race, nationality or religion doesn't matter at all here and grownups as well as kids can talk, work and play together in harmony.*  
[canopita, 39 months]

*Just being online eliminates the physical entanglement that comes with having the extra physical side to deal with... we want to be with each other for who we are not what we look like.* [polaris, 33 months]

*They [friendships] tend to be more emotional and psychological since you cannot see the person's physical characteristics.*  
[jabbah, 35 months].

Yet another resident, *acrux* (34 months), one of the people whom I got to know very well during my fieldwork talks about how her intimacy and closeness to her best friend is made easier by living in Cybertown:

*We're friendly enough for me to be comfortable talking to him he's close enough to be trusted but not close enough to be clouded by offline issues. He is completely impartial.*  
[acrux]

However, as we have seen, it is disclosure that helps cement friendship (Giddens, 1991), and that disclosure is balanced against the interactional tensions of friends (Rawlins; 1983, 1992). We must always remember that choice is paramount here because friends choose what to disclose and what to retain, based on reflexive ideas of safe disclosure, and the relief of dialectic tension (Rawlins; 1983, 1992). In Cybertown what is important is the commitment revealed towards these friendships through the investment of time and other gifts, an issue I address later in this chapter:

One of the hallmarks of existing friendship is the partners' demonstrated eagerness to commit their free time to one another in the absence of pressures or constraints that are external to the relationship.  
(Asher *et al*, 1996: 370)



This combined with other issues like intimacy, trust and reflexive organisation makes them pure relationships in Giddens' (1991: 88-98) understanding of the term. External social anchors become part of the disclosure process rather than a pre-requisite for the establishment of friendship, and consequently their presence/absence is not vital to the maintenance of friendship in cyberspace – it is however, vital to the movement of those friendships into offline settings. Yet this initial non-disclosure of everyday social anchors seems to allow other facts to be disclosed more easily, as demonstrated by the last extracts. This has two observable outcomes: first it appears to distance Cybertown residents from everyday pressures and constraints, a condition that allows them to commit their free time to one another (Asher *et al*, 1996); and second it seemingly moves friendship in Cybertown towards the commitment stage (Bruneau, 1983) more quickly and easily. The paradox here of course is that while the residents of Cybertown display an eagerness about this distancing from their offline lives, a good proportion of them (36%) have friendships that began in Cybertown and then survived a movement into offline settings. This movement necessitates the disclosure of precisely those subjects whose absence is celebrated online, and that provoke a feeling of isolation from worldly cares, as illustrated by *maasym*'s (21 months) comments:

You actually get to know someone inside, without being judged on appearance and everything else wrong with the world today.  
[maasym]

Another resident callee (31 months) was more blunt:

*I love my friends here, we don't care where we are from or what we are, we don't worry about what is out there in the real world. We are all friends here.*  
[callee]

*callee's* distancing herself from the real world was reflected in other interviews (63%). Many accounted for this by describing Cybertown as a 'safe place', and safety was often discussed in relation to both friendship and community (see previous chapter). However it was clear that for some, their friends in Cybertown provided an escape from the stresses of their everyday lives, as the next two extracts illustrate:

*[Cybertown] is a place that takes you away from normal life. You don't feel nervous if you're afraid of confrontation with strangers.*  
[thabit, 20 months]

*Talking to some of my Cybertown friends helps to reduce some of the stress levels I have to encounter each day.*  
[capella, 15 months]

There were however some who did not share the excitement of these more experienced residents. Although only a small minority (3.5%) of the total, these were those who were worried about this absence of external cultural clues, as *sadr* (6 months) explained:

*I think you might lose that sense of personal conversation, especially when compared to talking face to face.*  
[sadr]

It was particularly interesting that every one of these 3.5% had lived in Cybertown for less than nine months, and thus had less experience of the cultural conventions around meeting people and producing and negotiating friendship there. Although only minor, this difference between those who welcomed these lack of anchors and those who did not, could be explained by simply suggesting that over time residents become more familiar with being online as Whitty's (2002) study shows. However, there appears to be a more



profound difference that is related to the particular way in which people meet for the first time in Cybertown. This is very different to how people meet in their offline lives. Offline, we tend to rely on meeting people in our own social circle, for example at work or at play (by play I mean during leisure time spent in pubs and clubs etc.). Even so we tend to rely on being introduced to each other first. As Willmott (1987) suggests we also tend to gravitate towards people of our own age, experience, race or gender. These are often the social anchors that we recognise easily at first meetings. Inside Cybertown however people begin by speaking to each other and then make decisions on whether to continue those links and develop friendship, if they feel that they have enjoyed their conversation. Starting conversations can be seen as problematic, because how do you meet people initially, and then what do you talk about? It is clear that common ground must be available, and as I explained in the last chapter, intense, shared notions of community often provide that common ground.

However, making friends in Cybertown is something that is not always left to chance. The reason for this is that making friends is very important to Cybertown inhabitants, and this importance has facilitated the development of what I call friend-finding expeditions. Basically a friend-finding expedition entails exploring Cybertown looking for potential friends. Interestingly, these trips are often made in groups rather than singly. In addition these expeditions make no distinction between visiting the public or private spaces in Cybertown. In this respect the plaza and private homes are considered equally fair game, serving as rich hunting grounds. I myself experienced these friend-finding expeditions fairly frequently (perhaps once or twice a week) in groups of

anything from two to eleven. Setting out on an expedition was often spontaneously decided, suggesting that finding friends may be becoming a recreational activity as Anderson (1991) has suggested. The starting point for such expeditions was generally the Plaza where upwards of eighty people would be gathered at any one time. Basically it involves simply starting conversations with strangers without being first introduced. Indeed, one of the first things that *zosma* taught me is that it is okay to speak to strangers, something that really had been banned since my earliest childhood. In effect, it means that you can enter a room filled with perfect strangers, say hello, and somebody will say hello back. These are the rudiments of conversation with which friendships in Cybertown begin. As I already said I had to be taught how to do this and for quite a while it felt very strange, however in turn I taught others how to do this, and this practice is widely accepted in Cybertown. One interesting side effect often remarked on by residents is that this practice, of talking to strangers, also makes meeting people in everyday life easier.

Importantly, less experienced residents are taught to make friends in this way by more experienced residents, partly explaining the worries voiced by *sadr* earlier - remember she was worried about losing a sense of 'personal conversation'. This is because she was still a relatively new resident (six months), and had not yet been on a friend-finding expedition. Additionally *sadr* was still unsure about speaking to people without first being introduced. As *zosma*, a resident of 48 months standing told me on our first friend-finding expedition together, 'it feels weird at first, but you get used to it, and I've met some really lovely people'. In



this respect friendship does appear to act as an important social glue (Pahl, 2000), combining ideas of friendship and community.

The first friend-finding expedition that I went on consisted of just *zosma* and me. We went for two reasons: the first that we might find people to become friends with, the second because we might recruit somebody to become a block deputy to be employed in our neighbourhood. We began by going to the Plaza where there were about forty people. I did not know any of them although *zosma* knew one or two. We tried a few tentative greetings but nobody interesting emerged. These friend-finding expeditions are not always successful. Later we went to the café and there were fewer people there, only about twelve. This time we were more successful. People answered our greetings and soon there was an active group of six or eight of us happily chatting away. This was the evening we met *rana*. *zosma* did actually recruit him to be a block deputy, and over time he became an active member of the group I studied. These friend-finding expeditions to the Plaza were a regular part of everyday life in Cybertown, as *chatah* (17 months) explained:

*Going to the Plaza is a great way to meet people, and online you actually get to know someone from the inside, without being judged on appearance.*  
[chatah]

Apart from the Plaza, another starting point was to check the lists of people online. In Cybertown there is a facility that lists all the places occupied at that moment and also tells you how many people are in each place. This information is available to everybody in Cybertown and comprises of a list like the following:

Plaza (105)  
Café (15)  
Beach (3)  
duty's House (14)  
phad's House (6)

Friend-finding expeditions simply target the places on this list where many people are gathered. For example I would probably not go to the beach because only three people are there, but would happily go to *phad's* house (and did!) because there were six people there. Joining groups of people like this without an invitation is similar to gatecrashing yet is sociably acceptable in Cybertown. This is how I initially met *phad* (37 months), another Cybertown inhabitant who I later met offline. He was in his own Cybertown home with five other people when *zosma*, *pollux* and I entered, and our subsequent conversations and meetings led to us all becoming close friends. The following account is adapted from my fieldwork diaries at the time.

**Meeting *phad*, (an excerpt from Fieldnotes)**

*This particular evening was a routine visit to Cybertown, I used to go online several times a day and look at the list of residents online. If I saw someone I knew I would go to the place where they were and spend a few minutes or hours chatting to them. zosma was there before me and was in her home so I popped in to see her. After half an our chatting about her son who was ill she suggested going off to see who was around, we went to the Plaza first because it is generally the place everyone lands when they first arrive. There were only a few people there, but Pollux was one of them, he joined us as we set off scouring the*



*city for new friends. It was early evening for Europeans but for those in the USA they were between five and eight hours behind us so were still at work, so the city was fairly quiet. We went first to the café and then to the beach, losing pollux but gaining polaris, a young German girl. Along the way we laughed together and had fun. A new Colony had opened a few days ago so we all went to explore it. There was a huge central fountain with a tower, filled with the biggest spiral staircase I'd ever seen. The outlying suburbs were quiet as not many residents had moved into the new houses yet.*

*Eventually we conceded defeat in the public places and began to explore the private homes. There was usually a loose order to the way we explored, public areas first then houses. On checking the lists we discovered a house called 'The Wolfs Lair' with six people in it and off we went. When we arrived (zosma, polaris and myself), we discovered the house belonged to phad. He hadn't been in Cybertown for long, only a couple of months, we could see this by looking next to his name where his experience points were displayed. Although a bit taken aback by our gatecrashing he was very friendly, and the nine of us continued to chat for the next hour and a half. Eventually everyone drifted away except myself and phad (but of course he was home anyway!), and we continued talking for another two hours. He was happy to tell me lots about himself, for example that he lived in Nottingham about 60 miles from my home, and that he was divorced with two children. We discovered that*

*we shared a wicked sense of humour, and subsequently often sent each other jokes.*

On reflection *phad* was open, confident and chatty, and he also enjoyed meeting new people. However, at our first meeting we exchanged numerous details that anchored us in the real world. In suggesting that friend-finding expeditions were mechanisms for meeting people particular to Cybertown earlier I also wondered what the topics of conversation could or would be. In this particular instance *phad* and I couldn't find the topic that interested us until we 'knew' each other better, and that meant by using the common references we were used to dealing with in our everyday lives. It was through a series of calculated disclosures that we moved towards a relationship of trust and intimacy that resulted in us meeting face-to-face. In this our relationship did not differ from the mechanics of friendship negotiation that I explained earlier. However, we had met initially without being hampered by any of our cultural roles. It was only through careful disclosure that information was offered and exchanged, even though that process occurred over a very short space of time. This supports my earlier argument that friendship in Cybertown moves towards the commitment stage more quickly and easily than offline friendship.

