An Archeology of Cyberspaces

Shawn P. Wilbur
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Internet Culture ? Virtual Community ?

"Virtual community" is certainly among the most used, and perhaps abused, phrases in the literature on computer-mediated communication (CMC). This should come as no surprise. An increasing number of people are finding their lives touched by collectivities which have nothing to do with physical proximity. A space has opened up for something like "community" on computer networks, at a time when so many forms of "real life" community seem under attack, perhaps even by the same technocultural forces that make "internet culture" possible. We are occupying what may be a particularly critical moment in Western culture.

This is all the more reason to be particularly critical as we approach the tools we use to explore internet culture, even the words we choose to employ. Consider the notion of "virtual community". It reveals something about our presuppositions about both (unmodified, presumably "real") community and (primarily computer) technology that this phrase even makes sense. It is more revealing that we might think of "virtual community" as a new arrival on the cultural scene.

What follows is an attempt to come to grips with at least some of the questions raised by the notion of "virtual community", and particularly by its apparent acceptance as a phrase of choice among internet users, CMC researchers and journalists alike. It is an "archeological" study in two rather different ways. The first section, which is an exploration -- or perhaps excavation -- of some of the possible cultural and etymological roots of the phrase "virtual community", aims at unearthing a range of interpretive possibilities and spreading them out so we can begin the speculative (re)construction of concepts that we can use for rigorous research in CMC. The second section involves the exploration of slightly more literal ruins, as I examine what remains of two "virtual communities" that have already come and gone -- a section of a text-base virtual reality system housed at MIT's Media Lab, and a voice-based "virtual village" created by Harlequin Romance in conjunction with one of its book series. Throughout, the work is driven by my sense that internet users and CMC researchers have been hasty in their adoption of tools and terminology, but also by a feeling that the choices we have made in haste may prove to be surprisingly powerful, assuming we learn to use them with eyes wide open.

It is probably worth noting that my investments in these subjects are complex and multiple. Researchers on the internet seem to show a high tendency toward "going native", and I fear I am no exception. Although I have attempted to write what follows in the voice of a CMC researcher and academic, I wear numerous other hats on the internet -- nonprofessional user, electronic publisher, MOO "wizard", and owner of several electronic mailing lists, among others. I suspect some of those other voices will have their say before we are through. Of course, reference to the personal -- and the resulting scholarly discomfort -- seems to be characteristic of much of the emerging literature on internet culture. This may simply be a logical result of the strangely solitary work that many CMC researchers are engaged in, sitting alone at their computers, but surrounded by a global multitude.

The Right Tools for the Job

We use words as tools, as individuals and as scholars. On the internet we use little else. Whatever else "internet culture" might be, it is still largely a text-based affair. Of course, words are not simply tools which we can use in any way we see fit. They come to us framed by specific histories of use and meaning, and are products of particular ideological struggles. Richard Dawkins' notion of the meme may help us here. The meme is the cultural equivalent of a gene, a basic "unit of imitation". As genes act as replicators for biological structures, memes replicate cultures [1]. If we think of terms like virtual community or computer-mediated communication as the result of memetic (re)combinations, then perhaps we are more likely to be concerned about their particular inheritances, but we are also encouraged to consider the hardiness of our concepts. We ought to be on the lookout for recessive memes, and for the circumstances where elements of our memetic heritage might recombine in ways which do not enhance out our possibilities for cultural survival.

The current benchmark for any study of virtual community is probably Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Rheingold's earlier *Virtual Reality* established him as both a sharp-eyed observer and talented popularizer of "new edge" technologies. *The Virtual Community* established him firmly as a writer to be reckoned with, one of only a few able to bring the complex issues involved in internet culture to a broad audience [2]. If you have never laughed out loud or cried because of something someone said in electronic mail, or if you are likely to look askance at someone who insists they "talk" to "friends" they know only through the internet, put this book down now and read *The Virtual Community* before you go any farther. None of my reservations about Rheingold's book -- and it will become clear that I have several -- should obscure the fact that his book remains perhaps the best way to begin to learn about "virtual communities" without becoming part of one yourself.

According to Rheingold,

> Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace [3].

