

**RELATIONALITY AND THE RE-ENTRY OF THE REAL:
COMMUNITY IN CYBERSPACE?**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates synchronous, disembodied online communication in chatrooms. We are particularly interested in the notion of reality and processes of 'community' formation as they apply in the electronic environment of chatrooms. Jean Baudrillard's theory of 'simulacra' provides us with a starting point as it has been suggested that the theory provides a 'perfect' description of the online self. After a cursory literature review, we conduct our own empirical study in order to explore whether indeed 'reality' is absent in cyberspace. At first we restricted this empirical work to (passive) observation (August 2003) but soon found out that key features of online communication could not be observed but had to be experienced. As a result we moved from observation to active (covert) participation (September and October 2003). Chapters 2 and 4 present a selection and preliminary analysis of the data we collected. Van Gennep's and Turner's notion of 'liminality' provides us with a framework for the analysis of these experiences. Our theoretical analysis is given in the concluding chapter, which is divided into two parts. First, we theorise the relationship between language and reality in chatrooms, emphasising that the language used in online communication shares aspects of both written and spoken language. The second part of the final chapter presents our key finding, which is that cyberspace, as experienced in chatrooms, is not at all void of reality. More specifically we argue that the 're-entry of the real' and the unfolding of online relationships are two aspects of one and the same process.

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1. INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY AND REALITY

That's the entire problem. Is there still reality? I would rather say that we are in hyper-reality. Effectively, everything can be an object of communication. [...] It's of little consequence whether the contents are completely real or unreal, or hyper-real [...].¹

The close analysis of the dimensions and essence of community as an emergent phenomenon in chatrooms of synchronous communication first requires an exposition of the nature of cyberspace. Cyberspace is a relatively new phenomenon and there is a degree of instability surrounding attempts to define, bound or characterise it. Indeed, questions about whether cyberspace is unnatural and 'beyond' the physical world or is simply an extension of it continue to be debated and discussed. Nevertheless, what often emerges from such undertakings is a reengagement with the underlying question of 'reality' itself, with a view to discerning the extent to which 'cyberspace' offers new departures in understanding or conversely, reinforces traditional conceptions.

The following chapter could not possibly exhaust the perennial 'question of reality' that arises from the study of cyberspace, and indeed does not seek to do so. However, what is gleaned from the discussion can be used as a way of conceptualising the environment under study and will clarify the approach taken in the thesis to the chatrooms themselves. Although the assertions drawn from the theoretical discussion are tentative, and open to reassessment after the empirical study, they at least provide a foothold in the exegesis to uncover the potential for community in cyberspace.

As mentioned, a plethora of emerging theorisations on cyberspace are available. For example for Gibson,² cyberspace celebrates a fundamental transformation in relations between humans and machines, which are mediated by computer networks. Jordan argues that '[c]yberspace has been conceptualized as a net, matrix, metaverse and, universally, as a place constructed out of information.'³ Lawrence Lessig describes the architecture and the nature of cyberspace differently, claiming that; 'The barriers of cyberspace in its natural state are radically different from the barriers in real space'⁴. What becomes clear is the contested nature of the 'vision' that these authors hold of cyberspace, as well as the differing emphasis they give to issues of 'relations,' 'space' and 'place'. However, for the purpose of the present study, the following chapter will draw heavily on Baudrillard and by extension McLuhan. It will be argued that Baudrillard provides a vocabulary and a conceptualisation with which the empirical study can be approached.

In the second part of this introductory chapter, we will provide a selective literature survey of the scholarly literature on cyberspace. Given the rapidly increasing volume and diversity of the literature our survey cannot and does not want to be exhaustive.

¹ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Work of Art in the Electronic Age: Interview with *La Sept*', in Mike Gane (ed.), *Baudrillard Live: selected interviews* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 145-151 (145-146).

² William Gibson, *The Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984).

³ Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The culture and politics of cyberspace and the internet* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 26.

⁴ Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas: the fate of the commons in a connected world* (New York: Random House, 1st edition 2001), p. 121.

The survey's purpose is twofold. On the one hand we aim to demonstrate that the issues of reality and community in cyberspace are hotly debated among cyber-researchers. On the other hand, we aim to show that in spite of the range and volume of the existing literature, our approach to the question is original. In other words, while we situate our present study within the existing literature in terms of our topic and research question, we also claim that we are making a genuine, innovative contribution.

The chapter will conclude in 1.3. with a brief summary of the differences between the existing approaches to our subject and our approach.

1.1. THE QUESTION OF REALITY: BAUDRILLARD ON HYPERREALITY AND SIMULACRA

1.1.1. Introduction to Baudrillard and McLuhan

[T]he merging of the media and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new age.⁵

Jean Baudrillard is among the most important and influential contemporary social theorists. Although he is one of France's leading intellectuals his reputation has been growing slowly in the English-speaking world and is largely based upon books published after the 1970s. He was born in Reims, France in 1929, only three years later than Michel Foucault. Although he came into academia relatively late, after working for a number of years as a secondary school teacher, the department he joined became one of the focal points of the 1968 uprising against the de Gaulle government. It has been argued that the failure of the uprising had a major impact on Baudrillard's work, resulting in the polemic, leftist *The Mirror of Production* (1975).⁶ Nevertheless, what became clear from the development after his early work is that the author was not simply another 'ideological' writer but one who observed problems throughout the whole political process and possessed an 'eagle eye for the absurdities of modern life.'⁷

Baudrillard made his appearance on the theoretical scene much later than his contemporaries like Foucault, as his early writing had not been translated into English, and therefore his thought had not played an influential role until the entrance of the issue of postmodernism in the 1980s.⁸ His philosophical and political thought was informed by encounters with Marx, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche predominantly, and was enhanced by the influence of Sartre, Lefebvre, and McLuhan's theory on electronic media. Baudrillard owns a distinctive place in the contemporary discourse surrounding 'virtuality,' identifying the 'non-real' as becoming completely

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitcham), (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 54.

⁶ Rex Butler, 'Jean Baudrillard', in Anthony Elliot and Larry Ray (eds), *Key Contemporary Social Theorists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 32-37 (32-33).

⁷ Rex Butler, 'Jean Baudrillard', p. 32.

⁸ Mike Gane, 'Introduction' in Gane (ed.), *Baudrillard Live: selected interviews*, pp. 1-16 (1).

representative of the ‘real,’⁹ which will be expanded upon later.

The influence of McLuhan is particularly important for the way in which Baudrillard developed his approach to cyberspace. As has been highlighted by Poster,¹⁰ the ties between the two mean that an exploration of McLuhan would enrich the study of Baudrillard. Moreover, McLuhan is still regarded as an axiomatic figure in the study of media. Consequentially, there will be a brief account of selective ideas of McLuhan as part of his theory on media culture that can be offered as a departing point for a discussion on Baudrillard.

McLuhan¹¹ is well known for using two opposite notions to categorise culture: ‘cool’ and ‘hot’. Cool cultures for him are represented by ritual and symbolic festivals, dance and oratory and this kind of culture dominates tribal societies, while literacy for him represents hot culture, as it ‘rests at a distance, disaggregate action and reaction.’¹² The period of electronic mass media embodies a period of cool culture. To put the present study in the context of McLuhan’s theory, one suggests that the ‘age of information’ which is becoming dominated by the use of the Internet in cyberspace, is a part of cool culture; action and interaction become simplified in the context of the speed of communication, which enables a kind of ‘elimination’ of distance by enabling connection among multi-located remote computers that communicate to each other. Theories about media and culture pose further questions not only about the ‘reality’ that the media constitute but also about the structured relation between the medium itself and the culture it produces.

The relationship between media and people, and the dynamics of the media to marquee and influence cultures, is strongly oriented in McLuhan’s central point that any medium is ‘an extension of man’ and most importantly that ‘the media is the message.’¹³ Epstein and Epstein elaborate this idea further by saying that according to McLuhan, a super highway can become an extension of the feet, in the same manner as the radio can become the extension of the ear, the print media the extension of the eye, and the television and computer technologies the extension of the central nervous system.¹⁴ These extensions of media are analysed by McLuhan in accordance with the social structure they formulate and the cultural forms through which they are realised. In his book *Understanding Media*, he argues that all media have another medium as

⁹ It is necessary to clarify that the use of the term ‘real’ in the thesis will be in reference to the off-line world.

¹⁰ When Mark Poster discusses the virtual ethnicity in an age of global communications, he mentions that Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio pioneered the ‘descent’ in mass culture, but especially McLuhan by introducing a new tribalism, a global village, opened a path to virtual ethnicity. See: Mark Poster, ‘Virtual Ethnicity: Tribal Identity in an Age of Global Communications’, in Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0. Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (London: Sage, 1998), pp. 184-211 (197-198).

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The extensions of man* (London: Sphere, 1967 and London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2001. First published in the United Kingdom 1964).

¹² Mike Gane, *Baudrillard’s Bestiary* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 49.

¹³ Jonathon S. Epstein and Margarete J. Epstein, ‘Fatal Forms: Towards a (Neo) Formal Sociological Theory of Media Culture’, in Douglas Kellner (ed.), *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 135-149 (141).

¹⁴ Epstein and Epstein, ‘Fatal Forms’, p. 139. See also McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Sphere, 1967) and McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of typographic man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

their content. In his sense, the media are conveying their message through primary media, which become, in essence, the real message. The media, literacy, television and computer become the mediator of experience through the medium they content; they change the environment. McLuhan sums this up when he argues that:

What we are considering here, however, are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.¹⁵

McLuhan's argument that 'the medium becomes the message', is interpreted by Baudrillard who claims that: 'technology itself becomes the message; it doesn't push things forward or transform the world, it becomes the world...With information technology, for example, there is an effect on the realisation of the world.'¹⁶ 'World' is realised through the media, and thus the media does not only convey a message for the world, but rather, 'creates' the world; they produce the meaning of the world and its various cultural and social dimensions, and finally become the message themselves. Technology is not only the medium that carries the information as message, but the message itself.

For McLuhan the media are in constant struggle with the cultural forms they create, and he critically assesses the new technological media, believing that the speed at which information is nowadays transmitted creates 'mental breakdown of varying degrees.'¹⁷ At this point Baudrillard differentiates his position from McLuhan's, indicating that, although the new media extend the central system, it must be taken into consideration that 'they are still invested with the structures of power and regressive fantasy.'¹⁸ In general, McLuhan tries to investigate the connection between the media of communication and the culture they dominate. Baudrillard imposes a critique on the thesis of McLuhan about the categorisation of culture finding it 'extremely obscure',¹⁹ but remarks that 'there is an interesting idea, the possibility of a short circuit between the hot and cool'.²⁰ He studies the importance of the invasion of the cool media, such as television, into the hot cultures, and accordingly the different orders of active and passive participation it dictates. Thus Baudrillard uses McLuhan as a springboard for his own critique of communication and culture, particularly in relation to new media.

Communication through mass media has become for Baudrillard a dominant cultural form that acts as a black hole of signs and information which has evolved into a total system of mythological interpretation. As with any system, the system of media and communication has for him its own code and signification and affects the social through its influence upon the human being. Needless to say, the social dimensions of

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media : The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2001), p. 8.

¹⁶ Baudrillard, 'The Power of reversibility that exists in the fatal: Interview with D. Guillemot and D. Soutif', in Gane (ed.), *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, pp. 43-49 (44).

¹⁷ Epstein and Epstein, 'Fatal Forms', p. 140. See also McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Sphere, 1969).

¹⁸ Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary*, p. 49.

²⁰ Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary*, p. 49.

electronic media have become the epicentre of studies focusing on technologies. Woolgar, referring to the new electronic information and communications technology, argues that 'all aspects of social, cultural, economic, and political life thus stand to be affected by the continued massive growth in electronic technologies.'²¹

The media for Baudrillard does not count as a medium in itself, but as a re-theorising of one's position in the world and potentially re-orientating one's vision of the world. Gane tries to elaborate upon McLuhan's and Lefebvre's contribution to Baudrillard's thought, by arguing that for Baudrillard when 'tak[ing] the railways- it is not any particular journey that counts, but rather the vision of the world that is made possible.'²² Consequentially, one would argue that for Baudrillard, the message that the media carries does not only convey the mere significance of the result produced by using the particular medium, but also, and perhaps most importantly, the significance of the relationship built between the user of medium and the world. Such a relationship becomes in the end the most significant implication of using the specific medium.

For Baudrillard, the emergence of mass media and information technology has been related to social and cultural formations. This amalgamation of technological and cultural processes makes us wonder, in a Baudrillardian sense, whether and to what extent could one's experience of the world be transformed through technology. Baudrillard explains further by asserting that 'we must think of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a sort of genetic code which controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal.'²³ To come back to the question in the present study: What are the effects of the 'relation' between cyberspace and the participants within it? How is the 'reality' of cyberspace being transformed when experience is structured through participation in chatrooms?

By establishing a general introduction to Baudrillard's ideas on mass media in relation to the main research question, it is now necessary to explore the nature of the studied environment through the exegesis of the language symbol 'real' and the process of understanding which moves through simulation, simulacra and signs to the 'hyperreal'.

²¹ Steve Woolgar, 'Five Rules of Virtuality', in Steve Woolgar (ed.), *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1-22 (1).

²² Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary*, p. 50.

²³ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 55.