Because of these expeditions, making friends in Cybertown tends to be a very proactive experience rather than a reactive one. For example, in offline life as we move between the different social settings of work, home, the doctor's surgery or shopping etc. we meet people but do not tend to actively consider them as possible friends. Yet in Cybertown, the residents learn to regard



everyone sharing the same social space as a potential friend. This may be partly because all spaces in Cybertown appear to be social spaces, a theme I have explored more fully in earlier chapters. In contrast, not all of the spaces we occupy offline are social spaces. Some, as Augé (1995) describes are ‘non-spaces’ because they are interstitial places that attain their identity from their being between other significant and meaningful social spaces (for a more in depth discussion of interstitial spaces (see Vincent, 1990). Examples that Augé (1995) gives include airports and interstate highways. This links back to discussions in earlier chapters about the real/virtual and space/place. The privileging of spatial practice in the construction of place can be inverted to explain how the absence of spatial practice leads to these interstitial places. Fletcher (1998) suggests that this absence of spatial practice produces an echo of the virtual in offline spaces; where virtual space is not a real place but instead is a space you move through to reach another place (somewhat similar to Augé’s (1995) notion of non-place). In Cybertown these spaces are not moved through physically, but at the push of a button movement between one social place and another is accomplished. It was with one such push of a button that I happened upon *acamar* one day decorating her home with a new painting - about which she was very enthusiastic – which was a gift from a friend.

### **Gift Exchange in Cybertown**

*‘Do you think it looks better here or there?’ said acamar, one day as I called at her home to visit. She was hanging a painting on the wall above the fireplace, where it could be seen if you sat in the Dragon*

*Chair. The living room in her six-roomed house was full of objects that she had bought in the Mall, but this painting had a special value because it was one of many gifts given by her friends. 'Yes I like it there, it makes the room feel like home', she said, 'are you coming to the Mall? I need to buy a gift for canopus, I know she likes those little flying butterflies'. Strictly speaking acamar was in her 3D home, manipulating images on the computer screen with her mouse. By doing this she could position her objects exactly where she wanted. Not only that but she could label her objects too. For example her painting might have been sold in the Mall under the title 'The Sunflowers', but when displayed in her home it was labelled 'gift from canopus'. Although these labels can only be seen by moving the mouse cursor over an object and then right-clicking, visitors to your home regularly peruse them.*

*(Excerpt from fieldnotes, September 2004)*

I have already explained how friendship in Cybertown is mediated in an environment of reciprocity and exchange of trust and confidences that are constantly internally evaluated, and that it is the desire to maintain friendship that fuels this obligation. However, in Cybertown friendship is not confined to the exchange of trust and confidences, there is also a thriving practice of gift giving. This is particularly interesting given current and historical anthropological arguments that debate the importance of gifts in establishing and maintaining social relationships. In Cybertown the gifts are at the same time 'virtual' with no monetary or commercial value outside of Cybertown, and 'real' in that they are highly visible and recognisable signs or tokens of friendship.



What is interesting is the perceived value or meaning assigned to these gifts by Cybertown residents. These gifts are highly valued and treasured by both the givers and the receivers, their value being fundamental to the friendships that they support and define. Gift giving can also be very visible, and gifts received are often 'on show' as in the example above, providing an outward display of friendship. The first point I am making here is that in Cybertown gift exchange assists in creating and maintaining the conditions for reciprocity and friendship, the second that friendship and community have similar roles in terms of making people feel secure. Hence many of the attributes and meanings applied to these two concepts are similar, and they act in similar ways to reinforce ties between individuals in Cybertown. In addition, the values and meanings given to gifts in Cybertown are the same as those assigned to gifts offline, reinforcing the strong relationship between online and offline life. In general usage the giving of gifts is often associated with an unselfish action, and gifts are given without the expectation of receiving something of corresponding value in return. It was Malinowski (1922) who initially employed this concept of the 'pure gift' in anthropological debate, an altruistic exchange where little or nothing is returned or reciprocated and which is a private gesture. Malinowski suggested that men in the Trobriand Islands make free or pure gifts of magic to their sons (1922: 177-79). Malinowski subsequently discarded this idea after Mauss (1950) challenged his idea and suggested that a truly free gift could not create obligations or connections between individuals, explaining how 'in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily' (Mauss, 1950: 2-3).

Leaving the notion of the 'pure gift' aside for the moment, gift exchange has often been described as being associated with reciprocity, equivalence and obligations. Mauss (1950) foundational essay, *The Gift: The Form and Reasons for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, is an exploration of the function and meaning of gift exchange in non-western, or as they were often referred to at the time, primitive societies. He argues that the meaning of the gift is not a product of economic relations<sup>1</sup>. Instead gift-exchange demonstrates the connections between individuals and others and between individuals and things that are created by the transfer of possessions. He identified three obligations in exchange – giving, receiving and reciprocating. Where these exchanges take the form of gifts, Mauss also established the notion of the spirit in the gift, that he named after the Maori *hau*, explaining how all objects contain *hau*, the spirit of the donor. In this context, giving an object to someone means giving a piece of oneself. According to Maori conventions the *hau* is the source of exchange rather than the gift in which it resides, 'in reality, it is the *hau* that wishes to return to its birthplace, to the sanctuary of the forest and the clan and to the owner (Mauss, 1950: 15).

The substantivists who later drew on Mauss' work to formulate an economic theory of modes of exchange for Western societies included Polanyi (1957), and Sahlins (1972) for whom the gift is the origin of the social contract and the end of war, meant to create peace and bonds of trust (Sahlins, 1972: 183). Sahlins also rejected the notion of the *hau* as the spirit of the donor, arguing instead that Mauss had wrongly translated the term, and that *hau* signifies the interest

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<sup>1</sup> See also Gregory's (1982, 1983) analysis of the opposition between gift and commodity exchange. Gregory emphasises that gifts and commodities create different kinds of obligations, and therefore different kinds of relationships between individuals.



accumulated by the gift that must be returned to the original giver. Sahlins stipulated there is really a range of reciprocity, with generalised, balanced and negative as examples of this range. At one end of this range are examples of pure gifts between close kin, (sometimes known as altruistic gifts), and at the other a more economically rational practice of exchange where manipulating the system is the aim. This latter has been explored by writers in the late soviet and post-Soviet social systems where *blat* is the translation of unlawful use of personal influence to access resources (Nazpary, 2002: 77; see also Hivon, 1994 and Ledeneva, 1998).

The most problematic area in gift giving is the notion of the pure gift, where no reciprocity is incurred or triggered. The pure gift is characterised by the fact that it does not create personal connections and obligations between the donor and the receiver (Laidlow, 2000). This has been explored in the medical arena where Titmuss (1970) in particular quantified blood donorship as 'creative altruism'. He claimed that the main reason for voluntarily donating blood was an altruistic desire to help others. Others have disagreed with the possibility that such a thing as creative altruism among blood donors exists (Badcock, 1986; Rapport and Maggs, 2002). More generally, Derrida (1992, 1995) claimed that the genuine gift is impossible because from the moment an object is recognised by the recipient as a gift, it becomes weighted with obligations, and is no longer a pure gift. In other words the genuine gift must exist outside of the dichotomy of giving and taking. It can also never be recognised as a gift, where even a simple thank-you can annul the genuine gift by acknowledging its presence. In other words saying 'thank-you' removes the obligation of indebtedness provoked by

the gift, and draws the gift into the cycle of giving and taking (Derrida, 1989: 149). In what Bell calls the 'logic of reciprocity' (1991a: 253), he deduces that where there is a stable exchange relationship between two parties, and where each party prefers to maintain that relationship, then both parties must be satisfied with the bargain (1991a: 253). Clarifying the difference between a gift and a commodity he states, 'a gift implies an intention to develop or maintain a *social relationship* between parties to the exchange' (Bell, 1991b: 156, original italics) even though sometimes these exchanges are ceremonial, involving items of little value (Bell, 1991b: 155).

In Cybertown the central theme running through these accounts of the gift come together on several counts: first the mutual recognition of the gift by the donor and the recipient; second, the demand for reciprocity and equivalence; and third, the obligation incurred through the exchange of gifts (re)affirms friendship between individuals. This obligation emerges from the desire to maintain a friendship because 'a free gift makes no friends' (Laidlow, 2000: 617). The nature of the gift in Cybertown has a variety of forms that include giving objects or artefacts, providing help, or giving company and time. Relations are created through giving gifts, and also gifts are sometimes given specifically in order to create these relations. Time is an important factor in the complex interaction between trust, intimacy and disclosure, where time relates to the amount of time spent online (as I explained earlier). However time as gift is also an important feature of Cybertown friendships.