"Sufficient human feeling" is perhaps a rather imprecise measure, full of assumptions about the "human" and about what emotions will count as "feeling". And we are left to wonder about the ends to which this "human feeling" will be "sufficient". We are left very much in the dark about the process of community development -- perhaps "generation" or "genesis" would be as appropriate -- but we know that the key ingredients are communication and feeling. To his credit, Rheingold is not inclined to claim any great definitional rigor, although he provides plenty of indications about his own feelings. Judging from the examples which he uses, Rheingold is most prepared to see "community" in those groups which move from CMC to face-to-face interaction, as well as in those who share specific, or useful, details of "real life" (RL) [4]. It seems that for Rheingold, despite his immersion in certain virtual communities and his guarded enthusiasm for the uses of CMC, the best virtual community is an extension of "real community" -- though not, I think, in McLuhan's sense of transformative extension and amputation.

Another aspect of Rheingold's study that we ought to note, at least in passing, is his invocation of the "electronic frontier" metaphor, particularly in his use of the term "homesteading" to describe "pioneers" in virtual community-building. Because of organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), which have played an important role in addressing new issues of civil liberty and privacy relating to CMC, the notion of an electronic frontier has gained considerable currency online, even among computer users who might otherwise have reservations about a metaphor so steeped in traditions of imperialism, rough justice and sometimes violent

opposition any number of "others" [5]. In the complex social and legal spaces of internet culture, groups like EFF seem to be wearing the white hats, but we may want to consider the memetic heritage they carry with them. In any event, we should take note of the connection made between community and the near-primitive conditions of a frontier.

Community

From here, we must proceed carefully. A little bit of etymological spadework only serves to show how complicated the issues are [6]. Community seems to refer primarily to relations of commonality between persons and objects, and only rather imprecisely to the site of such community. What is important is a holding-in-common of qualities, properties, identities or ideas. The roots of community are sunk deep into rather abstract terrain. For example, community has achieved a remarkable flexibility in its career as a political term. It can be used to mean a quite literal holding-in-common of goods, as in a communist society, or it can refer much more broadly to the state and its citizens. In common usage, it can also refer to the location within which a community is gathered. Under the influence of bureaucracy and cartographic standards, this more common usage reduces the holding-in-common of the community to a matter of proximity. Community becomes shorthand for community-of-location, although we hardly presume anything like joint ownership.

Perhaps a personal example will clarify what is at stake here. My earliest recollections of the word "community" are of seeing it on road maps, back-seat driving as my father steered the family car through the rather desolate expanses of the southern San Joaquin Valley. I would track our route from town to town -- except that most of the towns in that part of the world were little more than crossroads with perhaps a gas station and a few trailers nearby. The maps designated these tiny towns, with a population under some magic number which I have long since forgotten, as communities. As a child, then, I imagined that a community was an empty, or nearly nonexistent, town.

This lowest-common-denominator for community is certainly far from Rheingold's "sufficient human feeling". Yet these tiny rural sites resonate with a discourse of homesteading and frontiers, if only to draw a clear line between those communities which grew to become larger dots on the map, merging into one another as they spread, and those that remain isolated. Here is one place to begin to ask questions about the ends of the homesteading process -- about issues of ownership and enterprise, the division of labor and the establishment of law and order. For the most part, Rheingold leaves these questions open. Are his "homesteaders" the relatively well-to-do patrons of high-priced services like the WELL ? [7] If so, then what role are the less "civilized" or less affluent denizens of the internet destined to play. For the moment, the white hats at EFF and elsewhere seem inclined to defend outlaws and "savages", but it may be that their role is somewhat obscured by the relative absence of real law on the internet thus far. That may change, if the time comes to really tame this electronic frontier.

Even as I write, electronic mail has been arriving describing a series of raids on computer bulletin boards in Florida, and reminding internet users that law enforcement officials have intervened in internet culture in the past. And recent court actions, involving the prosecution of a California couple for making available materials judged obscene in Tennessee, also reminds us that the courts may be inclined to their own theories of what constitutes community, and thus community standards [8].

"The Virtual"

In everyday speech, the "virtual" seems most often to refer to that which appears to be (but is not) real, authentic or proper -- although it may have the same effects. Even in this colloquial form it attests to the possibility that seeming and being might be confused, and that the confusion might not matter in the end. But this sense of the virtual as the as-good-as comes to us from a complex history of relations between reality, appearance and goodness. The roots of virtuality are in virtue, and therefore in both power and morality. In an archaic form, the virtual and the virtuous were synonymous. Another sense of the virtual -- which we might think is unconnected -- refers to optics, where the virtual image is, for example, that which appears in the mirror. But it may be that all of these etymological threads finally wind together.