1.1.2. Approaching the 'real'

But I hold no position on reality. [...] The real-all things considered, perhaps it exists- no, it doesn't exist- is the insurmountable limit of theory. The real is not an objective status of things, it is the point at which theory can do nothing. [...] Everyone claims "to be in reality". But the test of reality is not decisive. Nothing happens in the real.²⁴

The ambiguous position that Baudrillard holds, the discernable indecisiveness on the question of reality is neatly encapsulated in the preceding statement. Although Baudrillard claims here that he has 'no position on reality', it is this key philosophical issue that acts as his departing point into an understanding of why it is no longer *necessary* to hold a position on reality. He famously wrote that 'the great philosophical question used to be "Why is there something rather than nothing?"' Today, the real question is: "Why is there nothing rather than something?"²⁵ Thus the first part of Leibniz's famous formulation, relating the primary question of existence itself, is inverted by Baudrillard, suggesting already the extent to which he pushes the reader to rethink questions of what is 'real'; to discern a clear difference in the modern world.

At first glance the above question may lead to assumptions about the 'nihilistic' nature of Baudrillardian theory. Although the mystery of 'something' operates as driving force for producing and posing traditional ontological questions about 'being', it seems that the question expressed by Baudrillard rejects the existence of 'something' as a conventional starting point for ontological investigation. Consequentially, it becomes clear that there is potential for an impasse in understanding Baudrillard, as he seems to be inferring that what is 'real' is 'nothing'. However, it is not simply that 'something' has been exchanged with 'nothing', it is that the 'real' has itself been transformed in his analysis. Baudrillard argues that: 'the real becomes [...] *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction* [...] the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*'.²⁶ The hyperreal'.²⁶

So far Baudrillard's conception of reality is one that has become devoid of content, and to a certain extent 'deadened.' Indeed, it is precisely this lack of content that propels his thought as the question of why and how this has happened arises. From the previous quotation it appears that a process of continuous reproduction displaces the real; a process that will be elaborated on in the following section. What is also clear, bearing in mind the discussion on media, is that there is a link between modern practices and ways of life and the transformation of reality. In light of the current study, Baudrillard forces the reader to consider whether the debate about the 'reality of cyberspace' is actually taking place in a culture that is itself devoid of reality, or concrete referentials. Nevertheless, in order to make clearer his argument on the

²⁴ Baudrillard, 'Forget Baudrillard: Interview with Sylvère Lotringer', in Gane (ed.), *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, pp. 99-127 (122-123).

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 2.

²⁶ Barry Smart, 'Europe/America, Baudrillard's fatal comparison' in Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner, (eds), *Forget Baudrillard?* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 47-69 (52). See also Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 146. Emphasis as in text.

absence of reality it is necessary to better understand how this absence occurs through a discussion of 'signs' and 'simulation' and 'simulacra' that lead to the 'hyperreal'.

Simulation, Simulacra and Signs

Baudrillard writes of what is not there, what went missing, what is no more, what lost its substance, ground or foundation. The major trait of our times, he insists, is disappearance [...]. In simulation – this crucial, universal, perhaps exclusive, mode in which all things today are - the territory no longer precedes the map. It is rather the map that precedes the territory [...]. In fact we do not know the difference between map and territory [...].²⁷

Bauman's reflections on Baudrillard are a fitting introduction to the following section as they highlight the 'problem' of reality (disappearance) that leads to the investigation into 'simulation'. Bauman clearly identified the import of simulation as the 'exclusive,' modern 'mode' of being for Baudrillard and it may be possible to bring this into relation to his own emphasis on social reality as essentially cultural and postmodernism as the reflexive critique of the emergent order of modernity. Nevertheless, what is needed is a more systematic explanation of the disappearance of reality.

Perhaps the most important distinction to make when trying to get a grip on Baudrillard's approach is the distinction he makes between 'representation' and 'simulation' of reality. A representation is an 'image' that reflects reality but which is different and understood to be so. It is difference that 'forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real.'²⁸ However, Baudrillard argues that it is this 'sovereign difference' that has disappeared, the 'representational imaginary... disappears with *simulation*.'²⁹

The process through which representation is replaced, or overwhelmed by simulation is explained through the following four phases of the image.

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum³⁰

Initially, an image will represent some part of reality, in a sense it will be dissimulating 'something'; a representation based on a referential. The second stage is a 'bad' representation, which undermines an aspect of the real. The third 'plays' at being an appearance of reality and lastly there is no longer any 'appearance' of reality at all, it is pure simulation and conceals 'nothing'.³¹ Poster clarifies this by adding that 'simulations are different from fictions or lies in that the former not only presents the absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real, it also undermines any contrast to

²⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-151

²⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 2-3.

²⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 2-3. My emphasis.

³⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 11. Emphasis as in text.

³¹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 12.

real, absorbing the real within itself.’³²

As an illustration of the difference between representation and simulation, Baudrillard looks at the case of illness. If an individual represents being ill, she will lie down in bed and pretend to be ill. For someone who simulates illness, they have to produce some of the symptoms. As far as Baudrillard is concerned, the former action leaves the ‘reality principle intact’ meaning there is still a difference between the person who is actually ill and the person who is representing illness. In the latter example, the lines between real and imaginary disappear; one is not sure if they are ill or not. Moreover, if symptoms can be ‘produced’ it means that illnesses cease to be natural as they can be simulated which in turn undermines medical principles. While one may be able to see flaws in the example, the confusion over what is ‘real’ that ensues in the ‘age of simulation’ is clearly discernable.

Indeed, by drawing the distinction between representation and simulation, one begins to understand Baudrillard’s position on the content-less reality. Reality is ‘nothing’ if one cannot tell the difference between what is real or not and further, if there is no longer a referent for what is real. What comes to replace the real (or at least subvert it) is the ‘artificial resurrection [of the real] in systems of signs...It is no longer a question of imitation...it is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.’³³

When signs replace reality, then according to Baudrillard objects are signified and called ‘simulacra’. However, the simulacra have ‘changed’ and in order to understand how it can be applied in the modern era, one needs to understand how levels and ‘orders of simulacra’ relate to broad historical developments. The first ‘order’ runs from the Renaissance up to the industrial revolution and explains how signs break away from being locked into hierarchical order (of classes, clans etc) and start to refer to external reality. This means that signs are no longer exchanged between individuals, as in the feudal system in which clothes, speech and look conveyed immediately one’s ‘position’. Instead, signs can be compared and are measured against the ‘external reality’ to which they both claim to refer. Therefore this first order is depicted as ‘counterfeit’, as signs will exchange themselves for one another but they share recognition of an outside ‘real’ and as such are structured by their difference from it.³⁴ A sound example can be found in the automaton who acts as a ‘*metaphor for* and not an *equivalent to* the human.’ Therefore the automaton as a sign is not trying to be human and cannot be mistaken for one, indeed only if the difference is maintained can both relate.³⁵ In consequence, the first order simulacra actually confirm the real by the fact that they have to be different from it.

³² Mark Poster, ‘Critical Theory and Technoculture : Habermas and Baudrillard’, in Kellner (ed.), *Baudrillard : A Critical Reader*, pp. 68-88 (81).

³³ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 4.

³⁴ Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 36.

³⁵ Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*, p. 37.

The second order of simulacra as based around the commercial is placed clearly in the industrial revolution. It is a transition stage in which the difference between sign and reality is eroded and thus makes 'resemblance' between the two impossible: The sign wants to become the same as the real. In order to explain this 'order', Butler uses the example of the 'rationale of the assembly line' to explain how 'there is no difference between the model and the series. The first version of the thing is the same as the last. All copies are, as it were, "original". And all are equally, "unoriginal". They are certainly no longer counterfeits because there is no real or original from which they derive, against which to compare them.'³⁶ In dramatic terms, Baudrillard describes this as the 'obliteration of the original reference'³⁷ which allows the possibility of a general equivalence of all.

The third order of simulacra can be found from the industrial revolution up to the present day. The third order is of simulation and represents the discussion undertaken earlier in this section and continued throughout. It is the search for the referentiality within the system of signs which thus produces the 'simulated' real. 'Simulation', then, is the total consumption of the real through the simulacra which no longer allow the possibility of distinguishing reality because it becomes that which is '*always already reproduced*.'³⁸ The third order of simulacra becomes a justification for the system of signs or as Baudrillard called it a 'tactical hallucination'³⁹ which simply acts to sustain and extend the system because 'what is realised is that this real is possible only because of the system.'⁴⁰

'Simulacra' are in essence, the signified 'object', the representations of 'objects' by 'signs', to such an extent, that the 'real' disappears. 'Simulation', then, is the total consumption of the real through the simulacra which no longer allow the possibility of distinguishing reality because it becomes that which is '*always already reproduced*.'⁴¹

Trying to surmise Baudrillard's theory on simulacra and simulation, one could argue that 'things' are being revealed without being present, but rather through their disappearance, (because when 'things' are represented by 'signs', they are not actually there), and this can open up a discussion about the possible disappearance of the world. This disappearance is possible not merely as a result of the absence of 'things', but as a result of their representation by 'signs'. The representation of 'things' by 'signs', the 'simulation', in Baudrillardian sense, does not only account for the disappearance of 'things', but it has to do with their replacement by 'signs' and therefore the appearance of 'simulacra'. The ambiguously defined line between 'things' and their 'signs', between the 'real' and 'un-real', 'gives way to the simulacrum, which consecrates the unhappy non-distinction between true and false, between the real and its signs.'⁴²

³⁶ Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*, p. 38

³⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 97.

³⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 146. Emphasis as in text.

³⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 117.

⁴⁰ Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*, p. 39.

⁴¹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 146. Emphasis as in text.

⁴² Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, p. 17.

Baudrillard by theorising 'signs', 'simulacra', 'simulation', tries to illustrate the movement from 'real' to 'hyperreal'. To him, 'hyperreality' is a 'domain where you can no longer interrogate the reality or unreality, the truth or falsity of something.'⁴³ In the next section the ambiguity of hyperreality will be attested and the outcome for human being explained. It may already appear that the language is somewhat volatile and causes genuine difficulties in thinking in a Baudrillardian way on the real. As he himself has asserted, 'say: This is real, the world is real, the real exists (I have met it) - no one laughs. Say: This is a simulacrum, you are merely a simulacrum, this war is a simulacrum-everyone bursts out laughing.'⁴⁴ Yet it is precisely this false 'trust' or 'belief' in the real that Baudrillard sets about to contest and by understanding the hyperreal, his 'challenge' becomes more transparent.

Hyperreal

...That's what I call hyper-reality. Fundamentally, it's a domain where you can no longer interrogate the reality or unreality, the truth or falsity of something. We walk around in a sphere, a megasphere, where things no longer have a reality principle. Rather a communication principle, a mediatizing principle.⁴⁵

What remains, as a product of constant reproduction is the 'hyperreal'. The result of the simulation is the projection of the real by simulacra, a process that leads Baudrillard to argue that there is 'nothing' rather than 'something' in relation to questions of reality. Therefore any theorising on 'real' is no longer possible given that the 'real' is reproduced, and what appears as 'real' at the end of simulation is the 'hyperreal'. In Baudrillard's words, '[the] principle of simulation wins out over the reality principle.'⁴⁶

What then is the impact of the domination of the hyperreal? For Baudrillard this efficient simulation of the real is exemplified through the example of Disneyland. The first layer of analysis may see Disneyland as a play with illusions; it is an attractive location because it provides a series of 'worlds' signified by themes such as the wild west. Nevertheless, another level of attraction is seen to be the 'revelling in real America'⁴⁷ as the warmth of the crowd that is 'magnetised' by the gadgets and is pushed into 'flows'. By this Baudrillard understands Disneyland as simulating aspects of American life that, when the crowds leave for the 'real' world (often juxtaposed by the image of the solitude of the automobile in the car park), they no longer experience: it is a caricature of American values. Baudrillard claims that 'all its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic strip form. Embalmed and pacified.'⁴⁸

⁴³ Baudrillard, 'The Work of Art in the Electronic Age: Interview with *La Sept*', in Gane (ed.), *Baudrillard Live: selected interviews*, pp. 145-151 (146).

⁴⁴ Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, p. 95.

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, 'The Work of Art in the Electronic Age: Interview with *La Sept*', in Gane (ed.), *Baudrillard Live: selected interviews*, pp. 145-151 (146).

⁴⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 152.

⁴⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 24.

Nevertheless, there is another level of concealment, one that helps us understand the implication of hyperreality. Baudrillard argues that Disneyland is offered to the participant as illusory so as to make them think that everything else is real: '[I]n fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of 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, and thus of saving the reality principle.'⁴⁹ The role Disneyland plays is to simulate a referent to the real, which is the essence of the hyperreal; concealment through simulation to the point where nothing is discernable and everything (or nothing) is in flux.

When one considers Baudrillard's earlier contention over the nothingness of reality, it is through the hyperreal that one is finally able to understand his consternation. The real no longer has content as it is perpetually simulated, as Baudrillard goes on to explain: 'It is not, then, the real which is the opposite of simulation-the real is merely a particular case of that simulation-but illusion. And there is no crisis of reality. Far from it. There will always be more reality, because it is produced and reproduced by simulation, and is itself merely a model of simulation.'⁵⁰ Therefore, hyperreality is, as was established earlier, the state in which the real as something is replaced by the real as nothing; the real which is voided by its own simulation.

While the application of Baudrillard's theorisation will be addressed in a later section, one can immediately see the fundamental way in which Baudrillard could effect discussion on cyberspace. By considering cyberspace as a 'virtual reality', as the 'illusion' that confirms our own reality, is there a danger that it actually obscures our ability to see the hyperreality of the non-cyberspace world? In other words, does the 'obvious' simulation of reality through computer technology simply conceal the simulation that is the everyday life of a human being in the modern world? While a discussion on the way in which Baudrillard directly addresses cyberspace is needed, it is worth bearing in mind the extent to which, if taken to the logical extreme, his ideas destabilise analysis of the world itself.