Time spent with friends in Cybertown is managed in a different ways. As a global community that spans several time zones meetings with friends at the other side of the globe have to be carefully planned. *zosma* was one resident who took her friendships in Cybertown extremely seriously and invested a lot of time and effort in them. We were talking one Wednesday in her Cybertown home, and she was relating a meeting with *gacrux* the night before. Knowing that *zosma* was from Denmark and *gacrux* was from Texas I asked when they met, 'oh last night' she explained, 'I set my alarm for 3am because that was the only time *gacrux* could make it'. Cybertown time is set at Pacific time (GMT minus 8 hrs), and Copenhagen is at GMT plus one hour, therefore at the time of their meeting it was 6pm for *gacrux*. For my own part I would regularly go to Cybertown at about 6am (GMT) to find *acamar* who was also from the US - when it would be late evening for her (10pm) and so there was always a good chance of seeing her. This pattern was typical for many residents, because time spent in Cybertown is a finite resource and spending time on developing and maintaining networks reflects the high value of friendship. This issue of time being both valuable and a finite resource feeds back into general debates about the western concept of time. Here time is the medium within which the modern social world is synchronised. In pre-modern societies time was defined by the rhythms of nature. This changed with the invention of the mechanical clock. The clock was the first machine that separated time from human events. Mumford (1934) contrasts the differences between what he calls organic time and mechanical time. The first represents the natural rhythm of the seasons and the birth, growth, death and decay of humankind. The second represents an artificial time that has routinised and subjugated social life to the rule of the

clock. Eating is accomplished at prescribed mealtimes, not as a result of hunger. Sleeping, working, educating and leisure all have their little time slot. Most importantly, as Harvey's (1989) analysis illustrates, the mechanical clock not only constructs time as linear, but also as universal, with time across the globe being synchronised. This was uniquely demonstrated during the global celebrations for the new millennium, but is also evident in the example that I drew on earlier – in Cybertown everyone is aware of time as being routinised (hence the need to 'organise' time to be with friends) and the universal nature of time (through their knowledge and understanding of time-zones). As a result, finding time to be together is an important issue in friendship relations. It is not enough to rely only on chance encounters because the chance encounter versus the arranged meeting can be equated with what can be seen as two different types of time. I call these 'accidental time' or 'intentional time', not because of a set of absolute differences between the two, but to differentiate the amount of effort involved in gifting them. Of the two, accidental time does not signify as being a highly valued element of an effort-bargain as is illustrated by one of my own experiences. In an earlier chapter when explaining how to discover who was online in Cybertown at any given moment I mentioned the pop-up list of Cybertown residents. When I first lived in Cybertown I would regularly check this list for the names of people I had met with the intention of pursuing our relationship, and one of these was *phad* whom I later got to know very well. But in the early days of our relations he was quite difficult to pin down because he worked full-time and only managed to spend odd hours in Cybertown. I mentioned to *zosma* how difficult it was to meet up and she explained:

*But duty – you must go to his house and leave a message, then he will know you have been looking for him...things are different here in*



*Cybertown, you must not wait for things to happen – you must make things happen. If he doesn't know you are looking for him he won't know that you want to be friends.*  
[zosma]

Outside of Cybertown *phad* and I might have exchanged addresses, phone numbers or email addresses in order to keep in touch. In Cybertown we did not do that because it is easy to find someone again. What this really illustrates is yet another difference in the mechanics or 'cultural mores' of meeting, making and maintaining friendship in Cybertown. Friendships there are pursued quite forcibly, with first the friend-finding expeditions, then the follow up messages. When I use the term forcibly I do not mean that friendship is forced on unwilling parties, rather that friendship is not left to chance. It is more calculated in the sense that residents actively work to expand their social networks. Not only is time spent with each other a gift, but the promise of time spent together is as well and it is important to recognise and acknowledge this time. For example, the time that I visited *acamar* and found her hanging a picture (see page 313), I was not invited - I checked the citizens list to check she was home and then went to her house - it was a friendly visit, made with the aim of catching up on news and reacquainting myself with *acamar*. If she had not been at home I would have left a message in her inbox, she would then have known that I had invested time in our relationship thus inviting an equivalent response, perhaps by initially acknowledging my message and then later arranging a time to meet. In this respect messages might also be seen as gifts and a similar phenomenon was identified by Miller and Slater (2000) when they explored the use of e-greetings cards in Trinidad Internet use. They speculated that these

cards are themselves in 'latent sense' gifts, since they both demand a response and create the conditions for reciprocity (2000: 57).

In addition to time and messages being seen as gifts, giving objects or artefacts is another important aspect of friendship in Cybertown. Like Mauss (1950) I was impressed by the sentiments of the *Havamal*, from which I reproduce one verse here illustrating the need to spend time and exchange presents with friends:

You know, if you have a friend  
In whom you have confidence  
And if you wish to get good results  
Your soul must blend in with his  
And you must exchange presents  
And frequently pay him visits.  
(Mauss, 1950: 2, quoting the *Havamal*)

The exchange of presents in Cybertown is in itself is interesting because the objects and artefacts are themselves three-dimensional representations of objects and artefacts that are generally used to decorate the 3D homes of residents. They are not physically available or transferable outside of Cybertown. What is transferable is the spirit of the gift, in the sense that the obligation that the gift incurred to its donor is remembered. When we consider the gift of a painting given to *acamar* by *canopus*, we also know that it provoked the need to reciprocate by going to the Mall and getting a gift to give in return. However the act of gift-exchange does not end with the return gift because the memory, or story, or spirit of the gift remains. Not only that but the label on the gift tells part of the story of the history of the giver, so that these stories are shared. Of course not in the same way as for example stories about objects in the *Kula* Ring (Malinowski, 1922) are shared, but if we focus on the Maussian idea of the gift



we can read this in a particular way. Gifting is about establishing identity and maintaining social relations and it is also about remembering those social relations and the obligations incurred between individuals. In other words gifting is symbolic as well as physical. Although the value of these gifts is never discussed between friends it is necessary to come to an agreement on value, since any reciprocal exchange must reflect the value of the donor's gift. If it does not reflect the value of the gift, it may be seen as a rejection of the gift - and more importantly a rejection of the friendship.

In Cybertown there is not a huge divide between incomes that could lead to the creation of social divisions. Consequently no one is too poor to buy gifts (this is made possible in Cybertown by the city's economic system, in which I have explained how all residents bank money daily for going there). Sometimes however, gifts are assigned a higher value because of the time and effort that has gone into their giving. For example, in her life outside of Cybertown *zosma* is a graphic artist. Translating this skill into a usable commodity in Cybertown she designed paintings and sold them in the Mall. Sometimes she restricted these paintings to a small run of special issues, thus their rarity gave them a higher value. On one occasion she presented one of these limited edition paintings to me as a gift, pictured here hanging on my wall to the right of the window (figure 18):

**Figure 18: A Gift from *zosma* (a limited edition painting called ‘Night Moon’)**



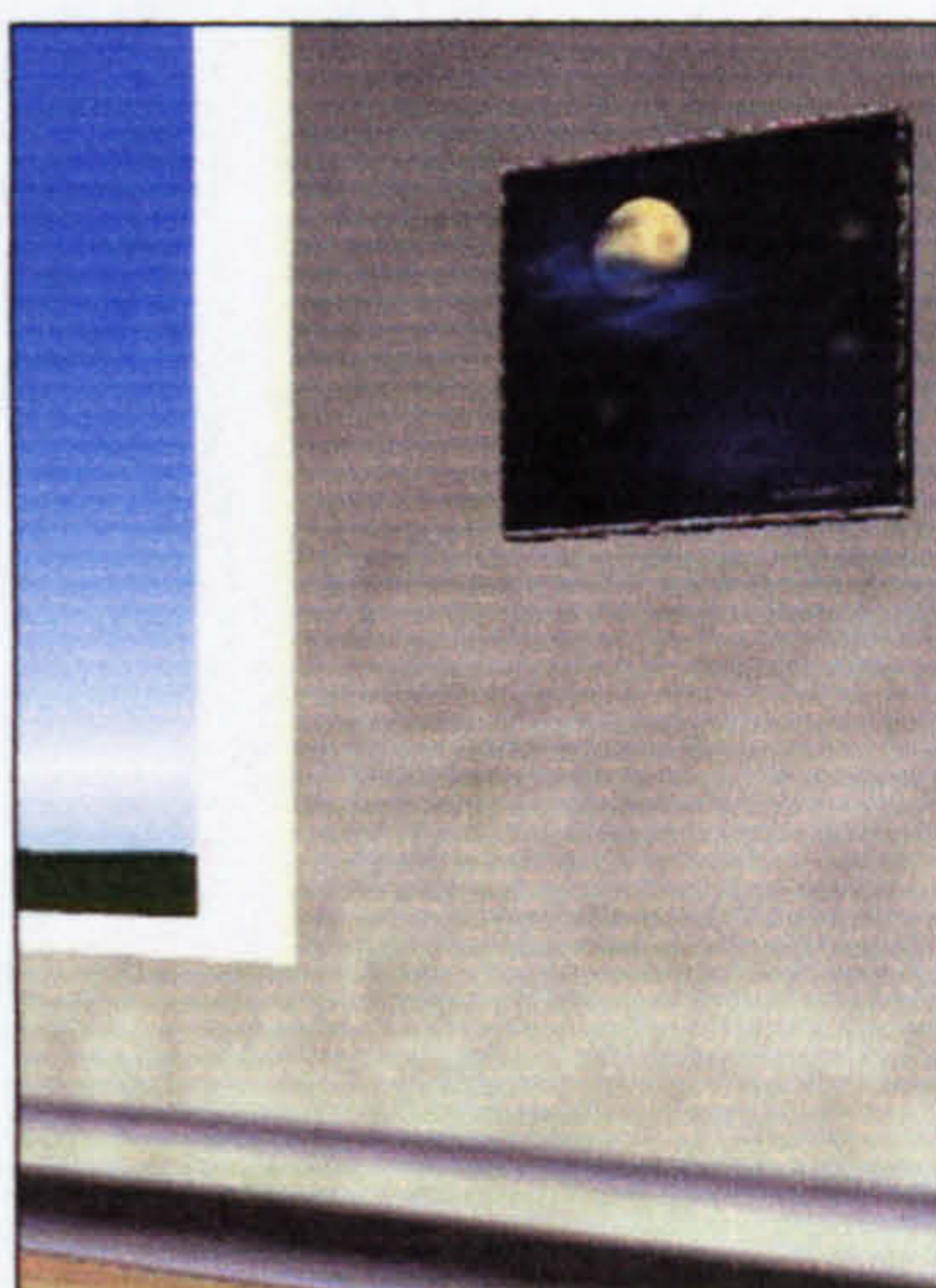
To me, as the recipient, this gift reflected the high esteem we shared, and the well-developed friendship that *zosma* and I enjoyed. Although difficult to reciprocate with a gift of equal value I did eventually receive her as a guest in my home in the UK, thus capping her gift. While here in my home we went to Cybertown together, sitting side by side at my computer, greeting friends and generally celebrating the movement of our friendship into an offline setting.