The deepest roots of virtuality seem to reach back into a religious world view where power and moral goodness are united in virtue. And the characteristic of the virtual is that it is able to produce effects, or to produce itself as an effect even in the absence of the "real effect". The air of the miraculous that clings to virtue helps to obscure the distinction between real effects of power and/or goodness, and effects that are as good as real. The two uses of the term seem to have been concurrent. Perhaps this is an almost necessary effect of the highly metaphorical world of a Christian church that can conjure the (virtual) body of Christ "where two or three are gathered together in [Jesus'] name", or that at one time invested authority for an entire religion in an elite council or "virtual church".

A more secular understanding of virtue begins by assigning it to more physical powers, so that virtue is equated with health, strength and sexual purity. These are, of course, still closely tied to notions of morality. Between this physical virtue and the virtuality of appearances there may in fact be some sort of discontinuity. However, we might draw on what we know of the history of Protestantism to suggest at least one possible bridge between the two. Think of "visible saints", caught between an unknown but predestined fate and the demands of a culture that demanded "proofs" of salvation [9]. You can perhaps see how a good (apparently moral) appearance can come to be as good as a good heart. Following Weber, you can see how the preoccupation with the former came to largely replace concern for the latter.

The optical definition of the virtual undoubtedly shares some elements of the miraculous, but refers specifically to the realm of appearances. Optical technologies deceive us in potentially useful ways, by bringing that which can't be seen into view -- via reflection, refraction, magnification, remote viewing or simulation. We need only turn on the television to see how powerful these technologies can be. It is no wonder that the promise of immersive virtual reality has caused so much controversy. And perhaps it should be no surprise that this extreme form of optical virtuality has given rise to a fresh outburst of moral concern, such as the media's continuing, titillated fascination with "cybersex" and "teledildonics". Behind the rather tiresome, but by no means novel, interest in "dirty tech" there is probably a much more intense and interesting concern about the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fantasy. Paul Virilio has suggested that technologies of the virtual are destined to not only simulate the real, as Jean Baudrillard has suggested, but to replace it [10].

The I in Cyberspace

Before returning, finally, to the question of the virtual community, it may be worth exploring one more use of the virtual which relates to issues of individual identity. The computer -- and particularly the computer as internet terminal -- is an odd sort of vision machine. It involves the user, primarily through vision, in forms of telepresence which may mimic any and all of the senses. It is likely that those who become most immersed in

internet culture develop a sort of synesthesia which allows them to exercise all of the senses through their eyes and fingers. Perhaps this is something like the extension and amputation of the central nervous system that McLuhan suggested was the effect of the computer, but many computer users seem to experience the movement "into" cyberspace as an unshackling from real life constraints -- transcendence rather than prosthesis. At the limit, the discourses on the freedom of cyberspace suggest that we can step outside of ourselves to such an extent that we might even be able to remake ourselves in some lasting way through virtual identity-play.

I suspect that there is some truth to the suggestion that the experience of dislocation in time and space which can be an effect of immersion in internet culture can help individuals to see their own identities in a different perspective. But the more extravagant claims seem to rely on some aura of the miraculous that still clings to technologies of the virtual. I am reminded of the privileged place of the mirror in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis. In his seminar of 1953-54, Lacan used an elaborate diagram to explain the dynamics of ego formation. Through a combination of curved and plane mirrors, an imagined subject is made to see two distinct objects, a vase and a bouquet, as if the vase contained the bouquet. This trick done with mirrors, Lacan says, is the necessary mechanism of misrecognition by which human subjects are able to imagine that they are possess a coherent (phallic) identity. In Lacan's diagram, the virtual space "behind" the plane mirror is where the subject imagines (through misrecognition) that its self exists as a unity (rather than some disorganized collection of identifications). This virtual space also contains the reflection of the subject's eye -- the place of the virtual subject -- which might, Lacan seems to suggest, look back at the jumble and see it as such [11]. This seems to be a space for the analyst, but it also seems to be an impossible space -- a fantasy of analysis, which may finally be little more than a kind of joint projection -- which would have to be constructed through misrecognition of some sort just as much as the subject's assumption of the position of whole bouquet-in-vase identity. However, it seems like the virtual is where all the action is, despite its impossible status. The work of analysis takes place between an analysand that imagines that it is -- or at least ought to be -- whole and an analyst that has some investment in clearly discerning the analysand's fragmentation. Both are operating in spaces which are finally dark and uninhabitable.