Let us now move on to discuss under which perspective Baudrillard examines technology, in order to bring into focus the broader discussion of 'reality' in cyberspace. As Baudrillard indicates: 'Internet, both as a technological artifact and as a popular image, provides a site for exploring "the world", and the position of such systems of totality in postmodernity.'⁵¹

He explores the terrain of cyberspace by applying his theory of 'simulation' in the communication through Internet. As previously mentioned, the transcendence from 'real' to 'hyperreal' occurs, according to Baudrillard, when representation of 'things' by 'signs' gives way to 'simulation'. The computer screen enables the establishment of 'hyperreality' because 'the screen becomes a hyperreal vehicle for travelling across a simulated world.'⁵² Departing from McLuhan's position which saw technology as

⁴⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 25.

⁵⁰ Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, p. 16.

⁵¹ Mark Nunes, 'Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity', *Style*, Vol. 29, Issue 2 (1995), pp. 314-327 (314).

⁵² Nunes, 'Baudrillard in Cyberspace', p. 2.

‘extensions of man’⁵³ he regards technology in general as becoming ‘a marvellous adventure...It becomes an art of disappearance.’⁵⁴ To him, the world is not only being transformed by the technology but rather it becomes an autonomous world, because of the process of ‘simulation’ through technology –or on computer screen in our study-orientates a new world, the hyperreal, virtual world.

When Nunes discusses Baudrillard he indicates that according to the Baudrillardian approach ‘the emergence of the Internet as a kind of cybernetic terrain marks the end of the symbolic distance between the metaphoric and the real. Cyberspace abandons “the real” for the hyperreal by presenting an increasingly real simulation of a comprehensive and comprehensible world...Now, the model of the world becomes the world itself.’⁵⁵ Here, the Internet is seen as the total absorption of ‘reality’ to such an extent that it becomes a ‘new’ world, to the ontological dimensions of which, I will refer in the following parts.

From a Baudrillardian perspective the Internet and the hyper-potential world of connectivity that orientates reveal the ‘unreal’ not as something imaginary or fantasy-created, but as something very close to ‘real, as a *‘hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself.’*⁵⁶ The Internet offers to him a simulation of the ‘real world’, which is represented on the screen not as a reality but as a ‘virtuality’ or ‘hyperreality’. The technology of networked machines originates virtual environments that will be analysed in following chapters. To what extent the activities in cyberspace such as the activities in chatrooms enforce a sort of ‘simulation’ that can become a step to ‘hyperreality’, or a device to overcome the distance between ‘real’ and ‘hyperreal’, is a question needs to be further analysed.⁵⁷

Critique of Baudrillard

The impact of new communication forms on society and its nature can be approached through Baudrillard’s reading. The comprehension of their nature and the environment they shape or change, can be served by the Baudrillardian theory on ‘signs’, ‘simulacra’ and ‘simulation’. He offers a theoretical arena for the exploration of the field of ‘reality’ and ‘hyperreality’. The current investigation attempts to draw these theoretical notions into relation to the concrete empirical study and use them as general analytical tools. Baudrillardian arguments operate as the departing point for discussing the nature of ‘reality’ in cyberspace, although such positions have provoked contradictions among scholars.

Poster recognises that although ‘Baudrillard’s writing is open to several criticisms [...] [his] work is an invaluable beginning for the comprehension of the impact of new communication forms on society.’⁵⁸ Virilio, the prolific French intellectual, known for

⁵³ Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, p. 35.

⁵⁴ Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, p. 39.

⁵⁵ Mark Nunes, ‘What Space is Cyberspace? The Internet and Virtuality’, in David Holmes (ed.) *Virtual Politics. Identity and Community in Cyberspace* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 163-178 (163-164).

⁵⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 142. Emphasis as in text.

⁵⁷ Further description of ‘what is’ of cyberspace is provided in the discussion and analysis of the empirical study, in the chapter on Empirical Study.

⁵⁸ Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 113.

his writings on media and communications technology poses his critique on technological innovation in general, and on computers in particular. He makes the suggestion that ‘the computer or telecommunications in general, functions as “the last vehicle”, one which threatens to resolve all topographical concerns.’⁵⁹ He considers cyberspace as the accident of the real space, not as a real space, and moreover he regards virtual reality as the accident of the reality.

In order to illustrate the preceding argument Virilio supports the idea by metaphorically presenting an example with a broken glass. To him what is broken, is not the glass itself but the reality of the glass.⁶⁰ He disagrees with Baudrillard on the issue of simulation. For Virilio we cannot talk about simulation but substitution. While for Baudrillard the simulation of reality leads to hyperreality - without obvious distinction - for Virilio we have two different realities, the actual and the virtual. ‘This is no simulation but the coexistence of two separate worlds. One day the virtual world might win over the real world.’⁶¹ Consequentially, in the case of Virilio the demarcation line between two different ‘expressions’ of reality, ‘reality’ and ‘virtuality’ is obvious, while for Baudrillard ‘hyperreality’ is the transcendence from ‘reality’ under the process of representation and thus simulation.

Nevertheless, Virilio seems to recognise the existence of metaphors in cyberspace when he poses the question: ‘*Who will in future generate the codes and the specifications by which bodies will be represented in cyberspace where everything exists as metaphor?*’⁶² Going back to Baudrillard, it could become an easy task to map out his central argument on ‘simulacra’ and ‘simulation’, by simply suggesting the ‘disappearance’ of reality. Soja stresses the danger in disappearing with Baudrillard into the desert, and he clarifies Baudrillard’s argument by using Bauman’s critique:

Simulation, you might think, consists in pretending that something is not what it is; this does not alarm us because we feel that we know how to tell the pretence from reality. Baudrillard’s simulation is not like that, however; it effaces the very difference between the categories true and false, real and imaginary. We no longer have any means of testing pretence against reality, or know which is which [...].⁶³

Essentially, refuting all referentials, undermining one’s ability to discern in any capacity what is real or not, means we must be content simply not to ‘know’. This is not the Socratic learned ignorance but the abandonment of the possibility, or

⁵⁹ Nunes, ‘Baudrillard in Cyberspace : Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity’, p. 315. See also Paul Virilio, ‘The Last Vehicle’, in Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (eds), *Looking Back on the End of the World* (New York : Semiotext(e), 1989), pp. 106-119.

⁶⁰ Luise Wilson, ‘Cyberwar, God And Television : Interview with Paul Virilio’, in *CTheory*, (October 1994), at: http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=62.

⁶¹ Virilio in Wilson, ‘Cyberwar, God And Television : Interview with Paul Virilio’.

⁶² Steve Redhead, ‘From Sexual Perversion to Sexual Diversion’, in Steve Redhead (ed.), *The Paul Virilio Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 175-190 (187).

⁶³ Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Disappearing into the Desert’, *Times Literacy Supplement*, (December 16-22, 1988); and Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), cited in Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 240-241. Soja finds ways to connect Baudrillard with Thirdspace. See Soja, *Thirdspace*, pp. 239-244.

possibility itself. Nevertheless, Baudrillard may be in danger of sounding too much like the prophet whose critique of the modern is the final pronouncement on the subject. If one accepts Baudrillard's account of the disappearance of the real, then to a certain extent all levels of communication are a perverted type of 'acting' in which none can stop, nor indeed know what acting and not acting is like: it is total confusion with the abandonment of the possibility of overcoming. Thus, while Baudrillard in some sense celebrates the picture of the 'modern' presented, many theorists have found it unsettling and, in extreme cases, unfounded.⁶⁴

For the study at hand, the approach provided by Baudrillard cannot be taken 'uncritically'. Baudrillard prophetically shows the reader a general sense of 'crisis' about the modern era, and is particularly useful for highlighting the potential absurdities of the relationship between man and the (new) world. Indeed, cyberspace seems to be tailor-made for his theorisation, particularly when as early as 1983 he wrote '[...] it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.'⁶⁵ Yet there still seems to be something different between cyberspace and 'not cyberspace', and it is in this difference that the potential for 'real' and 'hyperreal' to be experienced occurs. Baudrillard's system of analysis is useful but it may be that this very apparatus can be used in the present study to show how the transfer into cyberspace opens up the possibility to observe and play with the 'difference': In other words, entering cyberspace makes one aware of a change and a difference, this difference shows that the hyperreal and the real 'exist' – the final referent that Baudrillard could not explode was the one he created, the hyperreal. It may be that Baudrillard would snigger at this, explaining that cyberspace acts in a similar way to 'disneyland'⁶⁶ – it makes one think that the 'unreal' exists in quarantined, bounded systematisation, when in fact this simply helps to hide the absence of reality in the whole society – thus cyberspace is the world itself. Nevertheless, the adaptation of Baudrillard's ideas will be undertaken and explained in the following section.

1.1.3. Baudrillard and Cyberspace

What is situated at the centre of this study is that the whole communication and interaction in chatrooms demand a construction of the Self presentation, no matter whether it reflects the 'real', 'hyperreal' or 'unreal'. The characteristics of the online persona are not examined here with regard to their duration, they may last for a varying amount of time, but rather the analogies that can be drawn between the construction of the self-presentation and their possible appearance as 'simulacra' in Baudrillardian terms. The online Self –as it will be described in the chapter on Empirical Study- appears as a presentation of the participant given the anonymity and invisibility principles of chatrooms. The new characteristics may appear as 'signs', as 'simulacra', in the sense that eventually may appear as not having direct reference to the online persona. The continuous representation of the Self in chatrooms –even if it represents the 'real'- requires a sort of masking of 'reality', even if the mask itself

⁶⁴ Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1989).

⁶⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ see Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 23-26.

tends to reflect the 'real'. The point that needs to be emphasised is that the electronic environment empowers –at least temporarily- hidden structures and elements of Self in regard with status, gender, and so on.

In this respect, the participants are given the opportunity to be signed, to be represented by data of their choice (for example to choose pseudonyms), and it is contingent upon the individual choice of the participants whether such choices will eventually represent the 'real'⁶⁷ or take the user *closer* to reality. At first glance the total representation of 'real', even temporarily, is possible in cyberspace. And, this is what makes the movement into chatrooms attractive; the possibility of masking, playing, transforming the Self, in a way that the 'off-line' persona ceases to be of significance. The communication in chatrooms appears as interaction among various chatters, who share the same possibility of choosing to be represented by 'signs' (for example pseudonyms), to that extent that they come to know and recognise each other as 'signs', data information which is based upon individual choice. At this stage, it is not clear whether what occurs in chatrooms is related to a total simulation of 'reality' and therefore a 'disappearance' of reality. Nevertheless, the continuous simulation of the 'real' in the electronic environment may sustain the type of content-less reality, the hyperreal, that Baudrillard evokes.

If one is to apply Baudrillard's approach to the study of cyberspace without consideration, it would actually appear to be a rather fruitless exercise as cyberspace becomes an indiscriminate signification beyond recognition. Nevertheless, the fascination with Baudrillard amongst those who study the internet seems to indicate an important link; it may indeed be that the zenith of hyperreality is found online and that this growing 'desert of the real' is the perfection of a process he observes. Yet it seems that, teetering on the edge, Baudrillard actually has a sense of recoil from his approach, and implores those listening not to surrender to the hopelessness of simulation but to 'train our searchlight, as it were, and keep our telescopic lens on this virtual world.'⁶⁸ Moreover, that all one can do is to pursue with 'a trap set in the hope that reality will be naïve enough to fall into it.'⁶⁹

It is interesting, and in some ways perverse, to hear Baudrillard entreating the reader to be watchful rather than submissive to a process that he characterises as mechanically unavoidable, but this does provide an impetus to study cyberspace. While submerged in his critique, the gnawing caveat points to recognition that human being may have the potential to locate, or participate in reality despite(?) wholesale 'simulation'. Perhaps it is the ability to apperceive reality 'against all odds' – to encounter difference and reflect upon it – that one can identify as a powerful component of human experience. By entering cyberspace, observing and moving through this 'world' the present study wishes to better understand the experience and to see whether by participating in the online environment, something other than simulation is revealed; whether Baudrillard felt but did not fully reveal misjudgements in his approach and his understanding of the real.

⁶⁷ Detailed discussion about the importance of such choices takes place in chapters four and five.

⁶⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* (trans. James Benedict), (New York: Verso, 1993), p. 110.

⁶⁹ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 110.

1.2. THE CYBERSPACE LITERATURE: A SELECTIVE SURVEY

The literature on cyberspace is diverse and rapidly expanding, reflecting that the new technology impacts on all aspects of human life. There are contributions from all social sciences and the humanities including sociology, political science, psychology, anthropology and philosophy. Cyberspace studies investigate the increasing use of the internet in a wide range of contexts: the home, the workplace, public institutions, politics etc. There are empirical and theoretical studies of virtual communities, social Internet user networks, cyberdemocracy, gender and identity issues, virtual sexuality and many other issues and questions raised by the increasing availability and use of the new technology.

In order to situate the present study in this literature, we will in the following give a selective survey of important works that have in various ways addressed the key issues of community and reality which are at the centre of our study. This survey cannot aim to be comprehensive due to the volume and diversity of the literature. Nevertheless, we will be able to show (a) that the questions we raise are central to cyberspace discourse and (b) that our approach is different from the paths usually taken by the key authors in the field. As the key authors address a multitude of concerns, it is impossible to organise this survey according to issues or themes. Still, our discussion of the various contributions will focus on the issues of reality and community and the way in which they are problematised and theorised in cyberspace discourse.

1.2.1. 'Community' in cyberspace?

Howard Rheingold's virtual communities

Often considered as a 'cyber prophet', Howard Rheingold is one of the most influential cyberspace theorists.⁷⁰ His book *The Virtual Community* (1993) has become a classic in cyberculture studies.⁷¹ *The Virtual Community* popularized the WELL online community as an example of what he called 'virtual communities'. WELL stands for 'Whole Earth Lectronic Link'. Founded on April 1, 1985 by Whole Earth Catalog publisher Stewart Brand and public health and technology pioneer Larry Brilliant, the WELL was eventually acquired by the Salon Media Group Inc. in 1999. Salon, which was founded in 1995, is an Internet media company that produces an award winning, original-content Website of news, opinion and culture, and hosts two communities, Table Talk and the WELL. The latter is considered as one of the world's most influential online communities. WELL allows a community of artists, thinkers and writers to communicate and exchange information on a wide range of topics. WELL operates as a computer conference system, which is subdivided into several 'rooms' and includes numerous blackboards, enabling users around the world to conduct public conversations and exchange emails.