### **Not a place outside of Everyday Life**

In discussing pure relationships, Clark (1998: 182) suggested that the teen chat room is becoming a space outside of everyday life where the development of the ideal pure relationship is one with imagined intimacy but with no need for trust or commitment. In contrast I suggest that Cybertown is not a place outside of everyday life. Rather it is both embedded in, and an integral part of its



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### **Not a place outside of Everyday Life**

In discussing pure relationships, Clark (1998: 182) suggested that the teen chat room is becoming a space outside of everyday life where the development of the ideal pure relationship is one with imagined intimacy but with no need for trust or commitment. In contrast I suggest that Cybertown is not a place outside of everyday life. Rather it is both embedded in, and an integral part of its



inhabitants daily lives, as illustrated by the number of friendships, 69% of respondents had friendships that had been successfully moved into offline life. This movement offline requires some degree of trust and commitment to be established. As I mentioned earlier, a particular level of trust and intimacy is required before reaching Bruneau's (1983) commitment stage, after which friendship may be moved into other social settings. But as we have already seen, in Cybertown trust is something that must be mediated without first having face-to-face contact. This factor is often seen as an advantage by many residents (78%), and this lack of identity cues where all five senses are not brought into play has been discussed elsewhere (Donath, 1998; Markham, 2003; Parks and Floyd, 1996). Online we cannot see if someone is male or female, young or old. There are numerous non-verbal clues we cannot see either, for example, when we talk about liars looking 'shifty' or 'sounding insincere', about people looking 'bored' or 'interested', clues picked upon during face-to face meetings.

This is seen as an advantage by many Cybertown residents because it removes any preconceived ideas regarding judgements about age, race, gender etc., allowing a potentially pure relationship to develop initially. In addition it makes people feel safe in their acts of disclosure, removing the embarrassment of confession that Rawlins (1983, 1992) sees as being so contentious. In close relationships in both Cybertown and elsewhere trust has to be mutual otherwise the friendship would break down. Active trust brings about disclosure, and it is this disclosure that in turn facilitates intimacy. As Rawlins explains, in order to move from impersonal to interpersonal relationships, acts of revelation or disclosure must occur, but in an atmosphere of mutually negotiated trust (1983:



5). In discussing online relationships Whitty suggests that this follows a similar pattern to face-to-face relationships where trust develops gradually as people become familiar with one another (2002: 349). In this sense a parallel can be drawn between online and offline relationships in that trust develops over time rather than immediately.

As I argued earlier, for some, the intimacy of their online friendships appears to be superior to their offline friendships because of their initial free floating nature. For example, *jabbah* (18 months) thinks Cybertown relationships are more significant than offline ones because they, 'tend to be more emotional and psychological since you cannot see the persons physical characteristics'. Similarly, *meissa* (4 months), explained to me how she bonds with her Cybertown friends 'in a more personal way' than her offline friends.

These responses were typical of those whose friendships appeared to be free-floating in nature. Yet they revealed a major paradox, for at the same time as significant value was attached to the free-floating nature of friendship, its frequent move into face-to-face social settings re-anchored friendship in a more traditional sense. As such friendship became externally rather than internally referential. In this respect friendship in Cybertown appears much more complex than more traditional theories imply. However, it also seems clear that after the initial stages of friendships have been negotiated online, they are then often treated much the same as any other friendship.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of friendship in Cybertown, I began discussing with the residents if there was any difference between their online and offline friendships, and how their online relationships compared with their offline relationships. Typically, my informants support the view there are little or no differences between the friendships they have online or those they have offline. Of the residents I spoke to 69% said they were the same, 13% said their online relationships were better or compared favourably and only 6% said they were worse. Another 6% said there were some differences but in the main these differences were based around the time they had available to commit to their online relationships.

To have a high response indicating friendship in Cybertown was the same as offline friendship did not surprise me after living there for three and a half years. This was borne out by *zosma*'s comments, she is one of many residents who insisted that friendship online and offline are the same, but suggested that 'It just takes much longer in real life to get to know people'. She explained that in Cybertown:

*You get to know each other from the inside person and out - in real life you know people from outside and later inside. So in that way the two are composite. And knowing the inside person first - you see that looks aren't that important.*  
[zosma]

This idea of getting to know people from the inside out was a constant theme, as *thabit* (20 months), another resident confirms:

*My best friend here is Adara (42 months), we are very close. She knows me inside out and I know her that way too... I have also met many others that I care deeply for here, reaching across the USA and to other countries... We share our thoughts and feelings good or bad, listen to each other all the time. We pick each other*



*up when we are down due to ct or real life. We cry together as learn together. My friendships here are as important to me as the ones here in Real Life, sometimes more.*  
[thabit]

The question of similarity and difference between offline/online relationships was interesting because the residents sometimes struggled to answer. It was as if, once asked to consider this, they thought there ought to be a difference but previously had not really thought about it. This is interesting in light of earlier discussions about the notions of real/imaginary, since the origins of cyberspace suggest that it ought to be an imaginary place with imaginary people and imaginary relationships. However, the residents' experience is such that Cybertown is no less real than any other place, and their relationships there are no less meaningful than those in any other place. In other words they might think there ought to be differences but the reality is that there are not. This is the root of residents' problem to ascribe differences between the two. For example *acrux* (34 months) began by saying her online friendships are 'completely different' but then after further thought drew parallels with her offline friendships by adding:

*They're important and I try to find time for my friends [in Cybertown] the same way I do in real life.*  
[acrux]

Others took a similar view, with most explanations of difference being the result of different contexts rather than the relationships being deemed real or imaginary:

*Different, we have more time, but we don't meet the same way.*  
[dabih, 24 months]

*About the same...though not quite as close, as they revolve around a cyber life that I go into a few hours a week, whereas in real life, I'm there 24 hours a day.*  
[sadr, 35 months]

For some residents Cybertown expanded their range of social possibilities:

*I have made friends with people in other countries.*  
[baham, 13 months]

Others like *archird* (36 months) compared the depth of feeling between her kinship and friendship ties rather than between online and offline relationships:

*Well I feel like I can talk to my online friends more than I can talk to people in RL. And I know more people in Cybertown than I do in real life.*  
[archird]

There were those who considered their Cybertown friendships better than their offline ones, and the interesting thing here is why they thought this was so. When looking at the length of time these people had lived in Cybertown compared to the sample population as a whole there was only a slight difference. They had lived in Cybertown an average of 31.6 months compared to 28.86 months. In fact the resident in this group who was newest to Cybertown was one of the most vocal in her appreciation of her five principal online friendships. She has not yet met any of them offline but regularly speaks with them on the telephone:

*I've talked to these people in real life and they seems to know more about me then my real life best friends...[I am] very committed. They are like family now. It's an unspoken rule that all five of us get together everyday for just a few mins. So it's almost as if everyday at a certain time these people run my life.*  
[wasat, 18 months]



There was a line of thought suggesting that cyberspace as a medium was more liberating and allowed greater mutual disclosure:

*I think they [friends in Cybertown] are better. In fact I don't have many friends in my real life and for me it is easier to talk about the things that worry, sadden, move or scare me if I don't have to do it face to face.*  
[centrop, 39 months]

*In many respects, better. Real life friendships tend to be more superficial. In Cybertown, we tend to communicate on a deeper level. Therefore, the emotional ties we create are somehow stronger...though we have never met in person, we have shared so much of ourselves over the years - I view my friendships here as real as those in real life.*  
[gianfar, 53 months]

The group who thought their Cybertown relationships were worse than offline ones (6%) was less than half the size of those who thought they were better (13%). Sometimes the differences were again contextual, as with *zibal* (57 months) who simply thought that 'offline is better because of the extra activities we can share'. This really was very similar to *marfak's* (34 months) comment, although they thought Cybertown relationships were, 'the same really, except that because of the nature of the Internet they are of necessity more ephemeral'. *shaula* suggested that online he only had acquaintances not friends, explaining how:

*Online relationships seem much more flat. There is a distinct lack of shared experience that make them fell [sic] more like talking to someone you see every day on the bus. You might talk to them while you ride, but after you get off at your stop, they pass from your mind.*  
[shaula 41 months]

One resident specifically drew my attention to the advantages inherent in the similarity between offline and online relationships, suggesting that you could learn a lot online that could then be translated into other areas of life experience:

*This is I believe one of the most significant details of online community and Cybertown specifically the fact that people take you completely without prejudice with regards to your words. You are building a shape of your identity for them to take without the shadow of race, age or gender. I have made friendships with several people in Cybertown that I might not have had the chance to do so being influenced by their age in real life. For this reason it has helped me not make quick judgments about other people in different life situations.*  
[zaniah, 35 months]

There was a constant sense that Cybertown is an integral part of many residents everyday lives. This was often verbalised as a sense of confusion when I asked them to compare Cybertown and real life, as seen in *porrima's* (39 months) response, who did not understand, 'why my friends in either place should be treated any different'. As well as many residents telling me during interviews that their Cybertown friendships were just the same, the successful movement offline of such a high proportion of friendships also suggests that these friendships are much the same.

### **Moving Friendship Offline**

Many residents have met their Cybertown friends offline. Thus, their friendships are moving between the different places or social settings known to them in their everyday lives. Of the eighty-six inhabitants that I interviewed thirty-one had already met their online friends face-to-face, two of them having later married. Sixteen people expressed the intention to meet others, with one of these, *wasat* having spoken to online friends over the telephone, and eight others saying they would like to meet, but they lived too far away. Of the remaining thirty-one only three said they would never consider meeting anyone outside of Cybertown. In all, two thirds had met or were about to meet their Cybertown



friends face-to-face. However, all of those interviewed had spoken to me about their Cybertown experiences, and that could be interpreted as moving their Cybertown relationship with me into offline life. They had not only acknowledged that I was an authentic researcher, but had also made themselves 'real' and 'authentic' to me.