When we return to the question of free identity-play on the internet we may be seeing the invocation of something very much like the Lacanian analytic situation. A great deal of the discussion of the liberatory potential of the internet relies on the assumption that one could assume something very much like the position of the virtual subject. There is some sort of attempt at self-therapy work going on "behind" the plane of the computer screen. But we are as torn as Lacan seems to be between the dynamics of the mirror and those of the screen, dynamics which seem to be quite different. In particular, there seems to be some confusion about whether or not one can occupy the place behind the screen. It is not an impossible space in the same sense, in part because there is no necessity that the virtual image have any particularly "truthful" or even "real" relation to the subject. The persona that appears in cyberspace is potentially much more a projection than a reflection -- potentially nothing more than a more complex sort of identification, and often quite consciously so. But consciousness at this level does not, I think, allow us to play analyst and analysand simultaneously, as if the extension into the virtual through computer technology was a dissociative doubling. There remains around so many of our dreams about internet culture more than a whiff of pixie dust, incense or brimstone.

Of course, the debates will continue. And perhaps I too am guilty of closing a door prematurely. What is clear at this stage of the game is that an engagement with virtual community in any adequate, rigorous way will involve us in the often painstaking negotiation of a particularly complex field of meanings and associations -- one where the possibility of choosing between the real and the as-good-as-real may finally constitute one more question among many. In this sort of terrain, we must be on the lookout for effects of speed. The desert communities of my youth were not all deserted, but my passage through them -- in the rudimentary cyber-space of an automobile traveling at highway speeds -- was too rapid. My passage was out of sync with the rhythms of life in those spaces. In writing about internet culture, I have tried to remain "in sync" with my experience of life online, but it is a difficult work -- one more reason to use great care in constructing a work like this one which

must be a representation as-good-as some aspect of that culture.

(Re)Combinations

So what is virtual community ? Too quickly -- or at "net.speed" -- we might suggest :

1. It is the experience of sharing with unseen others a space of communication. It is other contributors to electronic mailings lists, like Future Culture or Cybermind, that flood my email "inbox" with hundreds of messages each day, and which keep me checking for more every few hours. It is the crowd that gathers in the text-based virtual reality of Postmodern Culture MOO, where I am one of the "wizards", and where virtual hot-tub parties vie with art exhibits and discussion groups for attention and system resources. It is the result of a semi-compulsive practice of checking in occasionally with others who are checking in occasionally in all sorts of online forums. It is the synergistic sum of all the semi-compulsive individuals who have come to think of themselves as something like citizens in someplace we refer to with words like "cyberspace" or "the net", collaborators in the mass conjuring trick which produces what we might want to call "internet culture".
2. For me it is the work of a few hours a day, carved up into minutes and spread from before dawn until long after dark. I venture out onto the net when I wake in the night, while coffee water boils, or bath water runs, between manuscript sections or student appointments. Or I keep a network connection open in the background while I do other work. Once or twice a day, I log on for longer periods of time, mostly to engage in more demanding realtime communication, but I find that is not enough. Many of my friends and colleagues express similar needs for frequent connection, either in conversation or through the covetous looks they cast at occupied terminals in the office. Virtual community is this work, this immersion, and also the connections it represents. Sometimes it is realtime communication. More often it is asynchronous and mostly solitary, a sort of textual flirtation which only occasionally even aims at any direct confrontation of voices or bodies. This work of tending virtual community has something in common with gardening. And then the phone rings at midnight and a strange voice speaks your name, or a letter arrives in the mail, or you find yourself with an airline ticket to spend the week in a distant city, crashing on the couch of someone you have shared text with for a year but have never -- that is, never "truly", as your friends will remind you -- met.
3. And/or virtual community is the illusion of a community where there are no real people and no real communication. It is a term used by idealistic technophiles who fail to understand that authentic cannot be engendered through technological means. Virtual community flies in the face of a "human nature" that is essentially, it seems, depraved (this, at least, is what I hear, out on the 'net).
4. Virtual community has no necessary link to computers, or to glossy high technologies. There is a virtual community of "mail artists" -- individuals who subvert the world's postal systems to their own ideological and aesthetic ends (why is this community virtual ? Is it because community has become so tied to proximity, or because this unlikely affair produces effects as good as more recognizable communities ?). It is a party line, or a pen-pal network (perhaps we should simply call all of these collectivities, however mediated, (unmodified) "community").
5. Virtual community is the simulation of community, preferably with a large dose of tradition and very little mess. Colonial Williamsburg, Solvang, Disneyland, and the KOA camp down the road all share some of this flavor. Please pay at the gate.
6. Virtual community is people all over the world gathered around television sets to watch the Super Bowl or a World Cup match.
7. Virtual community is the new middle landscape, the garden in the machine, where democratic values can thrive in a sort of cyber-Jeffersonian renaissance. Driven into a new sort of wilderness, beyond an