⁷⁰ His personal webpage can be found at: <http://www.rheingold.com/index.html> .

⁷¹ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: homesteading on the electronic frontier* (London: MIT Press, revised edition 2000).

The subject matter ranges from anime to Web design, from legal issues to parenting, and to whatever WELL members decide to explore today. Membership in the WELL, which includes unlimited participation in hundreds of members-only conferences, costs \$10 or \$15 per month depending on account features.⁷²

Servers and staff of WELL are located in northern California. It is important to note that WELL membership requires a subscription; the service is not freely accessible. This year (2005), WELL will be in its 20th year of existence, and series of online and offline activities are planned in order to celebrate the anniversary.

Rheingold joined WELL early on in the summer of 1985, just a few months after its creation. His analysis of the community is based on his own personal experiences, making his research the result of participant observation. At first he found the idea of a community that could only be joined through a computer ‘cold’, but very soon became an enthusiastic member.⁷³

Finding the WELL was like discovering a cozy little world that had been flourishing without me, hidden within the walls of my house. [...] The virtual village of a few hundred people I stumbled upon in 1985 grew to eight thousand by 1993.⁷⁴

Because both the creators and first participations of WELL were based in California, off-line meetings were usually easy to arrange. Offline-meetings were also part of Rheingold’s experience: among other events he attended a wedding and a funeral. Only three months after joining the group, Rheingold attended a party organized by one of the WELL moderators. In his book, he describes how he felt when he met his online ‘friends’ for the first time. This offline element of the WELL experience confirmed his impression that WELL had allowed him to build up a circle of friends from around the world.

As a result of his experiences, Rheingold concluded that whenever Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) becomes available, users inevitably build virtual communities ‘just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies’.⁷⁵ As informal public spaces disappear, the ‘hunger for community’ makes virtual communities so successful. To Rheingold, WELL formed an authentic community from the start because he was able to ground it in his everyday physical world.⁷⁶ The existence of such virtual communities, therefore, is not a theoretical problem but a fact:

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.⁷⁷

⁷² <http://www.well.com/p-release/well20.html>

⁷³ Rheingold, p. xv.

⁷⁴ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. xvi.

⁷⁵ Rheingold, p. xx.

⁷⁶ Rheingold, p. xvi.

⁷⁷ Rheingold, p. xx.

Nevertheless, virtual communities are different from traditional communities in that they have to rely more on acts of imagination. Different people in cyberspace face their virtual communities from ‘differently shaped keyholes’, whereas in traditional communities, ‘people have a strongly shared mental model of the sense of place – the room or village or city where their interactions occur. In virtual communities, the sense of place requires an individual act of imagination.’⁷⁸ Comparing contemporary trends to historical transitions from premodern to modern forms of social relations, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, Rheingold observes:

All the questions about community in cyberspace point to a similar kind of transition that might be taking place now, for which we have no technical names.⁷⁹

Given his own experiences, it is not surprising that Rheingold emphasizes the potential benefits arising from virtual communities. However, he is aware of the criticisms according to which the hyperreal is an illusion pretending to be reality:

Hyper-realists see the use of communications technologies as a route to the total replacement of the natural world and the social order with a technologically mediated hyper-reality, a ‘society of the spectacle’ in which we are not even aware that we work all day to earn money to pay for entertainment media that tell us what to desire and which brand to consume and which politician to believe. We don’t see our environment as an artificial construction that uses media to extract our money and power. We see it as “reality” – the way things are.

The danger of hyper-reality is thus that it creates a ‘false consciousness’, which can easily be exploited by those in charge of creating the false worlds of CMC:

To hyper-realists, CMC, like other communications technologies of the past, is doomed to become another powerful conduit for disinfotainment. While a few people will get better information via high-bandwidth supernetworks, the majority of the population, if history is any guide, are likely to become more precisely befuddled, more exactly manipulate. Hyper-reality is what you get when a Panopticon evolves to the point where it can convince everyone that it doesn’t exist; people continue to believe they are free, although their power has disappeared. [...] As electronic entertainment has become increasingly ‘realistic’, it has been used as an increasingly powerful propaganda device. The most radical of the hyper-realist political critics charge that the wonders of communications technology skillfully camouflage the disappearance and subtle replacement of true democracy – and everything else that used to be authentic, from nature to human relationships – with a simulated, commercial version.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Rheingold, p. 53.

⁷⁹ Rheingold, p. 54.

⁸⁰ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, pp. 317-318.

Drawing on Baudrillard, Rheingold notes how virtual communities could fit very nicely into a society where the hyper-real becomes an effective tool for advertising, creating desires in a world where most needs have been met:

According to Baudrillard, during the first step of civilization, when speech and then writing were created, signs were invented to *point to reality*. During the second step of civilization, which took place over the past century, advertising, propaganda, and commodification set in, and the sign begins to *hide reality*. The third step includes our step into the hyper-real, for now we are in an age when signs begin to *hide the absence of reality*. Signs now help us pretend that they mean something. Technology and industry, in Baudrillard's view succeeded over the past century in satisfying basic human needs, and thus the profit-making apparatus that controlled technology-driven industry needed to fulfill desires instead of needs. The new media of radio and television made it possible to keep the desire level of entire populations high enough to keep a consumer society going. The way this occurs has to do with sign systems such as tobacco commercials that link the brand name of a cigarette to a beautiful photograph of a sylvan scene. The brand name of a cigarette is woven into a fabric of manufactured signifiers that can be changed at any time. The realm of the hyper-real. Virtual communities will fit very neatly into this cosmology, if it turns out that they offer the semblance of community but lack some fundamental requirement for true community.⁸¹

But Rheingold maintains that the predictions and prophecies of the hyper-realists are by no means inevitable. The users of the new technologies are not helplessly exposed to new techniques of manipulation as long as they continue to question and examine the new practices in which they participate:

Failing to fall under the spell of the 'rhetoric of the technological sublime', actively questioning and examining social assumptions about the effects of new technologies, reminding ourselves that electronic communication has powerful illusory capabilities, are all good steps to take to prevent disasters [...].⁸²

Thus, it becomes essential that we continue to 'question reality':

The land of the hyper-real begins when people forget that a telephone only conveys the illusion of being within speaking distance of another person and a computer conference only conveys the illusion of a town hall meeting. It's when we forget about the illusion that the trouble begins. When the technology itself grows powerful enough to make the illusions increasingly realistic, as the Net promises to do within the next ten to twenty years, the necessity for continuing to question reality grows even more acute.⁸³

For the purpose of questioning reality, he proposes a science of internet behaviour. What needs to be understood, across the boundaries of academic disciplines, is how

⁸¹ Rheingold, p. 319. Emphasis as in Rheingold's text.

⁸² Rheingold, p. 320.

⁸³ Rheingold, p. 320.

‘the human communities are being transformed by communication technologies’, and this can be done only by ‘jumping into one corner or another of cyberspace, living there, and getting up to your elbows in the problems that virtual communities face’.⁸⁴

A science of Net behavior is not going to reshape the way people behave online, but knowledge of the dynamics of how people do behave is an important social feedback loop to install if the Net is to be self-governing at any scale.⁸⁵

The ‘bulwark against the hyper-reality of Baudrillard’ will come from a new way of looking at technology. According to Rheingold, our task is twofold. On the one hand, ‘we need to look closely at new technologies and ask how they can help build stronger, more human communities’, while on the other hand, we need to ask ‘how they might be obstacles to that goal’.

The late 1990s may eventually be seen in retrospect as a narrow window of historical opportunity, when people either acted or failed to act effectively to regain control over communications technologies. Armed with knowledge, guided by a clear, human-centered vision, governed by a commitment to civil discourse, we the citizens hold the key levers at a pivotal time. What happens next is largely up to us.⁸⁶

Intellectually, Rheingold is fully aware of the dangers of the hyper-realist vision, but it is his own experience that proves to him that alternative visions are available.

Cyberspace is one of the informal places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall. Or perhaps cyberspace is precisely the *wrong* place to look for the rebirth of community, offering not a tool for conviviality but a life-denying simulacrum of real passion and true commitment to one another. In either case, we need to find out soon.⁸⁷

Jan Fernback's symbolic communities

For Jan Fernback the notion of community is not applicable to all virtual social ‘gatherings’.⁸⁸ She asks:

Can we seek empirical verification of hypotheses regarding social activity that involves bodilessness? Is there a sociology of the ‘placeless’? Is there cybercommunity? These questions require a reexamination of the adequacies of applying social theory about *community* to computer-mediated communicative relationships.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Rheingold, p. xxxi.

⁸⁵ Rheingold, p. 55.

⁸⁶ Rheingold, pp. 320-321.

⁸⁷ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Jan Fernback, ‘There is a there there. Notes toward a definition of cybercommunity’, in Jones (ed.), *Doing Internet research. Critical methods and issues for examining the Net*, pp. 203-220 (216).

⁸⁹ Fernback, ‘There is a there there’, p. 205.

This reexamination leads Fernback to emphasise the symbolic aspects of communities, an approach that brings her in proximity to Anderson's 'imagined communities':

This symbolic scope of community emphasizes *substance* over *form*; it is a constructivist approach that illuminates the process of creating and embodying the meaning of community [...]. I assert that community should be studied as an entity of meaning. This avenue of inquiry allows us to conceive of community as existing in cyberspace, beyond the limits of physical locale. And scholars of community must remember to emphasise local meaning over universal meanings – community is not an anachronism; it very much exists on the local level in concerns over ethnicity, sexual orientation, even political orientation [...].⁹⁰

Fernback's communities in cyberspace appear symbolically as communities of meaning and substance, as an 'imaginary' symbol in the minds of the participants: 'Thus, if we log on, form relationships in cyberspace, and believe we have found community, it is real for us.'⁹¹ Such cybercommunities are not 'things' or objects; they are processes.

It is an entity and a process that emerges from the wisdom of our repository of cultural knowledge about the concept of community and from our observation of its manifestation in cyberspace. It is an arena in which passions are inflamed, problems are solved, social bonds are formed, tyranny is exercised, love and death are braved, legacies are born, factions are splintered, and alliances dissolved. It is a rich arena for study by scholars, cybercommunitarians, and the curious.⁹²

Tim Jordan's creative imaginary

Tim Jordan analyses 'power' in cyberspace. Drawing on the works of Max Weber, Barry Barnes and Michel Foucault, he explores power networks in terms of the relations between dominator and dominated. Like so many other authors, who refer to Benedict Anderson's work on 'imagined communities', Jordan emphasises the role of the imaginary in the creation of cyber-communities:

[...] the power of the imaginary is that a community comes to see itself as a community, not as a disparate set of individuals. [...] In the imaginary, we are in the presence of communities in creation. [...] The importance of imaginaries is not in their relationship to reality, in the sense of whether their dreams and nightmares can be made into reality, but in the way collectively held fantasies bond people into communities and, simultaneously, drive them to try to realize their fantasies. [...] The imaginary binds the virtual social order [...] [and] creates the possibility of virtual community.⁹³

⁹⁰ Fernback, 'There is a there there', pp. 209-210.

⁹¹ Fernback, 'There is a there there', p. 213.

⁹² Fernback, 'There is a there there', p. 217.

⁹³ Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: the culture and politics of cyberspace and the internet*, pp. 206-207.

Shawn Willbur's simulated community

Shawn Willbur examined 'electronic villages' such as the Tyler virtual village, in which members were connected via email and voicemail. Willbur emphasises the 'fluid' character' of the new cyberspace persona:

The persona that appears in cyberspace is potentially more fluid than those we assume in other aspects of our lives, in part because we can consciously shape it. And that consciousness may allow us to engage with ourselves in what appear to be novel ways.

Willbur characterises virtual communities based on frequent asynchronous communication as 'the experience of sharing with unseen others a space of communication',⁹⁴ as the 'illusion' of community, as a 'simulation' of community, as a new 'middle landscape'. According to Willbur, the Tyler community is a simulacrum of a community because it 'is a replacement for the kind of person-to-person interaction that it portrays so appealingly'.⁹⁵

Nessim Watson's shared relationships

Nessim Watson studied the Phish.Net online discussion group and concluded that the term 'community' had to be re-thought:

Rather than declaring that community must therefore be absent, I suggest that we stop thinking of 'community' as shared communication in the same physical space. After all, the imaginary borders of nation-states prove that we humans do not always communicate towards shared norms with the people nearest us, but rather make determinations of *whom* we wish to build community with and whom we wish to exclude through the construction of borders. We should begin thinking of community as a product not of shared space, but of shared *relationships* among people.⁹⁶

Watson emphasises that community is not only based on common interests and communication but also on 'communion', a term used in the religious rituals and discourse. Accordingly, 'community' depends on sincerity, intimacy and behavioral norms. Yet even with these qualifications, the development of the new technology and the development of new understandings of community go hand in hand:

By theorizing community as based in the subjective experience and imagination of its participants, the potential for changes in the nature of community is as present as the potential for new experience. Thus, the rise of CMC technologies can be seen as part of a fundamental change in modes of

⁹⁴ Shawn P. Willbur, 'An Archaeology of Cyberspace. Virtuality, Community, Identity', in David Porter (ed.), *Internet Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 5-22 (13).

⁹⁵ Willbur, p. 17.