Because online and offline social experiences exhibit the same similarities and differences, it follows that they may also be interchangeable. For example online relationships can be sustained offline. However, there is also an understanding among Cybertown residents that there are common misconceptions about the type of people who use the Internet. Recently a kind of global moral panic (Cohen, 1972: 9) about deviants and the Internet has been amplified by the media, emphasising the risk involved with meeting people in the flesh. When using the Internet we are warned not to trust anyone with our name, address, telephone number, credit card details etc. Despite this, people are learning to trust those people they meet on the Internet. As *acrux*, a 33-year-old Scottish policewoman says, 'People who don't use the net a lot don't seem to understand that real friendships can be established online, it's not all mass murderers and psychos'. *acrux* explains how, two years after meeting her 'best friend in the world', they continue to speak every day and meet face to face once a week. Similarly, *lesath* who had previously been a CB radio ham was forthright about meeting her friends offline. She has been doing it for several years now:

*Why \*not\* meet? General rule of thumb is, if local or in large groups, it's safer.... also, meeting in public & letting your family or friends know where you are is a wise idea. There are*

*precautions, but no more or less than back in the days of meeting  
CB buddies off the air for coffee breaks, etc.*  
[lesath]

Not only has *lesath* been meeting her friends offline but also she is very happily married to one of them:

*I married one of my online friends (who was strictly a friend,  
online...but over 3 years or so, we became much more  
romantically involved offline). Different people view it  
differently; some are horrified while others are intrigued & still  
others don't seem to think it unusual or 'different' at all. I am my  
own person.... my kids were a little surprised & perhaps  
apprehensive at first, but they understand who I am.... & they  
have come to admit that my choice is the best I've made in a long  
time. LOL.*  
[lesath]

My own meeting with *zosma* in September 2002 was a more opportunistic meeting. During my fieldwork in Cybertown I spent many hours chatting to her. She was in effect my gatekeeper as well as my friend, introducing me to many other residents and helping me find my way around Cybertown. It was *zosma* who taught me many skills and under her patient tutelage I learned to live life online. That September she was travelling from her home in Copenhagen to visit another Cybertown friend, *phad* who lived only fifty miles away from my home, so I invited her to stay with me and my family too. I had already known *zosma* for two years and we had exchanged many intimacies. We decided to exchange our real names, email each other our photographs (figure 19) and to speak on the telephone in preparation for meeting face-to-face. When she knocked at the door I went to answer it alone. This was a private moment. Thankfully she had told me the truth; she was exactly like her photograph. It was not until I saw her that I realised how important that particular truth was. Yet until this point I would have said that over time I had learned to judge the



truthfulness, authenticity and consistency of *zosma*'s personality, and that confirmation of this through face-to-face meeting was neither necessary nor desirable. In short, I agreed with my informants in that truth that is verifiable through sight was not necessary for true friendship. Nevertheless, in that instant of meeting face-to-face I realised that we had maintained an authentic perception of each other, and that failure to do so would have destroyed our friendship. Indeed this fact illustrates that our friendship was in a state of dialectical tension (Rawlins, 1983, 1992). We also continued to call each other by our Cybertown names, to the hilarity of friends and relatives, a strategy I thought at the time was no different to being called mum by my son and Denise by my husband. On reflection I believe this was yet another strategy for maintaining our perceptions of one another. As *zosma* said, 'thank goodness you really **are** *dutypigeon*'.

**Figure 19: Exchanging Photographs**



*dutypigeon*



*zosma*  
(With kind permission)

Intriguingly at this time I also met *phad* who accompanied *zosma*. At our meeting he was about ten years older, and a stone heavier than the photograph we had exchanged. Talking later, *zosma* and I agreed he was a bit vain to send us a



younger looking photograph, but also that he was exactly the same person we knew. Therefore, in this case we maintained our own perceptions of him even though he had not been completely truthful.

## **Concluding Remarks**

By examining the meanings behind Cybertown residents' notions of friendship it can be seen that these residents are as emphatic about the 'realness' of their friendships as they are about the 'realness' of the community they live in. In their eyes, friendship is a descriptive category that equates a particular set of attributes and meanings with their personal relationships in Cybertown. At the same time, this depiction of friendship as 'real' by the residents of Cybertown serves to (re)connect online and offline friendship. As a result my research has not identified any great differences between the notions of online and offline friendship. This lack of difference is important because it tells us two things. The first is obvious – for although theoretically friendship is a difficult concept to pin down since it is both a relational and a contextual concept (Paine, 1999: 43), the residents of Cybertown can discern no substantive differences between friendship online and offline. For these residents, friendship means the same in both contexts. It is therefore unsurprising that friendships are often successfully moved offline. As a result individuals are extending their webs of personal relationships to include cyberspace. The second is a result of the first - cyberspace is no longer distinct and separate from the real world. It is part of everyday life, as these relationships are becoming embedded in everyday life. The fact that many of these friendships are sustainable offline suggests that



people are widening their webs of relationships to include those that are no longer dependent on what Willmott calls 'the social patterns that underpin social support' (1987: 1). Social relationships are in a state of transformation insomuch as we are no longer confined to the work or home to meet people, or to develop or sustain friendships. On the contrary, by drawing on their experience of friendship both online and offline, and recognising the similarities between the two, residents of Cybertown are demonstrating how ICTs (Internet Communications Technologies) are becoming increasingly embedded in their everyday lives.

Additionally, what these people call friendship can indeed be evaluated using the concepts of traditional theorists like Allan (1979, 1989, 1996) and Jerrome (1984) in much the same way as offline friendship, illustrating the similarities between them. They are generally informal, personal and private. Furthermore they are chosen rather than imposed. Online friendships within Cybertown are formed and maintained in similar ways to those in wider society. There are, however, some differences, particularly in the proactive search for friendship that occurs in friendship-finding expeditions. People in Cybertown are learning to actively trust each other.

In many instances the nature of online friendship enables this trust to be achieved more easily, and this trust is a major contributory factor in maintaining the commitment and intimacy of online friendship. Yet there are contradictions, for in the early stages of friendship in Cybertown there are often no external social referents like age or gender. However, if friendship includes trust and

intimacy then these external referents become exactly the type of things that are revealed over time and that validate the continuing relationship. There is also an inconsistency between the need to trust without visual/external referents on the one hand that appears to be balanced by a desire to externally validate the truth. The relief of both *zosma* and myself on our first meeting illustrates this. Yet at the same time it is contradicted by our continued acceptance of *phad*. Hence a double paradox is revealed, trust can be maintained even when external validation has failed.

As a result the basic tenets of online friendship appear to be impossible to separate from the traditional everyday concept of friendship itself, and just as slippery to define. Certainly individuals in Cybertown appear to be investing a great deal of effort in maintaining their relationships in cyberspace. These relationships also seem to develop and mature in the same ways as offline friendships, and it is clear that mutual trust is an important element in this. Indeed the typical response from my informants gives the impression that a great deal of time and effort is often invested in moving these relationships into other social settings, in particular offline into everyday life. What is clear is that each relationship is individually negotiated. What is equally clear is that the rules that govern that validation are also individually negotiated.

Despite this there are differences in the ways in which friendship is initiated, through specific friend-finding expeditions. Rather than acting as an agent of transformation, the Internet is simply providing the technological condition for people to meet and make friends in cyberspace. Parallels can be drawn here



between the technological condition that facilitates friendship formation and that also facilitates the construction of Cybertown as a virtual community. The similarities do not end there. Both community and friendship in Cybertown can be evaluated by looking at trust, commitment and intimacy – all elements of what has come to be known as social capital, ‘the stock of active connections among people’ (Cohen and Prusak 2001: 4). Central to this explanation is the development of trust, and by locating this evaluation within wider theoretical debates around trust and social capital, this chapter has revealed the strong correlation between the formation of friendship ties, trust and community-building. These three are all important components of social capital, both on and offline (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; Putnam, 1995; Wellman et al, 2001).

As I explained earlier, social capital itself is another difficult or ‘slippery’ concept. It cannot be seen or measured but we may see its effects in the formation of trust, community-building and friendship ties. If, as Coleman explains ‘social capital is defined by its function’ (1988: 98) then in Cybertown the presence of social capital has been established because these three elements are present. Yet more is at stake here because if we look at Pruijt’s (2000) concept of social capital we can identify two elements: the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ social capital. It is the second of these, private, that comes into play when moving Cybertown friendship offline. This is because this movement has the further effect of increasing social ties and private social capital offline as well as online. It does this by widening individual circles of trust and increasing personal ties. Research has already shown that in already established offline communities, adding online interaction can increase social capital (Blanchard

and Horan, 1998; Wellman and Hampton, 1999a; Wellman et al, 2001). It is clear from my research that even where there is no established community offline, then living in a virtual community can increase private social capital.



## Summary, Future Work and Conclusions

It is a myth that CMC (computer mediated communication) and the Internet are transforming the ways in which we live our lives. That is not to say that there are no changes: only that the Internet is not the root cause of them. My argument is that rather than being an agent of transformation, the Internet is instead a technological condition for changes in our perceptions of two notions: the first is space and place, the second is the real and the virtual/imaginary. In the 1990s this new theorising of space and place on the Internet was often associated with the concept of postmodernity and globalisation, in which everyday cultural and social meanings were being eroded. This led to predictions of what Hine (2000) has called 'radical futures'. In other words predictions that the Internet lends itself to being a postmodern agent of fragmentation and deconstruction of the self (Bauman, 2000; Featherstone and Lash, 1995; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Harvey, 1989). This fragmentation and deconstruction would, according to Bauman, lead to a further erosion of cultural and social meanings – the end result being that all social meaning would be transplanted from a, 'now empty physical space' into cyberspace' (Bauman, 1998: 20). Similar arguments exist for the theorising of the boundaries between the real and the virtual/imaginary (Poster, 1995; Turkle, 1995). As in discussions about space and place, doubts about authenticity, representation and reality were expressed in early theories of the real and the virtual. In contrast, I have argued that the notions of place and space offered by Augé (1995), Ingold (1993) and Lefebvre (1974) among others, come together in understanding place as constituted through embodied practices that take place in a particular locality.

In other words place is no longer tied to a geographical location but to social action. My research is part of a paradigmatic shift change that no longer regards computer communications as a simple 'tool', but instead, as mediating a new kind of 'social space'. This has had the effect of opening up new fields of human subject research in the social sciences. In this respect Whitridge's explanation is closest to my own line of reasoning:

The notion of 'place', of a meaningful location assumes a remarkable discursive richness, and need not remain tethered to the archaeology of the landscape.  
(Whitridge, 2004: 213)

Further, my argument is that this shift in the theoretical conceptualisation of space/place has been instrumental in influencing our perceptions of community and social relations, and that this is clearly demonstrated by my examination of social relationships in Cybertown. This shift in perceptions combined with the presence of CMCs and the Internet as enabling technologies allows us to talk about living in cyberspace in an intelligible fashion i.e. that it makes sense. This shift in perceptions has also established the potential for us to live in cyberspace. It is this potential that has been grasped by the residents of Cybertown who live in this virtual community. It is the examination of their lives there that has formed the basis of my research. In other words, I have argued that Cybertown is a place or 'locality' constituted through embodied practices, or, as Lefebvre (1974) says 'social action'. My next argument goes a step further - Cybertown is a place whose status is 'no less real' than any place, a position I explained in chapter three. Effectively this has allowed individuals to think about two things: first, about the possibilities of establishing community in cyberspace; and



second, in allowing these same individuals to live there and to experience life online. Rather than offering an exotic space for new 'ways of being', cyberspace is instead becoming increasingly embedded in our everyday lives. Because of this embeddedness, Cybertown provides a new place in cyberspace for (re)producing the meanings that are attached to the notions of community and friendship. Consequently one theme that has woven itself throughout this thesis is my examination of the consistent way in which Cybertown residents described Cybertown as a 'real' place, a 'real' community, with 'real' people living there and making 'real' friendships. My thesis has been concerned with explaining this phenomenon in terms of the meanings that Cybertown's residents attach to these concepts of community and friendship. In Cybertown, community and friendship are no different than those occurring in offline social spaces. Furthermore, those notions are still structured by those same social and cultural patterns learned in everyday life.