electronic frontier, we will learn once again to be self-reliant, but also to respect one another. We will reconcile expansion with intimacy, and the values of capitalism with "family values".

We could undoubtedly go on, and on. Each of these definitions responds some of the memetic material carried by the notion of virtual community. None of them addresses the entire lineage, across time and cultures. We would hardly expect that it could or would. Some of the definitions push the limits of intelligibility, bound up tightly in the contradictions and confusions which inform notions of community and the virtual.

Putting "Virtual Community" to Work

Perhaps multiple, contradictory definitions look considerably less useful than, for example, Rheingold's fairly elegant, singular attempt. However, the point of all of this memetic dissection is not to better fit the words "virtual community" to some known social reality. Instead, we are at a point in our researches into internet culture where it is particularly important not to force definitions built to describe, for example, an already mythified westering movement to fit a new frontier of decentralized networks of multitasking, timesharing machines, and human-machine interfaces. We do not know very much about internet culture, so perhaps the best definitions are multi-bladed, critical Swiss army knives. Perhaps, precisely because of the richness of its memetic lineage, "virtual community" will serve us remarkably well.

The two brief case studies with which I will conclude this exploration constitute attempts to demonstrate the utility of virtual community as a guiding concept for CMC research, and to once again emphasize the openness of the field by comparing an element of internet culture, with a telephone-based system of a rather different sort. These are not representative cases in any ideal sense. Instead they represent extremes which may function as a foil for work, like Rheingold's, which has thus far looked within a fairly narrow range for its examples of virtual community.

The Voicemail Village

The remains of my time in Tyler, Wisconsin consist of a stack of twelve paperback romances, three copies of the same recipe, the records of four toll calls, and an academic paper I delivered on the subject. That, and a few memories, is all that remains of twelve months spent involved in the lives and loves -- particularly the loves -- of the people of Tyler, unless we count my increased, and increasingly grudging, respect for Harlequin Enterprises business savvy as an artifact of the period. And yet, for a year I was involved with the characters that moved through the twelve-book Tyler romance series. They spoke to me, quite literally on four occasions, and on those occasions I spoke back. I suspect that I was one of thousands of readers who made that connection with the citizens of Tyler, but I cannot be sure. I was alone when I spoke and was spoken to.

I came to Tyler at a time when my scholarly focus was still print media. My exit, which was also in some sense an expulsion, coincided, not entirely coincidentally, with my entrance into the world of internet culture. In March 1992, romance giant Harlequin/Silhouette was in the midst of major changes in its operations. They were launching a "New Look" for nearly all of their lines at the same time that they were imposing tighter controls over the pseudonyms under which nearly all series romance writers are required to write. The New Look was decidedly high tech, with photographic, or nearly photographic, cover art and a smooth, polished look that might well have been designed in wind tunnel. Initially, this included all of their lines, so we were treated to the