⁹⁶ Nessim Watson, 'Why we argue about virtual community: a case study of the Phish.Net Fan Community', in Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture. Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, pp. 102-132 (120).

apprehending the world. New ideas can be seen as leading to both the development of the technologies and the development of new understandings of community.⁹⁷

Arjun Appadurai's virtual neighborhoods

According to Arjun Appadurai, the new media create 'virtual neighborhoods', which are no longer defined in terms of space and location but which bring together 'territorially divided individuals' in 'communities of imagination':

The speed of such communication is further complicated by the growth of electronic billboard communities, such as those enabled by the Internet, which allow debate, dialogue, and relationship building among various territorially divided individuals, who nevertheless are forming communities of imagination and interest that are geared to their diasporic positions and voices. These new forms of electronically mediated communication are beginning to create *virtual neighborhoods*, no longer bounded by territory, passports, taxes, elections, and other conventional political diacritics, but by access to both the software and hardware that are required to connect to these large international computer networks.⁹⁸

Allucquere R. Stone's virtual systems

Allucquere Stone argues that cyberspace offers 'incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both "meet" and "face"':

These new spaces instantiate the collapse of the boundaries between the social and technological, biology and machine, natural and artificial that are part of the postmodern imaginary. They are part of the growing imbrication of humans and machines in new social forms that I call virtual systems.⁹⁹

According to Stone, the very essence of cyberspace is that it is a social space, where communities form.

Cyberspace, without its high tech glitz, is partially the idea of virtual community. The earliest cyberspaces may have been virtual communities, passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated. Virtual communities sustain themselves by constantly circulating those practices.¹⁰⁰

According to Stone, virtual communities have a history that can be divided into four

⁹⁷ Watson, 'Why we argue about virtual community', p. 122.

⁹⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 195.

⁹⁹ Allucquere R. Stone, 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures', in Michael Benedikt (ed.), *Cyberspace: First Steps* (London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 81-115 (85).

¹⁰⁰ Stone, 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?', p. 85.

epochs, and it is the beginning of the third epoch that coincides with the era of information technology. Every epoch is marked by a technological innovation and therefore by a change in the way people communicate. As ‘the rate of change in technological innovation increases with time, the more recent epochs are shorter, but roughly the same quantity of information is exchanged in it’.¹⁰¹ The first epoch begins in the mid 1600s when Robert Boyle (in 1669) created a “community of like-minded gentlemen” to validate his scientific experiments. The ‘like-minded gentlemen’ were not actually present during the experiments but Boyle shared with them detailed written descriptions of the experiments and their outcome, thereby creating an early textual virtual community. The creation of virtual communities could also be sparked by the publication of novels. Stone refers to the publication of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s short novel *Paul and Virginia* (1788) as another example from this first epoch. The novel is regarded as a passage point, spreading crucial ideas of social identity and influencing the French bourgeoisie. The second epoch started approximately in the 1900s and is marked by the invention of the telegraph and the phonograph, which introduced new means of communication and entertainment media. The third epoch began in the 1960s when the creation of the ‘first computer, terminal-based bulletin board systems (BBSs)’ inaugurated the era of information technology. The fourth and present epoch started in 1984 with the publication of Gibson’s science fiction *Neuromancer*, in which Gibson coined the term ‘cyberspace’ and described it as a three-dimensional ‘inhabitable’ space.

During this period, when *Neuromancer* was published, ‘virtual reality’ acquired a new name and suddenly prominent social identity as ‘cyberspace’. The critical importance of Gibson’s book was partly due to the way that it triggered a conceptual revolution among the scattered workers who had been doing virtual reality research for years: As task groups coalesced and dissolved, as the fortunes of companies and projects and laboratories rose and fell, the existence of Gibson’s novel and the technological and social imaginary that it articulated enabled the researchers in virtual reality – or, under the new dispensation, cyberspace – to recognize and organize themselves as a community.¹⁰²

Stone therefore studies current developments in cyberspace studies within a historical framework as the latest in a series of revolutions in communication technology and, by implication, in the relationship between humans and technology. Her empirical work on virtual systems examines the online bulletin services of the BBC as well as chats and videogames.¹⁰³

Steven Jones’ social networks

Steven Jones has edited various collections of essays on cyberculture, online communities and internet research methods.¹⁰⁴ The essays draw on research mostly

¹⁰¹ Stone, ‘Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?’, p. 85.

¹⁰² Stone, ‘Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?’, pp. 85-99 (98-99).

¹⁰³ See also Allucquere R. Stone, *War of desire and technology at the close of mechanical age* (London: MIT Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁴ Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (London: Sage, 1995); Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication*

carried out in different types of online groups including Usenet groups, MUDs and computer games.¹⁰⁵ As most other internet researchers, Jones acknowledges that traditional understandings of communities may not be applicable to online interaction. Computer-mediated communication does no longer rely on place-based structures such as geographical locations. Given that online communities are not based on face-to-face communication, Jones suggests to define such communities in terms of social networks. But he is unsure about the effect of CMC on community formation:

Can CMC be understood to build communities and form a part of the conduct of public life, as other forms of communication seem to, or does CMC problematize our very notions of community and public life?¹⁰⁶

Drawing on Anderson's work on 'imagined communities', Jones considers online communities as 'imagined' in two ways inimical to human communities.

First, they thrive on the 'meanwhile'; they are forged from the sense that they exist, but we rarely directly apprehend them, and we see them only out of the corner of our eye. [...] Naturally we understand online life only in relation to its offline counterpart. [...] We think, and sometimes feel we belong to Internet communities, but we are not sure quite how or in what ways, or whether belonging *matters* (beyond its capacity to have a negative effect on life offline). Second, they are imagined as parallel, rather than serial, groupings of people, which is to say that they are not composed of people who are necessarily connected, even by interest, but are rather groupings of people headed in the same direction, for a time.¹⁰⁷

Beyond these observations, however, little can be said about these communities other than that they are new, and they are new in that the underlying technology is new and in that this new technology affects the nature of the communities it creates.

It is difficult to imagine what new on-line communities may be like, and it is far easier to use our memories and myths as we construct them. [...] Because these machines are seen as 'linking' machines (they link information, data, communication, sound, image, through the common language of digital encoding) they inherently affect the way we think of linking up to each other,

and Community (London: Sage, 1998); Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture. Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* (London: Sage, 1997) and Steve Jones (ed.), *Doing Internet research. Critical methods and issues for examining the Net* (London: Sage, 1999).

¹⁰⁵ Usenet is a world-wide discussion system that allows participants to post messages and to respond to posted messages. The system is divided into several groups with a thematic organization. MUD stands for 'Multi-User Domains', 'Multi-User Dimensions' or 'Multi-User Dungeons'. The environment in which the MUD users interact allows the participants to build an on-going collective story, like game playing, but within set rules for interaction. LambdaMOO is well known example of an object oriented MUD, or MOO, in which the software facilitates the building of objects and rooms. MUDs are imaginary worlds. For further information on MUD see: <http://www.behavior.net/job/vlnl/utz.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, 'Information, Internet and Community: Notes Toward an Understanding of Community in the Information Age', in Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0*, pp. 1-34 (13-14).

¹⁰⁷ Jones, 'The Internet and its social landscape', in Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture. Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, pp. 7-35 (17).

and thus they fit squarely into our concerns about community.¹⁰⁸

Yet, whatever they are, the new communities affect public life, civil society and notions of citizenship. Indeed, Jones notes that the internet could be another medium that 'undermines the traditional notions of civil society that require unity and shun multiplicity while giving the impression that they in fact re-create such a society'.¹⁰⁹

Fundamentally, however, Jones leaves us with the questions that most cyberspace theorists are struggling with: 'Who are we when we are online?'¹¹⁰ 'Who do we think we are when we are online, and who do we want to be there?'¹¹¹ Given that these questions apply to the internet researcher as much as to the observed internet users, Jones concludes that the study of 'cybersociety' requires a reflexive approach.¹¹²

Barry Wellman's social networks

Moving away from an understanding of community based on geographical proximity, the sociologist Wellman approaches virtual communities as 'social networks'.¹¹³ In their research Wellman and his co-authors address a range of important issues: How does the internet affect the ability of its users to sustain relationships? How strong are these relationships? Do norms of commitment, solidarity and reciprocity develop on the internet? Do 'virtual communities' resemble 'real' communities? Are virtual communities integrated into 'real' communities?¹¹⁴

Wellman and his co-researchers observe that internet users provide information and support for people they have never met offline. 'The Net makes it easy to ask distant acquaintances and strangers for advice and information via email (distribution lists, newsgroups, etc.).'¹¹⁵ They suggest that strong online ties are quite similar to strong offline ties, and the relationships that the people maintain online are similar to the ones they develop offline. In fact, Wellman and Gullia compare living online with living 'in the heart of densely populated, heterogeneous, physically safe, big cities'. They conclude that the internet does support the development of community networks.¹¹⁶ However, the Wellman team sees virtual communities as different from real-life communities 'in the basis upon which participants perceive their relationships to be intimate'.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, 'Information, Internet and Community', pp. 29-30.

¹⁰⁹ Jones, 'The Internet and its social landscape', p. 25.

¹¹⁰ Jones, 'The internet and its social landscape', p. 9.

¹¹¹ Jones, 'The internet and its social landscape', p. 18.

¹¹² Jones, 'Studying the Net Intricacies and Issues', in Jones (ed.), *Doing Internet research. Critical methods and issues for examining the Net*, pp. 1-27 (1).

¹¹³ Barry Wellman, J. Salaff, D. Dimitrova, Laura Garton, Milena Gulia and Caroline Haythornthwaite, 'Computer networks as social networks: Collaborative work, telework, and virtual community', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 22 (1996), pp. 213-238. See also Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 'Studying on-line social networks', in Jones (ed.), *Doing Internet Research*, pp. 75-105. Also Barry Wellman, 'An electronic group is virtually a social network', in Sara Kiesler (ed.), *Culture of the Internet* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publisher, 1997), pp. 179-205.

¹¹⁴ Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual communities. Net surfers don't ride alone', in Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 167-194.

¹¹⁵ Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual communities', p. 184.

¹¹⁶ Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual communities', p. 179.

People on the Net have a greater tendency to base their feelings of closeness on the basis of shared interests rather than on the basis of shared social characteristics such as gender and socio-economic status.¹¹⁷

Marc Smith's collective goods

Marc Smith began his work on cyber-communities with a study on the WELL. According to Smith, what turns separate users into groups and communities are 'collective goods', i.e. shared gains that result from online co-operation. Social network capital and knowledge capital as recognised valuable goods bring users together to form unities that share common characteristics with offline communities.¹¹⁸ In his work with Kollock, Smith also addresses the question of the nature of the social spaces that are created within electronic networks.¹¹⁹ Kollock further refines Smith's work by looking at 'incentive structures' in online communities. Overall he appears to confirm Smith's observation that the co-operation between users consists in the production and use of public goods.¹²⁰

Schmitz, Silver and others on community networks and cyber-democracy

Community networks have generated much interest in political science and social policy in that they seem to offer new opportunities for political participation and social inclusion. Several studies focused on the PEN network, Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network. For example, Schmitz examined the creation and operation of PEN through participant-observation.¹²¹ He explains that his analysis is grounded

[...] in a symbolic interactionist perspective, one influenced by the Chicago School of Sociology, and one aware that the symbolic environment we create for each other as we interact profoundly shapes our personae, beliefs, and consequent actions.¹²²

Focusing on the situation of the homeless, Schmitz was impressed how electronic means of communication seemed to facilitate the inclusion of social groups that had found it difficult to express their views and needs in traditional offline politics.

¹¹⁷ Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual communities', p. 186.

¹¹⁸ Marc Smith, 'Voices from the WELL: The Logic of the Virtual Commons', MA Dissertation, Department of Sociology, UCLA, 1992.

¹¹⁹ Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 1999). See also: Kollock and Smith, 'Managing the virtual commons: Cooperation and conflict in computer communities', in S. C. Herring (ed.), *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), pp. 109-128. And Marc A. Smith, 'Invisible crowds in cyberspace. Mapping the social structure of the Usenet', in Smith and Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 195-219.

¹²⁰ Peter Kollock, 'The economies of online cooperation: gifts and public goods in cyberspace', in Smith and Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 220-239. Some of these ideas were anticipated by Lee Sproull and Sara Kiesler, *Connections: New Ways of Working in the Networked World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), who write on the use of CMC in organisations.

¹²¹ Joseph Schmitz, 'Structural relations, electronic media, and social change: The public electronic network and the homeless', in Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in cybersociety*, pp. 80-101.

¹²² Schmitz, p. 81.

The inclusion of homeless persons in the PEN Action Group and their prominent role in developing the SHWASHLOCK program would be wildly improbable in groups that originated through the traditional sequence of face-to-face encounters.¹²³

Like many other studies of this type, Schmitz's work shows how civil society and politics can use the internet as a tool in order to increase participation and inclusion. Collin-Jarvis, too, studied PEN but from the point of view of gender studies.¹²⁴ David Silver based his empirical work on the Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) and the Seattle Community network, which use mailing lists, newsgroups, emails and websites as spaces for exchanging information.¹²⁵ It is typical of such studies that they understand the internet activities under examination as extensions of offline activities of existing offline groups.

1.2.2. 'Cybercultures'?

David Bell's cybercultures

For David Bell, cyberspace is both cultural artifact and culture in itself.

The trick is to think about cyberspace as product of and producer of culture simultaneously – another hypertext moment.¹²⁶

Bell is a theorist of cyber-communities. As many other authors on the subject, he looks to classical theories of community from Toennies to Anderson as guides for our understanding of online community. However, he is fully aware of the novelty of the phenomenon. According to Bell, we need to keep 'a close eye on cybercommunities and our ways of understanding them, as both evolve symbiotically'.¹²⁷ Moreover, he wonders whether jettisoning the whole concept of 'community' or at least replacing the term, would be a more suitable strategy.¹²⁸

Bell's discussion of online communities emphasises four aspects which, although not unique to online communities, find their most radical expression in cyberspace interaction. First, there is 'globalisation', which 'can be argued to open up the whole world as a potential source of community'.¹²⁹ Second, there is the phenomenon of

¹²³ Schmitz, pp. 97-98.