Chapters five and six lay out my explanation of how the residents of Cybertown engaged in these particular embodied practices – community building and friendship formation – here I argue that this results in the constitution of Cybertown as a 'real' place. In this respect my research supports the work of later Internet theorists like Hine (2000), Markham (1998), Miller and Slater (2000), Schaap (2002) and Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002). Their work explains how these new social spaces on the Internet are becoming embedded in everyday social structures and relations. I argued here that trust, commitment and increases in personal networks are vital components of social capital. In this respect my work contributes to the work of others in the field, for example that

of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) who argue social capital is a stock of active connections between community members that allows collective action to be successful. I also argued that there is a strong correlation between the formation of friendship ties, trust and community-building in Cybertown. These three are all important components of social capital, both on and offline.

Putnam's (1995) analysis uncovered a perceived decline in social capital leading to social and civic disengagement. Halting this decline has been the subject of much research, particularly with the development of CMCs and the Internet in the last ten years (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; Cohen and Prusak 2001; Pruijt, 1997, 2002; Wellman *et al*, 2001). However, much research in this area involves adding CMC and Internet interaction to already established offline communities where increases in social capital have resulted (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; Wellman and Hampton, 1999a; Wellman *et al*, 2001).

My research has established that Cybertown residents often move their friendships offline. Indeed in the course of my research I met several of Cybertown's residents face-to-face. This movement offline points towards a blurring of boundaries between online and offline life, thus reaffirming the embeddedness of the Internet in everyday social structures and relations. But this movement offline is doubly significant because it has another effect. That is - that it increases what Pruijt (1997, 2002) calls private social capital, both online and offline. It does this by widening individual circles of trust and increasing personal ties. Because of this I have argued that Cybertown is interesting for the reason that although it is not tied to a specific offline



community, it also has the capacity to increase social capital, both online and offline. It is clear from my research that even where there is no established links to a community offline, then living in a virtual community can increase private social capital

Developing this argument using a set of tools that anthropologists know as ethnographic practice, has led to another equally important outcome of my research. By arguing that cyberspace is a real space in which real people live and work I have not only built on the work of Hine (2000), Markham (1998), Miller and Slater (2000) and Schaap (2002), but I have also added to the body of work establishing that cyberspace is an authentic anthropological fieldsite. My research has also made an important contribution to more general debates about the notion of the anthropological field. Like many contemporary anthropologists my work has also been about the processes involved in developing my research tools, in this case ethnography. Like Markham my story also looped back on itself (1998: 23), and I didn't always recognise critical moments until long after they had occurred. Therefore, my ethnography is not a linear, chronological affair, neither in its progress towards completion as an investigative act, nor as my own voyage of discovery.

Perhaps surprisingly for some more traditional anthropologists, doing ethnography online has revealed many similarities with traditional ethnography: for example, learning a new language; travelling to an 'exotic' location; finding a 'gatekeeper', and an analysis of what is meant by my field of research as well

as developing new technologies of the fieldwork such as writing and coding online questionnaires.

These issues were initially dealt with in chapter three, although my more in depth analysis of the language as interactive written discourse is given in chapter four. Chapter four also deals with the intriguing question of 'being there'. As I explain how the residents of Cybertown learn how to be embodied in cyberspace. As Markham explains, engaging in fieldwork involves being there, and participating as an embodied and social being (1998). Together these early chapters lay the foundation for my argument that technological engagement is structured by underlying cultural knowledge and discourses of identity, community and friendship.

Whatever the debate about community, friendship, space, place and the Internet it is clear that the Internet is an increasingly popular medium of both communication and socialisation. As well, the Internet is playing a progressively more important role in our everyday lives. It is also clear that the study of virtual communities like Cybertown is definitely an important theoretical tool for studying the organisation of online life. The chapters on methodology, friendship and community will provide the basis for a series of academic papers and conference presentations that will disseminate my research findings in the larger academic community. As well, future research projects will address broader critical questions raised in the thesis. For example, a study of newsgroups, and other computer mediated forums employed by nurses, social workers and other health professionals will relate well to the real world. It will



uncover how issues of boundaries and collaboration, social capital and community, and social relationships are mediated online. In addition it will analyse how cyberspace, both as a concept and a practice impacts on current UK policy issues.

## **Appendix A: What is Cybertown?**

(Reproduced from the Cybertown information board at  
<<http://www.cybertown.com/info/about/details/information.html>>.)

Cybertown is a virtual community on the Internet. It is a great place for people to communicate, explore and share in the magic of online 3D. Cybertown is known as the “Civilization for the Virtual Age” - a futuristic, immersive society accessible via the Internet. Cybertown citizens use personalized 3D avatars to represent themselves and they can own free personal 3D homes with virtual pets, hold jobs, form clubs, shop in the virtual mall, dance in the nightclub, play games in the Casino and Arcade, get free Cybertown e-mail addresses, attend live celebrity and author chat events and more. Citizens are actively involved in the social structure of the community and with each other, making Cybertown a true community that is created by its own residents.

You earn virtual “city cash” by visiting Cybertown everyday. Your 3D house can be bought and upgraded. There is a whole social and economic structure in Cybertown and you can participate in it with other people from all over the world. You can do this across multiple Cybertown Colonies, all with their own special and unique identity.

Cybertown features technological advances like “shared-state” environments where your actions with objects will be seen simultaneously by people in the same environment from anywhere in the world. For example: when you move the sofa in your living room, your guests will see where you put it and know where to sit. You can secure your house so that only your friends can visit. The identity established by your avatar - which can be completely customised - is also maintained from community to community.

Citizens can create their own customised objects either for their own use or for trade. Citizens can create custom avatars with the new blaxxun Avatar Studio software available for sale at: <http://www.blaxun.com>. Soon citizens will be able to create, sell and trade custom houses or other living abodes as well as custom avatars. Some of the merchants selling “real” goods in the community will give discounts for earned community credits so your credits can go towards purchasing real-world goods and services as well.

The purpose of Cybertown is the harmonious interchange of ideas and information between community members and between Colonies and to give you something worthwhile to create. So, make Cybertown your community and be a pioneer in the next big step in global communication and interactivity!



## **Appendix B: Cybertown Jobs**

(Reproduced from the Cybertown information board at  
<<http://www.cybertown.com/info/help/faq.html>>.)

a) **THE MAYOR** - He runs the community and liaises between the Founders and the City Council via the Founder Liaison and by co-ordinating the activities of the City Council. He also handles PR functions such as press conferences in the community, heading up community planning meetings and emergency and other meetings of the Council. He is responsible for seeing that goals set by the Founders are achieved via strategic plans implemented by the City Council. He has veto power in times of deadlock over voting issues.

b) **THE CITY COUNCIL** - Runs the strategic plans and proposes new ones to handle specific areas. Each City Council member has a specific area of the community that he heads up - e.g. Community Planning (new areas to be built, current areas to be expanded or fixed), Events and Activities, Community Information Liaison, Visitor and Member Support, Maintaining Order etc. Each Colony Leader is also on the Council. The City Council also proposes and votes on new laws based on the Constitution and appoints new Council Members and co-ordinates the activities of the various town Leaders. The Chief Guide and the Security Chief are on the City Council as is the Founder Liaison.

c) **CITY GUIDES** - Helping visitors and members - this includes such functions as Community Guides who help by answering questions, helping them find things in the community, giving tours, helping them build homes, manning the message boards, hosting chat sessions and helping with any problems.

d) **WORLD BUILDERS** - Helping expand and update the community - this includes such things as building new areas, buildings, attractions, objects - including furniture and avatars - and features to add to the community, helping promote the community, repairing and maintaining the community etc.

e) **MAGAZINE STAFF** - Acting as an information liaison between the Founder and the City Council - and the community - this includes such things as providing information and announcements to the community about events, guidelines, news, running the community newspaper, creating a newsletter, letting the community know about Cybertown appearances in the media and letting the Founders get needed information from the community.

f) **SECURITY OFFICERS** - Maintaining order in the community - this includes such things as checking into the rooms areas and ensuring that people follow the guidelines regarding no profanity and disruptive behaviour and no offensive images in buildings etc. This includes Security Offices being Cybercops, as necessary.

g) **EMPLOYMENT CHIEF** - Responsible for allocating and filling job positions in the community.

h) **CLUB OWNERS** - Helping members get to know each other and bringing

together members with similar interests - includes such things as organizing and running special-interest Clubs with message boards and chat discussion groups

i) EVENT ICs - Includes such things as creating community events and get-togethers, games, competitions, awards for best houses and other created objects.

Other duties: NEIGHBORHOOD AND BLOCK LEADERS (and their DEPUTIES) - They are responsible for activating new neighborhoods with those responsible (in discussion with the City Councils) and checking the Colonies with all those responsible for the neighborhoods and blocks. Those responsible for neighborhoods: Can activate new blocks within their neighborhood and check those responsible for blocks and everything in their neighborhood. Those responsible for blocks: Can activate new properties within their block and check everything in their blocks. Can check all posted personal images for a property and can accept or deny those images. An important task is to keep the properties clean and to support all members within their block.



## **Appendix C: The Cybertown Constitution**

(Reproduced from the Cybertown information board at  
<<http://www.cybertown.com/info/about/details/constitution.html>>.)