unlikely spectacle of a regency romance built according to this jet fighter aesthetic. The historical lines were later restored to their old looks. But this was the context for the appearance of the first volumes of the Tyler series, which were all the more remarkable for their homely, bumpy, quilt-motif covers and small town setting. The twelve novels in the series shared a location and a general cast, and even a connecting storyline. As the rest of the line became more clearly built for speed, the Tyler novels appeared as a particularly leisurely and welcoming alternative.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude from its down-home look that the Tyler series was not as carefully crafted as the New Look series. In fact, it may be that Tyler was as elaborately constructed as any mass market book series to date. The writers for the series were among the best available, and the packaging of the books involved contoured covers and detachable matching bookmarks. The promotions included discounts on future titles, a Tyler necklace as a free gift, and a 1-900 number where customers could order series titles that they were having trouble locating otherwise. There was also a second 1-900 line (1-900-78-TYLER) which allowed you to listen to the voices of various characters as they told you the daily town gossip, gave you previews of forthcoming novels, or shared recipes. In this elaborate voicemail system, you could navigate from one section of Tyler to another by the usual "if you want X, press Y" commands. You could also leave messages at various points, mostly to order books or have a copy of the recipe of the month mailed to you.

Perhaps it is too much to liken this to a sort of virtual reality, although it involves the negotiation of a fairly explicit landscape using commands very similar to those you might use in a MUD on the internet. But even if we were to acknowledge that 1-900-TYLER connected us to a bizarre, rudimentary voice-based virtual reality, should we think of Tyler as a virtual community ? By Rheingold's definition we would have to say no, I think. The requirement of explicit person to person communication means that no matter how many individuals "shared" the experience of the virtual Tyler, they did not constitute a community. No doubt, some outpourings of human feeling were orchestrated by the combination of written and aural texts, and if you, the anonymous reader, read the books and called the number then you and I have something in common. But what does this sort of sharing mean ? Can we acknowledge that there is something like virtual community that comes from those cultures of compatible or shared consumption that shape so much of our multi-mediated daily lives ? Are we certain that we know the difference between talking to one another and talking to the television ?

Tyler raises a number of very interesting questions about community. Some of them were clear to me when I first began to analyze the series. For example, we suspect that there is something like a community of readers who share particular tastes and concerns which would lead them to a series like Tyler, or to romances more generally. Sometimes this potential community shows itself as something more solid, in the form of magazines like *Romantic Times* which chronicle its existence or at conferences for romance readers and writers. We also suspect that there is considerable overlap between those who read and those who write romance novels, and that successful women writers may be more important heroines for their readers than the rather less dynamic leading ladies who tend to populate the novels. The case has been made for romance writing and reading alike as strategies of resistance to patriarchal demands. In this context, the question about the potential community of romance readers is a political one, and the choice to not acknowledge the (no doubt highly mediated) communication that might be taking place is one we make at some risk. In particular, we might be inclined to look for solidarity in a series focused on a literal community, especially since the Tyler series is finally itself an extended prescription for the reunification of urban and rural elements to rekindle supposed core values of American life. Of course, we might wonder how well this quasi-populist rhetoric serves the ends of a multinational corporation like the one that owns Harlequin. We should be particularly wary of the role it proposes for itself -- mediator at several levels of a new community now rather fully integrated into an economy that thrives on homework and decentralized production, and that counts on input from consumers to direct ever more accurate marketing back to them.

Tyler is, perhaps, the simulacrum of a community. It is virtual community both because it is contained in print

and voice media and because it is a replacement for the kind of person to person interaction that it portrays so appealingly. Its subsequent disappearance -- the 1-900 numbers have long since been disconnected -- marks it as primarily an artifact of marketing. But before we smugly abandon Tyler to the bit bucket of history, let's consider how different the interactions are on the average moderated electronic mailing list, or Usenet news group. To what extent, in other words, does the internet actually function as an effective many-to-many communication system, and to what extent does the highly segmented and self-selecting nature of so much of the internet foster many-to-one conversations between enthusiasts and their subject matter ? I have argued elsewhere that one of the reasons that flamewars can be so easily started or prolonged is that in many forums the subject matter, and the user's relation to it, is more important to the user than the relations between participants [12]. Perhaps great portions of the net are composed of these cultures of compatible, though not always convivial, consumption.