¹²⁴ L.A. Collins-Jarvis, 'Gender representation in an electronic city hall: Female adoption of Santa Monica's PEN system', in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (1993), pp. 49-66.

¹²⁵ David Silver, 'The Soil of Cyberspace: Historical Archaeologies of the Blacksburg Electronic Village and the Seattle Community Network', in Doug Schuler and Peter Day (eds), *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Civil Society in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 301-324, and Silver, 'Margins in the Wires: Looking for Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Blacksburg Electronic Village', in Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert R. Rodman (eds), *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 133-150.

¹²⁶ David Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 2

¹²⁷ Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures*, p. 110.

¹²⁸ Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures*, p. 110.

¹²⁹ Bell, p. 96.

‘disembedding’, which ‘allows us to choose our communities’. Bell lists reflexivity as the third entry on his list. Reflexivity, he explains, ‘allows us to think about who we are and who we want to be – and the Internet is the ideal site to “play” with our identities’. Finally, detraditionalisation ‘frees us from old obligations’.¹³⁰

Reflecting on the possibility of online communities, Bell draws an analogy between car drivers and participants in cyberspace. In what ways and under what circumstances can we consider car drivers as members of the community of car drivers?

[...] car drivers *might* imagine themselves as a community – for example when their ‘right’ or ‘freedom’ to enact their identities is threatened (by car tax or fuel prices), but in that kind of context community is a *defensive* concept, bringing people together only when they feel under collective threat. Maybe the ‘ambient fear’ of the death of community is the threat that prompts defensive communo-genesis in cyberspace, then?¹³¹

Bell does not provide an answer to his evocative question, but he draws attention to the close link between the fate of offline community and the quest for online communities.¹³²

Michele Willson’s cultures of disembodiment

Michele Willson seeks to understand the impact of communication technologies on social forms. She is particularly interested in the political and ethical implications that accompany the rise of ‘cultures of disembodiment’. Her empirical work examines ‘virtual communities’ within conference groups, bulletin boards and other interactive networks. Willson argues that

[...] virtual communities are undeniably ‘made’, in the sense that the illusion of space is created for the production and operation of community within a humanly crafted technology. Yet this does not mean that interaction will automatically take place, or that a community will be formed, since people cannot be forced to participate.¹³³

For Willson, virtual communities provide a space and form for new experiences of community.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Bell, p. 97.

¹³¹ Bell, p. 102.

¹³² For authors such as Nikos Demertzis the rise of cyber-communities reflects how the communities of postmodernity have entered a new phase in the process of their auto-construction. According to Demertzis, cyberspace constructs social reality while at the same time being itself a subject of construction. See Nikos Demertzis, *Political Communication* (in Greek), (Athens: Papazisis Publications, 2002), p. 394.

¹³³ Michele Willson, ‘Community in the Abstract: A Political and Ethical Dilemma?’, in David Holmes (ed.), *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 145-162 (158).

¹³⁴ Willson, p. 159.

1.2.3. The online 'self' and online 'relationships'

Turkle's second self

Sherry Turkle studies cyberspace from a psychoanalytical perspective. She is particularly interested in how the internet provides opportunities for users to play with identities and to test new identities or to experience aspects of their identities that are suppressed or oppressed in offline life.

The ability to join online communities, or being able to play out aspects of self that are different than what your physical self permits, has profoundly changed what is available to the human psyche.¹³⁵

In her book, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Sherry Turkle suggested that computers provide an additional tool for thinking about who we are and that computers in fact may cause the development of a 'second self'.¹³⁶ Her book *Life on the Screen* is based upon a very long participant-observation, lasting for about two decades.¹³⁷ The book begins with her observation that in cyberspace we can

[...] assume personae of our own creation. We have the opportunity to build new kinds of communities, virtual communities, in which we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we converse daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet.¹³⁸

Dealing with the many questions raised by the new technology is 'difficult and painful, because they strike at the heart of our most complex and intransigent social problems: problems of community, identity, governance, equity, and values.'¹³⁹

In her empirical work, Turkle visits virtual environments (MUDs) and examines processes of identity construction. She is interested in how online identity experiments may help users orientate their offline identities. She refers to the case of Ava, a MUD user, who lost her leg in a car accident. Ava came to be 'sexually' involved with another user, and this relationship helped find a way to love her virtual body and thus to come to terms with her physical body. Turkle comments:

Virtuality need not be a prison. It can be the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don't have to reject life on the screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either. We can use it as a space for growth. [...] Like the

¹³⁵ 'Discover Dialogue: Social Scientist Sherry Turkle a Psychologist in Cyberspace', *Discover*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (June 2003). This is an extended version, exclusive to the *Discover* web site, of the article that appeared in *Discover* magazine in April 2003. Available at: <http://www.discover.com/issues/jun-03/rd/breakdialogue.html/>.

¹³⁶ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

¹³⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: identity in the age of the Internet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996).

¹³⁸ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 9-10.

¹³⁹ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 232.

anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices.¹⁴⁰

Turkle seems to accept the need to become member of the online community in order for someone to be familiar with its playful nature: 'In the emerging culture of simulation, the computer is still a tool but less like a hammer and more like a harpsichord. You don't learn how to play a harpsichord primarily by learning a set of rules, just as you don't learn about a simulated microworld, whether a Macintosh-like graphical interface or a video game, by delving into a instruction manual. In general, you learn by playful exploration.'¹⁴¹

Elisabeth Reid's self-made people

Reid studied the identity of participants in MUDs, visual worlds in which participants interact through texts or cartoon-like visual personae. According to Reid, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is a playground where users are free to experiment with their self-presentation. In the 'material' world, social conventions are visibly and materially expressed in architecture, fashion and dress codes, codes of etiquette etc., IRC users have to rely on verbal modes in order to define and structure their social context. They must use written words in order to re-create the lost 'material' context. This 'lack' of context gives them the opportunity to create alternative contexts with evolving rules, rituals and communication styles. Reid argues that the characters users adopt in MUDs are 'self-made people'.¹⁴²

Accordingly, she is particularly interested in the self-organisation of IRC interaction. For example, she looks at how IRC operators (who are in charge of the IRC service) and channel operators (who administer individual channels) can use their powers in order to 'punish' unwanted online behaviour. They therefore act as an unofficial governing body revealing hierarchy and social cohesion within the relevant MUD.¹⁴³ Typically, such punishment is followed by messages that explain the chosen course of action. For Reid such messages sustain voluntary rituals and underline a degree of hierarchy and loyalty that maintain a degree of IRC order. An important issue that usually leads to voluntarily sustained conventions is the possibility to choose other users' nicknames. There appears to be a consensus among users that the uniqueness of names and the consistency of their use are very important for the development of continuous online interaction.

Reid's work shows how IRC users have developed mechanisms in order to address problems that arise from using the medium, and she takes this as evidence that IRC users constitute a culture, if not a community. However, online communities, she observes with Kolko, are fragile. They often fail due to fragmentation and inflexibility. They both argue that the fluid online self can become a fixed identity, making interaction rigid and inflexible, while the strength of a community is usually

¹⁴⁰ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 263.

¹⁴¹ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 61.

¹⁴² Elisabeth M. Reid, *Electropolis: Communications and Community on Internet Relay Chat*. Electronically distributed version of her dissertation, University of Melbourne, 1991.

¹⁴³ Reid, 'Hierarchy and power: social control in cyberspace', in Smith and Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 107-133.

due to its flexibility.¹⁴⁴

Derek Foster's artificial online 'We'

Like many other cyberspace researchers, Derek Foster takes traditional analyses of society and community – such as Toennies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – as a starting point as he approaches cybercommunities.¹⁴⁵ His empirical work is on Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (PEN) and examines PEN as a public sphere, as well as more generally the transformative power and the affect of computer-mediated communication in social relationships.

He emphasises that the 'we'-feeling virtual communities is 'artificial'. In 'real' communities, members are 'integrated' in the sense that they have to adapt to the rest of the community. The 'we'-feeling in such communities is thus the result of a change and movement that produces a certain 'likeness' among their members. Foster accepts that communication is implied in community, but the reverse link does not necessarily hold because 'communication alone does not constitute a community'.¹⁴⁶ Consequently, Foster criticizes Rheingold's definition of virtual communities according to which every cyberspatial 'gathering' forms a community. Such gatherings, Foster explains, '[...] may not be sufficiently communal'.¹⁴⁷ Drawing on Anderson's 'imagined communities' Foster argues that in the absence of any verifiable likeness, members of cybercommunities have to artificially create a 'we'-feeling through imagination. The act of imagination is 'required to summon the image of communion with others who are often faceless, transient, or anonymous'.¹⁴⁸ In contrast to 'real' physical communities, virtual communities cannot rely on an externalized, 'objective' definition of community. 'The "virtual" in the term entails that one must internalize the definition of community; it cannot be externalized into a specific, objective product'.¹⁴⁹ That being the case, authenticity and truthfulness will always be problematic in virtual communities but, on the other hand, CMC has the potential of bringing individual and communal identity closer together. As he puts it, CMC has 'the potential to reify both personal and communal identity. In this regard, it may even be making the distinction between the two redundant'.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ Beth Kolko and Elizabeth Reid, 'Dissolution and Fragmentation: Problems in On-line communities', in Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0*, pp. 212-229.

¹⁴⁵ Derek Foster, 'Community and Identity in the Electronic Village', in Porter (ed.), *Internet Culture*, pp. 23-37. Toennies's distinction between 'Gemeinschaft' and 'Gesellschaft' is well known: 'Gemeinschaft' is characterised by bonds of fellowship, family, custom. While in 'Gemeinschaft' the primary intimate relationships prevail, 'Gesellschaft' is characterised by weak family organization and generally impersonal social relationships driven by utilitarian goals. 'Gemeinschaft' represents a traditional type of association, where 'Gesellschaft' reflects an impersonal type of connectedness. In essence, the dichotomy between 'Gemeinschaft' and 'Gesellschaft' epitomises the shift from traditional community to the type of community created by industrialisation and urbanisation. See Ferdinand Toennies, *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*, (Trans. Charles P. Loomis. Originally published in 1887), (London: Routledge and Paul, 1955).

¹⁴⁶ Foster, 'Community and Identity', p. 30.

¹⁴⁷ Foster, 'Community and Identity', p. 24.

¹⁴⁸ Foster, 'Community and Identity', p. 25.

¹⁴⁹ Foster, 'Community and Identity', p. 35.

¹⁵⁰ Foster, 'Community and Identity', p. 27.

Nancy Baym's online friendships

Nancy Baym's ethnographic studies of online soap opera communities are well known. She is particularly interested in r.a.t.s., which stands for rec.arts.tv.soaps. r.a.t.s. is a Usenet newsgroup, subdivided into several 'rooms' according to the soap operas being discussed in the rooms, where users can exchange ideas, views, and gossip on their favorite soaps.¹⁵¹ Baym's *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* focuses on the room devoted to the soap opera 'All my Children'.¹⁵² Her studies have shown that it is not only the interaction between users but also other, 'external' factors such as the overall purpose of the group determine the development of community.

In contrast to the popular idea that the Internet can help users to alter their identities, Baym claims that the majority of internet users do not construct new ideas deliberately.¹⁵³ She also pays attention to the phenomenon of 'online humour' and concludes that the discussions she observed and took part in were both enjoyable and informative.¹⁵⁴

Of particular interest for our purposes is Baym's work on the factors that make people experience such groups as communities. According to Baym,

An on-line community's 'style' is shaped by a range of preexisting structures, including external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristic [...]. The result is a dynamic set of systematic social meanings that enables participants to imagine themselves as a community.¹⁵⁵

In her work, Baym is particularly interested in the forms of expression that the participants develop and how these expressions are translated into social meanings underlying communities. Baym argues that friendship is possible in online communities although 'relations take time to build'.¹⁵⁶ Just like any other community, online communities have their rituals, traditions, norms and values:

It is in the details of their talk that people develop and maintain the rituals, traditions, norms, values, and senses of group and individual identity that allow them to consider themselves communities. Rather than judging from the outside, we need to listen closely to what members of new media communities have to say to one another and to those who ask. Only then will we understand their diversity and the opportunities and challenges they offer.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵¹ Nancy K. Baym, 'The emergence of community in computer-mediated communication', in Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 138-163.

¹⁵² Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online community* (London: Sage, 2000).

¹⁵³ Baym, 'The Emergence of On-Line Community', in Jones, *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 35-68.

¹⁵⁴ Baym, 'The performance of humor in computer-mediated communication', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, (1995). Available online at: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol1/issue2/baym.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Baym, 'The Emergence of on-line community', p. 38.

¹⁵⁶ Baym, 'The Emergence of on-line community', p. 59.

¹⁵⁷ Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, p. 218.

1.2.4. 'Reality'

Manuel Castells' real virtuality

According to Castells, the network is the main organisational form and social unit of the information age. The internet forms one of the most important networks; in fact, the internet brings a new culture into existence: the 'culture of real virtuality':

Throughout the powerful influences of the new communication system, mediated by social interests, government policies, and business strategies, a new culture is emerging: the *culture of real virtuality* [...].¹⁵⁸

Real virtuality replaces the stable social foundations of place, nation, class and race, and it can be found in cyberspace rather than in defined geographical locations. For Castells, the networked space of flows and the timeless time become 'the material foundations of a new culture'.¹⁵⁹ The new communication system transforms both space and time, and thus marks a profound departure from the industrial era, which was characterised by the 'space of places'. The overwhelming concern of the 'new' networked citizens, who can no longer rely on the co-ordinates provided by place, nation, class and race, is thus the search for personal and collective identity.