- 1) In communicating to others in Cybertown follow customary manners as they are (or at least as they should be!) followed in real life. In other words don't insult other members, don't make statements that are grossly offensive including blatant expressions of bigotry, racism, hatred, or profanity and don't indulge in abusive or harrassing behavior or personal attacks. This includes not indulging in racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious slurs, disruptive behavior of any kind or making lewd comments.
- 2) Cybertown includes a set of Colonies where people are not discriminated against on the basis of personal beliefs, sex, age or race and a place where people are not attacked for these things. One intention of Cybertown is to provide an oasis for rationality, pleasant discourse and harmony rather than tirades and insults against those who disagree with your views.
- 3) The public meeting places are not sex-chat spaces. This means that you must not engage in sexual activities or sexually-explicit chat that would generally be considered offensive or inappropriate in a public place. What you do in the private spaces is your own business - what you do in the public spaces becomes everybody's business and appropriate actions will be taken to prevent violations. These actions include gagging offenders, removing them from the community for a certain period of time and, in extreme cases, exiling them forever.
- 4) You may not promote or provide instructional information about illegal activities, or promote physical or mental harm or injury against any group or individual. You also may not indulge in activities that infringe upon anyone else's copyright(s).
- 5) Cybertown is not responsible for the content of these meeting places. That responsibility lies solely with the people using the spaces since they are the ones dynamically creating the content. The opinions and views expressed in these meeting places do not necessarily reflect those of Cybertown.
- 6) Due to legal requirements Cybertown does not monitor these meeting places, but the community itself, in the interests of fostering positive community spirit, has decided what it will and won't accept in these spaces and various Security Personnel do check on the spaces from time to time. We do not wish to be forced into using filters by the foolish and thoughtless actions of the minority.
- 7) Members can be held legally liable for the contents of their speech, and may be held legally accountable if their speech includes, for example, defamatory comments.
- 8) You agree to indemnify and hold harmless Cybertown for any loss, liability, claim, damage, and expenses (including reasonable attorney fees) arising from

or in connection with the contents of your speech and your use of these communities.

9) In building your dwellings in Cybertown, the above rules also apply. In other words you cannot furnish your spaces with textures, texts, objects or images that would generally or usually be considered offensive, illegal, pornographic, racist or that violate copyrights.

10) Your uploaded files, and your participation in conferences and chats, are subject to review, modification, and deletion without notice by community officials or others responsible for community activities.

11) Avoid excessive shouting (use of all caps) or flooding (continuous posting of repetitive text) in the Chat areas.

12) Impersonation of Cybertown sysops or staff members is prohibited. False representation of yourself as a Cybertown employee or sysop can result in immediate termination of your Cybertown account.



# Appendix D: Experience Points and Citycash System

(Adapted from the Cybertown information board at  
<<http://www.cybertown.com/exprewards.html>>.)

ACTIVITY	POINTS	CITYCASH	EVENT/FREQUENCY
Immigrating		5000	Once
Visiting Cybertown	5	50	Once a day
Employed Citizen	21	336	Once a day for those with a Job
Referring a new member		2000	Once per new member

JOBS	POINTS	CITYCASH
City Mayor	34	400
Deputy Mayor	32	375
City Council	30	350
Colony Leader	30	350
Senior City Guide	24	300
Colony Deputy	26	325
Deputy Security Chief	26	300
Security Chief	28	325
Neighborhood Leader	24	300
Security Officer	22	240
Employment Chief	24	280
Flea Market Chief	24	280
Mall Manager	24	280
Club Owner	14	200
Neighborhood Deputy	20	275
Block Leader	18	250
Ambassador	18	250
Post Office Manager	20	250
City Guide	20	250
World Builder	22	275

HTML Tech Support	12	230
Sponsor Team Member	25	300
Block Deputy	14	225
Place Deputy	12	225
Suburbs Chief	24	260
City Advisor	40	420
Bank Manager	24	250
Club Assistant	10	150
Bank Cashier	12	200
Master World Builder	24	300
Jail Guard	18	230
Colony Secretary	20	275

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## **Appendix E: Special Awards System**

(Adapted from the Cybertown information board at  
<<http://www.cybertown.com/exprewards.html>>.)

These titles are voted on by the Council when an eligible member applies for the status. All titles need final approval from the Founder before being granted and a list is presented to him bi-annually for his review. These titles are a privilege and are by no means automatically awarded and even after being awarded they may be revoked by a majority vote of the Council for actions or public communications unbecoming their status.

Most people can qualify fairly easily for Elder status if they have 5,000 experience points and at least 1 year of valuable contribution with a reasonably clean record however the upper statuses from Templar and above become much harder to qualify for since they require a completely clean record. If for instance a person has a record that includes an act or acts that were deliberately destructive to Cybertown, they would not be eligible for the statuses of Templar and above.

If such a person feels they can adequately show that they have made up the damage done and that they have shown at least a year of excellent and contributive behavior, they can petition the Council for their case to be reconsidered and if the Council feels their petition is valid they can then send it on to the Founder for final approval.

These titles (Templar and above) can be proposed by others and also those that feel they can demonstrate that they have earned them can also apply but it is important to understand that these are not "automatic" titles or any resident's "God-given right" - they are a reward that is awarded selectively and there is no guarantee and should be no expectation that anyone being proposed or applying will be accepted for this award.

They would be awarded to those who it is felt are particularly worthy and conversely those who have consistently demonstrated not having the best interests of the community at heart would not be so awarded. Due to the large numbers of people applying for these awards, in the case of a rejection no explanation should be expected or demanded however an Appeals process will be set up for any who feel that their application or contributions were not sufficiently recognized and who feel that they have more information that would have made a difference had it been known.

**ELDER** - 5,000 exp. points and at least 1 year valuable contribution with good record

- Honorable Mention in the Daily News
- Special Elder avatar
- Listing on the High Rankings page

**TEMPLAR** - 10,000 exp. points and at least 2 years valuable contribution with completely clean record

**Honorable Mention in the Daily News**  
**Special Templar avatar**  
**Listing on the High Rankings page**

**WIZARD - 15,000 exp. points and at least 3 years valuable contribution with completely clean record**

**A special web page devoted to them**  
**Honorable Mention in the Daily News**  
**Special Wizard avatar**  
**Listing on the High Rankings page**

**VIRTMASER - 20,000 exp. points and at least 4 years valuable contribution with completely clean record**

**A special unique house for Virtmasters and above**  
**Honorable Mention in the Daily News**  
**Special VIRTMaster avatar**  
**Listing on the High Rankings page**

**KNIGHT VIRTUAL - 25,000 exp. points and at least 5 years valuable contribution with completely clean record**

**Picks a new place for people to visit that Cybertown doesn't have and helps with the design and it is named as theirs**  
**Honorable Mention in the Daily News**  
**Special Knight Virtual avatar**  
**Listing on the High Rankings page**

**Note:**

- This is not a list of all jobs but includes enough to act as a guideline for other jobs.**
- Citycash is earned only for the highest job held**
- Extra Citycash and Experience Points can be awarded by the Council for stellar contribution from time to time.**



## **Appendix F: CyberIdentity/Community Interview Questions**

(Available from <<http://www.denisecarter.net/interview.htm>>)

Thanks to all my friends in Cybertown for taking the time to complete this short questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect data on Cybercommunity and Identity for the PhD thesis that I am writing. None of the questions are compulsory, if you have any thoughts that are not covered by these questions please feel free to complete the suggestions box at the end of the form or E Mail me.

Any information I receive will be held in the strictest confidence in line with the aoir ethics working committee (preliminary report available from: <<http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>at Ethics>).

I attempt at all times to adhere to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA), and to the recommendations of the Internet Crime Forum (IRC) sub-group.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT SOME AOL USERS MAY HAVE PROBLEMS WITH THIS FORM**

Thanks again for your co-operation.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

How old are you?

Which country do you live in ?

Are you male or female?

Briefly describe your family circumstances.

What do you do for a living?

How old were you when you started using the Internet?

What drew you to the Internet?

What do you do mostly when you are online?

What does the Internet mean to you?

Is there anything about the Internet makes it so unique or different (say from

the phone or face to face )

### **COMMUNICATION - LANGUAGE - TECHNOLOGY**

What equipment do you need to be online?

What special skills if any do you use to communicate online?

How did you learn to use these skills?

How do you use your computer to communicate online?

What is the main difference between being in Cybertown and being on the

Internet, or using email?

What place in enabling these skills do your computer and technology have?

How do you convey emotion/feelings in Cybertown?

Do you prefer to chat in 2D or 3D?

Why?

## **THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY AND BELONGING**

How did you discover Cybertown?  
How much time per day do you spend in Cybertown?  
In your opinion is that a lot of time? If yes - why??  
Why do you like spending time in Cybertown?  
What are the main characteristics of Cybertown?  
What was your best ever experience in Cybertown?  
What was your worst ever experience in Cybertown?  
Have you read the Cybertown constitution?  
What do you think about it?  
Why do you think the rules and regulations are there?  
Do you think that they work?  
Why do/don't they work?

## **THE NATURE OF REALITY AND VIRTUALITY - BOUNDARIES - SELF - NICKNAMES**

When did you immigrate to Cybertown?  
Are you the same person in both places?  
How do you manage to be in two places at once - ie Cybertown and RL?  
Is there a boundary between Cybertown and RL?  
In what sense are your experiences in Cybertown 'real' to you?  
What do you feel about RL events also happening in Cybertown  
(halloween, xmas,  
thanksgiving)?  
How would you describe your sense of self or ID in Cybertown?  
Do you think your sense of self as a person in Cybertown is  
fundamentally  
distinct from your sense of self in RL?  
Are you the same person in Cybertown and RL?  
What is your nickname?  
How did you choose your nickname?  
Has it got a particular significance to you?  
Does it relate to your RL self or characteristics at all?  
Does your nickname reflect your age/gender/race/nationality?  
Were you excited at choosing a new name?

## **CYBERSPACE SOCIALITY - SOCIAL NETWORKS - HOW CREATED AND REPRODUCED**

Are any of your Cybertown friendships particularly significant?  
If so, what makes your Cybertown relationships so significant?  
How do your online relationships compare with your offline  
relationships,  
better/worse/same?  
How committed do you feel to the relationships you develop in  
Cybertown ?  
How do your Cybertown relationships fit into your everyday life?  
How many of your Cybertown friends have you met offline? - how did  
you decide to  
meet this person offline?



What do your RL friends/family think of your friendships in Cybertown?

**Any suggestions?**

Thanks again for your help with my research.

Feel free to browse My Home Page at <<http://www.denisecarter.net>> for any further information on my research

## Glossary

### **Avatar**

A three-dimensional computer representation of an object on the screen that graphically represents the **user** in an interactive **multi-user dimension (MUD)**. The user can move around and control this object.

### **Browser**

This is the **software** that your computer (**client**) uses to connect to the Internet (**server**). The two most common browsers are Netscape Navigator and MS Internet Explorer. Browsers interpret **HTML** documents from the **server** and display it on the **client** screen.

### **Chatroom**

A chatroom is a site on a computer network where online conversations are held in real time by a number of users.

### **City Cash (cc's)**

As well as earning experience points each citizen also earns City Cash that can be spent in the shopping mall.

### **Client**

The **client** is the system that initiates requests to the **server**. For the home user it is the home computer.