Follow the Bouncing Donuts

The rise and fall of the FutureCulture (FC) experiment on MIT's MediaMOO was a rather different sort of affair. The FCHall is quiet now, nearly all of the time, but once it was the site of some of the most interesting and fruitful online interactions that I have experienced. FutureCulture is an electronic mailing list with several hundred subscribers from around the world. Its nominal focus is new technology and its effect on global culture, but the actual discussions range broadly -- from questions about the future of monogamy to discussions of constitutional issues. On FC, the future is now, and much of what goes on appears to be an attempt to learn to live in a world which appears to be constantly new, endlessly shifting. The people on the list drive discussion with their particular interests. There is no clearly defined subject matter to mediate between individuals, and things can become quite personal. For those who doubt the possibility of online intimacy, I can only speak of births and deaths that have shaken the list in a variety of ways -- of hours sitting at my keyboard with tears streaming down my face, or convulsed with laughter. Communication on electronic mailing lists is asynchronous, which has some advantages for creating connections between individuals. It is rare, for instance, for me to log in without finding some new mail from members of FC, and it is there when I have the time to read it. Realtime forums cannot accommodate nearly as many different community members, since they enforce a certain speed on interaction and require the coordination of presences. Another group that I work with has recently attempted to use IRC for discussion purposes, but has discovered how difficult it is to gather an international community in realtime. Negotiating time zones can be difficult even for groups consisting entirely of Americans, and networked communities are increasingly global affairs.

However, the immediacy of realtime communication has a definite appeal and it us common for groups based in asynchronous forums to experiment with realtime interactions. At the time of FC's entrance into MediaMOO, there was also a great deal of interest in IRC as a means of expanding list-members' contact with one another. In fact, the MOOers and the IRCers engaged in a rather heated feud on the list, and in both realtime environments, for several months. What was at stake was the shape of the FC community, and more specifically its speed. The IRC crowd was arguing in favor of a sort of relatively transparent presence, and against what they saw as the "clutter" of text-based virtual reality. One of the most interesting conflicts revolved around the use of props in MOO. Why, for example, should one spend time programming an elaborate and realistic coffee pot in cyberspace ? Must online community depend on the creation of a comfortable, familiar "real life" environment ? Or should we be looking for alternative settings more conducive to other sorts of interaction, and perhaps other sorts of community ?

The debate was never settled, and members of the FC community continue to be active in MOOspace and on IRC. But don't look for them in the FCHall, or anywhere in the complex that list members built on MediaMOO.

You can still find all of the artifacts of the brief, exciting period of community building. There are the attempts to embody favorite FC memes in code, such as the Netweavers' Labyrinth, and my own tribute to the tradition of futurism, The Retrofuturist Aerodrome and Voices Blimp. There are numerous other personal statements, attempts to flesh out online personae with virtual accessories. ChristJ's Holy Office is perhaps exemplary, particularly for the wry humor apparent in its name.

Humor is an important part of the FC community, and an atmosphere of play dominates the MOO neighborhood. Exits are traversed with commands like "flip" (and "backflip" to return). The FCRec room features a ping pong table, a pente board, grandstand seating and a number of virtual refreshments -- including a box of donuts that can be eaten, replenished with a "bake" command, squashed, or thrown. The "throw" command sets off a series of messages that describe the donut ricocheting from wall to wall before finally coming to rest. I helped a much younger friend write the code that made the donuts bounce, and I have seen university professors take great glee in filling the "air" of FCRec with flying donuts. Often, these outbursts would come within minutes of serious discussions of philosophy or music, or debates about the impact of new technologies or laws. The participants varied substantially in age, education and occupation -- but a well-coded food fight can be wonderfully leveling.

So where are they now ? Were those early interactions in fact too frivolous to sustain interest, or was the environment that was built not sufficiently lifelike (or perhaps too slavish in its adherence to the "real") ? These are the questions we would ask if we interpreted the silence and emptiness of the FC/MediaMOO complex as sign of a failure. But if we track down the participants in this short-lived community, we find signs of another sort. For example, the decline of FC/MediaMOO was matched by the birth of BayMOO, a San Francisco-based MOO run almost entirely in its first few months by members of FC, or individuals who were connected through contacts made at MediaMOO. I was recruited to do early development work, and soon received administrative status, as a result of my work on MediaMOO. Similarly, my Retrofuturist Aerodrome attracted the attention of a MOO-hopping mail artist, who has since become increasingly involved in online communities, and eventually even joined FC.