In Castells' framework, cultures are defined by the communication processes they entail. Drawing on Baudrillard, he reminds us that all forms of communication rely on the production and consumption of signs. There is a sense, however, in which Castells goes further than Baudrillard in that he argues that all reality has always been virtual:

Thus reality, as experienced, has always been virtual because it is always perceived through symbols that frame practice with some meaning that escapes their strict semantic definition. It is precisely this ability of all forms of language to encode ambiguity and to open up a diversity of interpretations that makes cultural expressions distinct from formal/logical/mathematical reasoning. It is through the polysemic character of our discourses that the complexity and even contradictory quality of messages of the human brain manifest themselves. This range of cultural variation of the meaning of messages is what enables us to interact with each other in a multiplicity of dimensions, some explicit, some implicit. Thus, when critics of electronic media argue that the new symbolic environment does not represent 'reality', they implicitly refer to an absurdly primitive notion of 'uncoded' real experience that never existed. All realities are communicated through symbols. And in human, interactive communication, regardless of the medium, all symbols are somewhat displaced in relationship to their assigned semantic meaning. In a sense, all reality is virtually perceived.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 329-330.

¹⁵⁹ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 375.

¹⁶⁰ Castells, pp. 372-3.

What, then, is new in the information age? In an argument that reminds us of Baudrillard, Castells proposes that the novelty is the construction of ‘real virtuality’:

In all societies humankind has existed in and acted through a symbolic environment. Therefore, what is historically specific to the new communications system, organized around the electronic integration of all communication modes from the typographic to the multisensorial, is not its inducement of virtual reality but the construction of real virtuality. [...] What is then a communication system that, in contrast to earlier historical experience, generates *real virtuality*? *It is a system in which reality itself (that is, people’s material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience.*¹⁶¹

As noted above, ‘the *space of flows* and *timeless time* are the material foundations of a new culture, that transcends and includes the diversity of historically transmitted systems of representation: the culture of real virtuality where make-believe is belief in the making.’¹⁶² Flows, like flows of information, flows of capital, flows of technology, flows of symbols and sounds constitute our society. The space of flows becomes ‘a new spatial form characteristic of social practices that dominate and shape the network society’.¹⁶³

The mixing of times in the media, within the same channel of communication and at the choice of the viewer/interactor, creates a temporal collage, where not only genres are mixed, but their timing becomes synchronous in a flat horizon, with no beginning, no end, no sequence.¹⁶⁴

Michael Heim’s virtual realism

Not unlike Rheingold, Michael Heim tries to find a balance between ‘network idealists’, who believe in virtual communities and global information flows, and ‘naïve realists’ who, driven by technophobia, find electronic culture accountable for unemployment and criminal violence.¹⁶⁵ He calls this pragmatic balance ‘virtual realism’, and finds it through a critical analysis of technology.¹⁶⁶ According to Heim, the virtual worlds created by the new technology are not realistic in the sense of photo-realism but each virtual world is to be seen as a functional entity, which can parallel, not absorb or represent the world we live in.¹⁶⁷

Trying to understand ‘being’ in a virtual world, Heim examines the philosophical significance of cyberspace. He suggests that cyberspace is ‘a metaphysical laboratory,

¹⁶¹ Castells, p. 373. His emphasis.

¹⁶² Castells, p. 375. His emphasis.

¹⁶³ Castells, p. 412.

¹⁶⁴ Castells, p. 462.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Heim, *Virtual Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁶⁶ Heim, *Virtual Realism*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁷ Heim, p. 48.

a tool for examining our very sense of reality'.¹⁶⁸ The lack of human presence in online and email interactions makes participation optional and as a result 'electronic life converts primary bodily presence into telepresence, introducing a remove between represented presences.'¹⁶⁹ In bodily life, we believe we can alter our identities by changing our appearance, clothing, or by wearing masks and adopting new names; in 'electronic life' we can entertain the illusion that we are 'having it both ways', keeping a distance while at the same time 'putting ourselves on the line'.¹⁷⁰ This ambiguity of play without apparent consequences in online existence may nevertheless bring about real effects, e.g. reduce trust and increase cynical anomie.

Mark Slouka's lost reality

According to Mark Slouka, cyberspace represents an 'assault' on reality. The artificial reality created by new technologies – and here he includes not just computers but also radio and television – will eventually replace reality in that we will become unable to distinguish what is real from what is artificially created.

Cyberspace systems would develop and expand, fundamentally altering our definitions of physical space, of identity and community. Already it was routinely possible to interface simultaneously with a number of different individuals in different parts of the globe. In the not-too-distant future, it would be possible to touch them. Feedback technology would provide the illusion of touch directly to your nervous system. It would be indistinguishable from the real thing. Physical presence would become optional [...]. In this New Age, boundaries between self and other, male and female, nature and machine, even life and death, would be obsolete. The word *reality* would lose all meaning, or would metastasize beyond recognition.¹⁷¹

Commenting on Dibbel's account of a 'virtual rape' (see below), Slouka notes that cyberspace begins to compete with reality as soon as the 'metaphors' and images that occupy cyberspace – and MOO environments in particular – are taken literally:

Entering cyberspace required only one thing: that one be willing to take *literally* what was basically one big metaphor. It meant accepting the words 'you enter a blue room with a small table and three wooden chairs' as something more than words on a computer screen. It meant inhabiting a textual world *as though* it were real. In many ways, the MOO was very much like the world of a novel. With one important difference: in cyberspace, the characters could talk back, could take control, could offer you their friendship or humiliate you till you cried.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Michael Heim, 'The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace', in Benedikt (ed.), *Cyberspace: First Steps*, pp. 59-80 (59).

¹⁶⁹ Heim, 'The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace', p. 76.

¹⁷⁰ Heim, 'The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace', p. 76.

¹⁷¹ Mark Slouka, *War of the Worlds: cyberspace and the high-tech assault on reality* (London: Abacus, 1996), p. 17

¹⁷² Slouka, *War of the Worlds*, p. 44.

Much of Slouka's criticism is not directed at the technology underlying the 'assault' on reality but at the people who own, develop and sell this technology because, he asserts, they are trying to make us believe that our physical world can be downloaded into a computer.

Julian Dibbell's 'virtual rape'

One of the most frequently referred to 'events' in a Multi-user domain (MUD) is a 'virtual rape' that took place at LambdaMOO, an online virtual 'world' that was created by Pavel Curtis at the Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center in 1992. MUDs have become the subject of many studies on cyberculture. Curtis himself published on the sociological and psychological dimensions of MUDs.¹⁷³ It is Julian Dibbell's account of the 'virtual rape' at LambdaMOO, however, that brought this case to the attention of the cyberstudies community. Dibbell tells the story of a LambdaMOO member who, by using a voodoo doll, attacked and 'raped' other LambdaMOO members.¹⁷⁴ Dibbell explores the reaction of the LambdaMOO community to the violence, i.e. the processes whereby the 'citizens' decide (a) what constitutes a crime and (b) how crimes are to be punished. Like many other cyber-researchers, Dibbell assumes that this kind of activity – the taking control of the 'order' of the community by the community members – is characteristic feature of an online community.

1.2.5. Researching Cyberspace

Christine Hine's virtual ethnography

From a cultural and more ethnographic perspective cyberspace is understood by Christine Hine studies cyberspace as both a cultural artifact – as a product of culture – and as a culture in its own right.¹⁷⁵ She calls her approach to the study of cybercommunities 'virtual ethnography', and she spends just as much time on applying the method as on exploring and developing its principles and assumptions. The questions she addresses are of immediate relevance to our own research: How do internet users understand the internet and its capacities and do they perceive this medium of communication? How does the internet affect social organisation, and how does the internet affect authority relations? Is internet communication 'authentic'? Hine also examines the boundaries between offline and online existence. Among the aims of virtual ethnography is to 'to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the "virtual" and the "real"'.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Pavel Curtis and David A. Nichols, *MUDs Grow Up: Social Virtual Reality in the Real World* (Palo Alto: Xerox PARC, 1993). For a related work using the MIT Media Lab's MediaMOO, see Amy Bruckman, *Identity Workshops: Emergent Social and Psychological Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Reality*, Master's Thesis, MIT Media Laboratory, 1992. See also Bruckman's personal webpage at: <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/>

¹⁷⁴ Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999). Also Dibbell, 'A rape in cyberspace: or how an evil clown, a Haitian trickster spirit, two wizards, and a cast of dozens turned a database into a society'. *The Village Voice*, Vol. 21 (1993), pp. 36-42. A revised version of this article became the first chapter of his book.

¹⁷⁵ Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

¹⁷⁶ Hine, p. 64.

Interesting empirical material for her work was provided by an internet and media event: the trial of 'Louise' for child murder in Boston court in October 1997. This event received prominent media coverage in the UK and the USA and provoked significant internet activity, leading to the creation of bulletin boards, websites and newsgroups devoted to the case. The court case provided Hine with an interesting example of how the internet affect the social relationships in space and time and how online and offline activities interacted. She pays particular attention to the 'authenticity' of the messages posted in the newsgroups and webpages covering the trial.

Hine explains that traditional ethnographic research draws on 'face-to-face interaction':

Face-to-face interaction, and the rhetoric of having traveled to a remote field site, have played a major part in the presentation of ethnographic descriptions as authentic.¹⁷⁷

Hine is fully aware of the methodological problems of ethnography but she insists that the method offers 'the promise of getting closer to understanding the ways in which people interpret the world and organize their lives'.¹⁷⁸ Accordingly, she aims to develop a type of ethnographic enquiry that fits the Internet:

The ethnography of the Internet does not necessarily involve physical travel. Visiting the Internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement.¹⁷⁹

She appreciates the role of the participant researcher in cyberspace not only as a traveler but also as participant, emphasising that the ethnographer shares emotions and commitments with the research subjects.¹⁸⁰ One of the reflexive aspects of virtual ethnography is the ability of the ethnographer to draw upon her own experience of engaging and interacting with the technology. The 'additional' problem posed by the electronic environment is the issue of 'authenticity':

The question remains then whether interactions in electronic space should be viewed as authentic, since the ethnographer cannot readily confirm details that informants tell them about their offline selves.¹⁸¹

The issue cannot be resolved but it should inform the questions that we ask about online existence. For example, instead of deciding what is and is not 'authentic', the virtual ethnographer should observe how the users themselves deal with the problem and they assess the authenticity of the message they receive and reply to.

¹⁷⁷ Hine, p. 10.

¹⁷⁸ Hine, p. 42.

¹⁷⁹ Hine, p. 45.

¹⁸⁰ Hine, p. 47.

¹⁸¹ Hine, p. 49.

Rather than treating authenticity as a particular problem posed by cyberspace that the ethnographer has to solve before moving on to the analysis, it would be more fruitful to place authenticity in cyberspace as a topic at the heart of the analysis.¹⁸²

Hine proposes ten principles that should guide virtual ethnography as a research method.

- (i) According to Hine's first rule, virtual ethnography requires the sustained presence of the ethnographer in the field studied and his engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants. 'Rather than being inherently sensible the Internet acquires its sensibility in use.'
- (ii) The second rule stipulates that the virtual ethnographer must appreciate that cyberspace has rich and complex links and connections with the context – including the offline context – within which it is used, entered etc.
- (iii) The ethnography of mediated interaction must be seen as mobile rather than as being located in particular places. 'The investigation of the making and remaking of space through mediated interactions is a major opportunity for the ethnographic approach.'
- (iv) Furthermore, virtual ethnography must focus on flow and connectivity rather than on location and boundaries.
- (v) Boundaries must not be assumed but investigated by the ethnographer. 'The challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the "virtual" and the "real".'
- (vi) Virtual ethnography may imply temporal and spatial dislocations in the sense that the virtual ethnographer interacts with people from all over the world and in different time zones. In fact, as Markham, who adopts Hine's approach, points out, borders in cyberspace are negotiated processes, rather than well-defined, static, or geographic.¹⁸³
- (vii) There are limits to virtual ethnography. With virtual ethnography it is impossible to achieve a 'holistic description of any informant, location or culture. [...] Our accounts can be based on ideas of strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities.'
- (viii) Virtual ethnography implies that the ethnographer herself, her personal experiences, become a research source. 'The ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight. [...] The shaping of interactions with informants by the technology is part of the ethnography, as are the ethnographer's interactions with the ethnography.'

¹⁸² Hine, p. 49.

¹⁸³ Annette N. Markham, 'The Internet as research context', in Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium and David Silverman (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice* (London: Sage, 2004), pp. 358-374 (362).

- (ix) 'All forms of interaction are ethnographically valid, not just the face-to-face.' Virtual ethnography is 'ethnography *in, of and through* the virtual'.
- (x) 'Virtuality also carries a connotation of "not quite", adequate for practical purposes meaning that such ethnography is characterized by an adaptive nature which fits with the new conditions found in computer mediation technology and communication. [...] Virtual ethnography is adequate for the practical purpose of exploring the relations of mediated interaction, even if not quite the real thing in methodologically purist terms.'¹⁸⁴

Ethnography is a widely used approach for the study of an increasing range of electronic communities. In addition to the studies already mentioned, the works of Correll on Lesbian Internet cafés and Mitra on the Usenet newsgroup soc.culture.Indian are good examples of this approach.¹⁸⁵ Correll argues that her studies did not reveal a high degree of inconsistency between offline and online identities.

1.3. COMMUNITY AND REALITY

As we have seen, 'community' is one of the key issues of the cyberspace literature. While there appears to be little doubt that internet users 'interact' online, there is no agreement as to whether this interaction can lead to the formation of relationships that would constitute a 'community'. Thus, we find 'virtual communities', 'symbolic communities', 'simulated communities', 'virtual neighborhoods' and 'networks' in the literature. We also find a significant measure of consternation as scholars are wondering whether indeed the term 'community' has to be given up in the context of online interaction and whether a new term is needed to describe the new reality.