### **CMC**

Computer-mediated communication.

### **Control Panel**

Cybertown navigation system – series of **hyperlinks** that connect the user to other places in Cybertown.

### **Cookie**

A cookie is a small file that is sent to your hard disc by a **web page** that you visit. Its purpose is to gather data that relates a later transaction to the current one. For example it may keep a count of how many times you visit a particular web page. When a web server places a cookie on a **client's hard disk**, it can use that information in a subsequent connection to determine how information should be sent to that particular client. Netscape originated the concept. The decision of whether to accept a cookie offered by a web server is entirely up to the client. There is nothing inherently harmful or dangerous in accepting cookies, except that the client has no idea what information is transferred in the process.

### **Cyber-**

Jargon used by Internet users as a prefix to refer to the world of networked computers. An example is **cyberspace**, first used by William Gibson in his book *Neuromancer*.



## **Cyberspace**

Jargon used by **newbies** to refer to an environment made possible by a network of computers designed for exploration and communication with both data structures and other humans. This term was introduced in *Neuromancer* by William Gibson.

## **DNS - Domain Name System**

A distributed database and data query service used on the Internet to translate hostnames into Internet addresses. In the web address

*http://www.hull.ac.uk/lib/homepage.html* the DNS server is (*hull.ac.uk*).

## **Emoticon**

A face made with keyboard characters. The slang term for emoticons is smileys. For example a semi-colon followed by a right curved bracket is a wink ;)

## **Experience Points**

Every Cybertown citizen earns experience points each time they log on. The amount varies from ordinary citizens to those who have jobs. The experience points of each citizen is displayed after their nickname in brackets (but only in 3d mode).

## **Flaming**

Sometimes you might offend someone unintentionally. Be prepared to receive some angry e-mail or be treated rudely in a public discussion. This is called being **flamed**. If you attack back, you will spark a **flame war**. To contain the heat, the best response usually is no response at all.

## **Flooding**

In Cybertown this generally means **flooding** the chat dialogue box with many copies of the same (or similar) message. This effectively stops all conversation.

## **Floppy disk**

Short for floppy diskette, a storage medium originally used in all types of microcomputers. Physically, it consists of a paper-thin flexible disk coated with magnetic material and mounted in a plastic enclosure 3.5 or 5.25 inches in diameter. The 3.5-inch disks have replaced the larger size, and they hold up to 1.44 megabytes (MB) of uncompressed data. The capacity of the diskette is determined by whether the medium is single-sided (SS), double-sided (DS), double-density (DD), or high-density (HD).

## **Frame**

In order to make navigation around a site easier it is desirable to keep certain elements of the site design onscreen at all times. HTML coding allows this to be done using codes that partition the web page into designated frames. Within Cybertown the frames code produces a page that is split vertically. The common navigational aid for Cybertown is always displayed in its own frame on the right of the screen. This never changes. The active screen which reflects movement around Cybertown changes as the user moves around the site.



**GIF - Graphic Interchange Format**

A standard format for digitised images used by many web servers.

**Hacker**

A person with sophisticated programming skills who can break codes and access restricted data without access privileges.

**Hard disk**

A fixed magnetic disk drive within a computer that stores large amounts of data. Winchester is a common type.

**Hardware**

The electromechanical portion of a data processing system. Computer machinery, circuit boards, monitors, peripheral devices (keyboards, printers and scanners), modems, cables, and connectors are all hardware components.

Four items of computer hardware enable connection to the Internet, the computer itself, a keyboard, a monitor and a modem. Text is typed on the keyboard and Software packages (often exclusive to Internet Service Providers) turn the bits and bytes into readable text and display it on the monitor. A device called a modem plugs the computer into the regular telephone line. The modem then converts the bits and bytes of computer-readable information into audible pulses that are sent down the telephone lines and the receiving modem translates them back into bits and bytes. Software packages (often exclusive to Internet Service Providers) turn the bits and bytes into readable text and display it on the monitor.

**Hyperlink**

Often simply called a *link*, a connection between two points in a hypertext (HTML) document or between different documents. A browser displays a hyperlink with coloured or specially formatted text. When a hyperlink is activated by a mouse click, the browser immediately seeks and displays the target of the link.

**HTML (Hypertext Markup Language)**

A set of commands for marking a document so that it can be read by a web browser, such as Netscape Navigator. All home pages on the World Wide Web are HTML documents. Commands are written in a text document usually in pairs, and the web browser converts the code into displayable screen attributes. E.g. The following command `<font face="arial" colour="blue" size="+2">`would tell the browser how to display any text until that command is discontinued`</font>`

**HTTP (Hypertext Transfer Protocol)**

The protocol used for exchanging HTML documents on the World Wide Web.

**ICTs**

Information and communications technologies.

**Image**

A collection of graphical data representing a two-dimensional scene. An image is composed of **pixels** arranged in an array. The pixels contain information representing the brightness and colour of the image at that point. The term is



generally applied to a representation of existing objects that have been photographed and scanned digitally. The two most popular image formats are **GIF** and **JPEG**.

### **Immigrate**

The initial **log on** procedure for Cybertown. Cybertown residents do not log on, they immigrate. Immigration is fairly simple, but if you immigrate you become a citizen of Cybertown and subject to the rules and regulations therein.

### **Internet**

A packet-switched network developed by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) of the Department of Defence to give researchers access to databases and computers. The Internet dates from 1969, when the ARPANET was started. The Internet has grown into a large, diverse community of online users that is self-governing and that develops its own procedures. Internet activities include sending messages over email, conducting group discussions over Usenet, accessing databases, and "surfing" World Wide Web documents, or pages, that are linked to one another.

### **ISP - Internet Service Provider**

A company that delivers Internet access to other companies and to individuals.

### **JPEG**

A standard format for digitised images used by many web servers.

### **Keyboard**

Any device that contains alphanumeric, symbol, and function keys that can input text or give instructions to a computer. The version that resembles a typewriter is referred to as a *QWERTY* keyboard because of the layout of the keys.

### **Keyboard shortcut**

A combination of keys that, when pressed simultaneously, perform some task that ordinarily requires use of a mouse or other input device and may take longer to do.

### **Log on**

To enter a networked multi-user environment, typically by submitting a user name and password to the **server**.

### **Lurking**

A **lurker** is jargon for a subscriber to a mail list or newsgroup who does not post often but who reads group postings regularly.

### **Memory**

See **RAM** (Random Access Memory) or **ROM** (Read-Only Memory).

### **Modem**

Shortened form of **modulator/demodulator**; a device that converts digital data into audio signals for transmission over telephone lines and that translates the audio signals back into data on reception.

**MUD (Multi-user Dungeon)**

A type of multiplayer interactive game that is accessible through the Internet. A MUD is like an adventure game in a structured real-time chat forum, and it may include combat, traps, puzzles, and magic.

**Navigate**

Move from place to place. Change screens by clicking on a shortcut that contains a Hypertext Link.

**Netiquette**

Contraction of network etiquette; the conventions of politeness observed on Usenet, in mailing lists, and in Internet communications in general.

**Newbie**

A new immigrant.

Someone with few experience points.

Jargon for a person who is new to computing and to the Internet.

**OS - Operating System**

Software loaded into RAM when a computer boots up, controlling fundamental processes such as saving and retrieving files. My home computer has Windows '98 as its operating system.

**Pixel**

An abbreviation of *picture element*; the smallest raster display element represented as a screen coordinate with a specified colour and intensity level. Picture resolution is measured by the number of pixels used to create an image. A common resolution is 640 x 480 pixels.

**Protocol**

A standard procedure or a set of rules with which software and hardware systems must comply in order to be compatible. All users must observe network protocol in order to have successful data communications. Protocols govern error handling, framing, and line control in transmitting and receiving packets. An example of a telecommunications protocol is XModem.

**Random Access Memory (RAM)**

A memory storage chip installed in a computer. RAM holds information that a microprocessor can access rapidly. Generally, the **operating system** and the **application software programs** are loaded into RAM. This part of a computer's memory can **read** (find and display) and **write** (record) information, and the **user** can update or amend it.

**Read**

To recall and use information in the computer memory.

**Read-Only Memory (ROM)**

A computer storage medium that allows the user to recall and use information (**read**) but not to record or amend it (**write**).



**Real**

Not simulated. Compare **virtual**.

**Server**

A software program that provides a service to a **client**. Server and client communicate via network hardware and protocols.

**Search Engine**

A database front end that allows a user to seek information on the Internet by keyword. Search engines may look for titles of documents, URLs, headers, or text.

**Software**

The part of a computing system that is not **hardware**. There are two main types of software, systems software and application software. *System software* typically includes an operating system that controls other programs; Windows '98 is an example of this type of system. *Application programs* perform functions, such as accounting or designing; word for windows is an example of this.

**Shortcut**

A link that contains a **URL** to another web page that is the new place.

**Spamming**

(Spam is the electronic equivalent of junk mail).

1. The indiscriminate posting of unrelated comments, or worse -advertisements - to every newsgroup you can think of.
2. To send unsolicited email indiscriminately to promote a product or a service, similar to junk mail in the postal service.

**Surf**

See navigate.

**TCP/IP - Transmission Control Protocol**

A standard procedure or a set of rules with which software and hardware systems must comply in order to be compatible. All users must observe network protocol in order to have successful data communications.

**URL - Uniform Resource Locator**

A means of identifying an exact location on the Internet. A URL has four parts, in <http://www.hull.ac.uk/lib/homepage.html>, for example, there is the Protocol type (<http://>), the DNS server name ([hull.ac.uk](http://www.hull.ac.uk)), and the file name ([lib/homepage.html](http://www.hull.ac.uk/lib/homepage.html))

**User**

The operator of a computer program (me).

**Virtual**

Describes an object, an entity, or a relationship that exists in software rather than in a tangible, physical condition. Virtual is a commonly used term for anything that exists but that has no concrete manifestation. Compare **real**.

**VR**

Virtual Reality - a realistic, computer-generated world.

**Web Page**

A web page address. An HTML file that is identified by a URL and that a web browser can read (e.g. <http://www.hull.ac.uk/lib/homepage.html>). A web page may contain text, hypertext links to other locations (as in a navigation bar), and images in the GIF and JPEG formats.

**WWW - World Wide Web**

A distributed information retrieval system that operates over the Internet.

This glossary was compiled with the help of the *Dictionary of Digital Media* [online]. Portland State University. Available from: <<http://www.hansenb.pdx.edu/DMKB/dict/index.php>>.



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