The community has moved from site to site, and has changed shape on numerous occasions. Certain memes that have passed through FutureCulture have attracted small groups in other directions, although the wanderers most often find their way back. People talk about FC using words like "home", which is startling. The shell of FC/MediaMOO is perhaps just that, a shell which the FC community broke out of at some moment that none of us can quite recall, and to which it would be difficult to return. It is possible that FC itself might be constraining at some point in the community's life, and perhaps there will come a time when we will look back fondly at the list from wherever it is that the transformed community now gathers. There were communities before FutureCulture which represent part of its lineage. Some of them still survive in the environment the list provides.

Shapes of Community

It is too easy to log into an online chat system and imagine that it is just like wandering into a local bar. It is too easy to login and imagine that it is all make-believe. It is altogether too easy to enter a virtual world and imagine that this allows us to understand the "real" one. Any study of virtual community will involve us in the difficult job of picking a path across a shifting terrain, where issues of presence, reality, illusion, morality, power, feeling, trust, love, and much more, set up roadblocks at every turn. The hazards are doubled for any traveler who hopes to report what s/he has seen, since every description takes us into the realm of the virtual (the as-good-as). However, faced with the challenge, we should not be too dismayed. As we can see, the tools that we have selected seem remarkably flexible. One step on the road to increasing our flexibility as CMC researchers is

to understand these tools.

We should be prepared to find community under a wide variety of circumstances, in a broad range of environments, and intermingled with any number of elements that seem to work against the development of "sufficient human feeling". With eyes wide open, using the tools we have inherited with some respect for the memetic inheritances that they carry, CMC researchers may be able to carry forward the study of community in directions which we had not previously even imagined. However, we can, perhaps, imagine the next set of hurdles, which will, I suspect, have to be taken both all at once and at a run. Community, virtuality, mediation, commerce : how are these elements articulated within "Internet culture" ? Can we tell the difference, for example, between a community and a market segment, or culture of compatible consumption ? What are the relations between the real and the virtual, between being and seeming, between "real life" and "net.life" ? Are the structures and marks of class, race, gender and the like more or less deeply inscribed in these "virtual" spaces ? Can these clearly mediated spaces provide a place for contesting "real world" powers. Or are many of these questions badly posed, as they assume a certain authenticity and lack of mediation in our everday lives which is perhaps illusory ? Is the screen a mirror, or something else ? These are only a few of the pressing questions, and they are pressing more urgently every day.

References

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 1989).

2. See also Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown* (New York : Bantam, 1992); Clifford Stoll, *The Cuckoo's Egg* (New York : Doubleday, 1989); and Stewart Brand, *II Cybernetic Frontiers* (New York : Random house, 1974).

3. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA : Addison-Wesley, 1993), 5.

4. A common usage on the networks refers to online activities as VR, for "virtual reality", and offline activities as RL, for "real life". There is, however, a strong element of irony that informs much of this attribution of online activity to the realm of the non-real.

5. See Rheingold's chapter on EFF and similar organizations (Rheingold, 241-275).

6. In all that follows, I have relied on the *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition* for etymological guidance.

7. The WELL, or Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, is a computer conferencing system based in the San Francisco area, which charges a combination of monthly membership and hourly usage fees. It is the focus of Rheingold's introductory, definitional chapters. However, many inhabitants of communities on the open internet see communities such as the WELL much as inhabitants of the central parts of a city might look on walled, well-policed suburbs. Rheingold is careful to look at other environments, but it is not clear that "sufficient human feeling" represents an adequate measure for community on Internet Relay Chat or within a Usenet newsgroup, nor is it clear how we would measure it.

8. A summary of the case is available on the gopher at eff.org, under the name "aabbs_case.docs".

9. The standard treatment of this theological problem is Edmund Sears Morgan, *Visible Saints* (New York : New York University Press, 1963).

10. Louise Wilson, "Cyberwar, God, and Television: Interview with Paul Virilio", *CTHEORY* (electronic edition), article 20, December 1994. Virilio himself draws the comparison between himself and Baudrillard, claiming that he has surpassed Baudrillard in predicting the replacement of the real by the virtual. However, this sounds very much like Baudrillard's explanation of simulation as "more real than the real".

11. Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Techniques* (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I), (New York : Norton, 1991), 139-142.

12. See my "Running Down the Meme: Cyberpunk, alt.cyberpunk, and the Panic of '93", originally presented to the American Culture Association National Conference, 1994.