Moreover, most of the empirical work that is being done in this field studies asynchronous communication, e.g. email lists, usenet groups and so on. Little attention is being paid to synchronous communication as we find it, for example, in chatrooms. In an environment that allows for synchronous communication, the conditions of cyberspace are radicalised. In addition, scholars tend to assume from the outset that cyberspace has to be studied as a tool or instrument, i.e. as an 'extension' of already existing offline practices. This perspective is typical, for example, of studies on community networks and cyberdemocracy in that they ask questions such as: How does the internet help develop civil society? And how does the internet allow for more direct forms of participation in existing democratic societies? This research therefore starts from an offline perspective and approaches the internet, as it were, from 'outside'.

¹⁸⁴ Hine, pp. 63-65. Hine's emphasis (see (ix)).

¹⁸⁵ Shelley Correll, 'The ethnography of an electronic bar: The lesbian café', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1995), pp. 270-298, and Ananda Mitra, 'Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet', in Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture. Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, pp. 55-79.

In contrast, we are interested in studying synchronous communication in cyberspace 'from within'. In order to clarify our purpose, it is useful to introduce Mark Poster's distinction between two different functions of the internet. Poster understands the internet as a decentralised communication system, as a network of networks, which can be considered (a) as a tool and (b) as a social space:

[...] the Internet is more like a social space than a thing so that its effects are more like those of Germany than those of hammers. The effects of Germany on the people within it is to make them Germans (at least for the most part); the effects of hammers is not to make people hammers, though Heideggerians and some others might disagree, but to force metal spikes into wood.¹⁸⁶ As long as we understand the Internet as a hammer we will fail to discern the way it is like Germany. The problem is that modern perspectives tend to reduce the Internet to a hammer. In this grand narrative of modernity, the Internet is an efficient tool of communication, advancing the goals of its users who are understood as preconstituted instrumental identities. The internet, I suppose like Germany, is complex enough so that it may with some profit be viewed in part as a hammer. If I search the database functions of the Internet or if I send email purely as a substitute for paper mail, then its effects may reasonably be seen to be those on the order of the hammer. The database on the Internet may be more easily or cheaply accessed than its alternatives and the same may be said of email in relation to the post office or the fax machine. But the aspects of the Internet that I would like to underscore are those which instantiate new forms of interaction and which pose the question of new kinds of relations of power between participants. The question that needs to be asked about the relations of the internet to democracy is this: are there new kinds of relations occurring within it which suggest new forms of power configurations between communicating individuals? In other words, is there a new politics on the Internet?¹⁸⁷

In other words, if we approach cyberspace as an environment, we can begin to ask the question of how this environment affects those who find themselves exposed to it. In fact, we found that approaching the internet in this way is the *only* approach that allows us to ask the question of whether new kinds of relations emerge between new kinds of online personae. As soon as we stop to take the purpose of the medium for granted – as we would if we compared it to a hammer – and as soon as we stop to consider online 'being' as preconstituted by offline conditions, we will finally be able to approach the experience of online 'being' in a more open manner. Thus, instead of approaching cyberspace with given expectations and purposes, we aim to study the online experience as a primary empirical phenomenon that may or may not lead to new forms of 'identity' and 'community'.

¹⁸⁶ Referring to *Being and Time* (1962:69ff), Poster explains in a footnote: 'Heidegger does not exactly speak of human beings becoming hammers as I suggest but something pretty close: Dasein is "absorbed" in equipment (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1962, p. 102)'. See: Mark Poster, 'Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere', in Holmes (ed.), *Virtual Politics. Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, pp. 212-228 (225).

¹⁸⁷ Poster, 'Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere', p. 216.

Furthermore, although the literature deals with both the question of reality and the question of community, individual authors usually treat them as *separate* questions. This ‘habit’ again reflects an underlying offline perspective. Drawing on our empirical work as presented in Chapters 2 and 4, *we will argue that these two questions are indeed one and the same*. It is intriguing to think that this result, although derived from our online work, could shed new light on the relationship between offline communities and ‘reality’ as well, but investigating this possibility lies outside the scope of our research project.

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY PART I: OBSERVING CHATROOMS

2.1. FIELD OF RESEARCH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In the previous chapter I identified the key concern of the thesis as the notion of reality and processes of ‘community’ formation as they apply in the electronic environment of chatrooms. As already mentioned I have chosen chatrooms, a particular venue of cyberspace, as the field of my research. In this chapter I will describe this particular facet of cyberspace, which accommodated my case study. Furthermore, I will discuss the nature of the observed chatrooms as well as their technical characteristics. The research method employed in examining the chatrooms will also be presented with the aim of elaborating my thesis question, as well as the research design and organisation including the various problems and difficulties faced while conducting the empirical work.

Technical landscape

I will start by providing a brief description of the chatrooms in which my research was conducted. Generally, the architecture of the Internet provides a distribution system of information between computers; that is to say that the main function of the Internet is to transmit bits of information from one computer to another.¹ Such bits of information can be assisted by different software and be sent or received by text, audio or video. This capacity of the Internet to transmit information from one computer to another can be used to provide various modes of communication mediated by computers (Computer Mediated Communication or CMC) either asynchronous or synchronous.² Asynchronous communication does not require users to interact, send and receive messages at the same time; in asynchronous communication users are not expected to respond immediately to incoming messages. Electronic mail (email) and email discussion lists,³ bulletin boards⁴ and Usenet

¹ For the origins and history of the Internet see: Jordan, *Cyberpower: the culture and politics of cyberspace and the internet*, (especially the chapter ‘Cyberspace and the Matrix’, pp. 20-58). See also Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Robert E. Kahn, Leonard Kleinrock, Daniel C. Lynch, Jon Postel, Lawrence G. Roberts, Stephen S. Wolff, ‘The Past and Future History of the Internet’, in *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (February 1997), pp. 102-108.

² For a discussion on various applications of Computer Mediated Communication see Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith, ‘Communities in cyberspace’, in Smith and Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 3-25 (4-12). Also useful definitions of information technology related terms are provided by: www.what-is.com. For a brief description of the asynchronous and synchronous modes of communication see also Brenda Danet, *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 14-15. (The figure 1.4. in p.15 describes different types of computer-mediated communication).

³ While email allows the individual to send a message directly to another person, discussion lists allow messages to be sent to more than one person, i.e. to a group address. Email discussion lists or mailing lists are lists which are mainly monitored by individuals, small groups or associations and are devoted to particular topics and mainly assist the communication among members of the same group. (For example an Alumni association may run its own discussion list. The message sent by a member of the association is distributed among all the members of the group). Reply to those messages does not occur synchronically but it can take place after minutes, days or even months after.

⁴ Bulletin board systems (BBSs) are known as conferencing systems; they allow people to create thematic areas in which a number of messages similar to emails can appear together one after another.

newsgroups⁵ are examples for this mode of communication. Synchronous communication enables people to communicate synchronically and it encompasses Multi-User Domains or Dungeons (MUDs)⁶, chat systems as Internet Relay Chat or IRC⁷ or chat systems supported by internet service providers like Yahoo and MSN, which also allow functions such as emails and newsgroups. Chatting is the main activity supported by the chat systems in the electronically designed forums of interaction and conversation, i.e. chatrooms. Chatrooms form a 'place' in which multiple users can enter the room, send and receive messages at the same time. There are text-based chatrooms in which communication is based on the exchange of textual messages and chatrooms that support the usage of additional visual or audio mediums, in which participants can also listen to or watch each other.

My empirical study focused on a particular chatroom category named 'Friends', a chatroom of text-based communication, which is electronically supported by a particular chat provider⁸ that has high attendance capacity⁹ and an interface that allows both public and private chatting on separate screens. This specific chat interface provides a multi-room environment; the chat environment is divided into various categories and sub-categories according to the topics available for discussion. Different chat categories are represented by different chatrooms which are dedicated to various discussion topics.¹⁰ The sub-chatrooms are named Lobbies. Accordingly,

They are differentiated from email discussion lists in the sense that the messages in mailing lists are sent to people who are members of the particular group which run the mailing list, whereas in bulletin boards people have to select the particular group and messages they want to read and reply to. For Kollok and Smith BBSs differ from email discussion lists for that the second one are 'a "push" media-messages sent to people without them necessarily doing anything', while the bulletin boards or conferencing systems 'are "pull" media- people must select groups and messages they want to read and actively request them'. See: Kollok and Smith, 'Communities in cyberspace', pp. 5-6.

⁵ Newsgroups are thousands of discussion groups in which the distribution of messages is assisted by a particular software different from the software used in mailing lists. The newsgroups are carried over the Usenet, a large conferencing system which 'is composed of a distributed database of messages that is passed through an informal global network of systems that agree to a standard message format', according to Kollok and Smith, 'Communities in cyberspace', pp. 5-6. The main function of Usenet newsgroups is information exchange. The newsgroups are organised into thematic hierarchies and the users can post messages, reply to messages already posted in the group or create their own newsgroup. Some of the newsgroups are moderated but most of them are unmoderated.

⁶ MUD is associated with computer gaming and it is a kind of computer-role play. The participants assume characters and receive textual information and description of the electronic environment in which they perform their roles, creating by that way an imaginary world. The environment in which the users interact allows the participants to build an on-going story, a game, within a set of agreed rules of interaction. LambdaMOO is one of the very well known examples of Multi Object Orientated MUD or MOO, in which the program facilitates the building of several objects and rooms. For further information on MUD see: <http://www.behavior.net/job/vlnl/utz.html>.

⁷ Internet Relay Chat sustains a form of synchronous communication over the Internet and it is based on a specific server software. It is designed in several rooms, known as channels, and it enables thousand of users to interact within. It is a relatively older chat system than the chat systems provided by internet servers like AOL and MSN.

⁸ The studied chatrooms belong to Yahoo Groups, which is one of the largest chat providers. It is located at: www.yahoo.com. MSN is also a large chat provider. Referring to Yahoo's chatrooms Chris Nuttal states that 'Last month, Yahoo's chat rooms had 11.4m visitors, with MSN Chat having 4.3m, according to ComScore'. See Chris Nuttal, 'Rivals condemn Microsoft closure', *Financial Times*, 25/09/2003.

⁹ I do not argue that the provider has unlimited attendance capacity although it is not stated anywhere in the chatroom that the number of the users is restricted.

¹⁰ Cultures and Communities, Hobbies, Business, Religion are some of the chat categories available.

the chatting interface in which I conducted my study is divided into different chatrooms: one of them is called 'Romance', which is also divided into various subchatrooms ('Friends', 'Dating', 'Culture' etc), which also have several lobbies.

The people who want to access chatrooms need to create an online nickname. In the process of choosing a pseudonym the participant needs to fill in a form where she specifies her name, location and email address. This information is not accessible to other users, but the users are also offered the option to provide additional information about themselves accessible to other users. This information may include name, location, hobbies, age, gender, favourite links, photos etc. In other words, the users – if they wish – can build-up a personal profile, which is accessible to other 'chatters'.

Access to 'personal profiles' is possible by right-clicking the name of the chatter in the chatroom. As will be discussed in the following section, users can also provide photos and images as additional means of self-presentation. Interestingly, users are given the opportunity to provide 'false' information about themselves and therefore to present a non-real profile. Chatroom users register for the chatroom of their choice and log into a room, after choosing a pseudonym (nickname). Inside the chatroom, there is a list of people currently online, who are informed that a new user has entered the chatroom in that the new user's name appears on the screen. To chat, users type messages into a text box provided. After writing a message they select 'enter' and almost automatically the message is visible to the other chatters as it appears on the screen. Typing and sending messages results in the messages stringing together on the screen in a dialogue form. Users can be in the chatroom without actively participating in it, without chatting. This practice is known as 'lurking'. Sent and received messages in chatrooms are publicly and instantly visible to all the users in the chatroom no matter whether they are chatting or just lurking.

As mentioned above, the particular chatting environment where I conducted my case study supports both public and private discussions; apart from the open and public discussions in chatrooms, private discussions can take place among participants. The chatters are offered the option to open private discussions and continue their contact in private dialogues accommodated in private 'windows' on the screen. Being registered in the Yahoo server and being able to choose a pseudonym and to connect to the chatroom server, the chatters can download and use a software known as Messenger at no cost.¹¹ The downloading of this software allows chatters to create their own list of 'friends' by sending invitations to other chatters whom they met in public chatrooms. If the other chatters give their permission, their names can be added to the list of 'friends'. Whenever one of these friends is online, her name appears in bold on the screen. Only after the download and installation of the software can the user make use of the 'friends list'. Therefore, the chatters can add a person's email address in the list by following the on-screen prompts, and the names of the 'friends',

¹¹ 'Yahoo! Messenger is a free instant messaging service that you can use to communicate with other people who also use Yahoo! Messenger. You can see which of your friends are online and communicate with them in real time.' This information is provided on the web page: www.yahoo.com under the paragraph 'what is Yahoo! Messenger?' and it is available after clicking 'new to instant messaging?' Also 'Nothing! Yahoo! Messenger is free' is the answer to the question 'How much does it cost to use the Software', as part of the general information that the webpage www.yahoo.com provides to the 'newcomers' to instant messaging.

who have signed in the software's chatrooms, and are online, appear in bold in the 'friends list'.¹² As a result, a chatter who has made contacts online has the option of sustaining the contacts by taking advantage of the instant messaging software.

Additionally, it should be mentioned that adding a name in the 'friends list' requires the invited chatter to accept the invitation and provide her/his email, which is essential for being added to the friends list. Therefore, to add chatters in the friends list is not possible without the consent of the invited chatter. I will illustrate the process by providing a simple hypothetical example. The process of adding chatters in the 'friends list' is as follows: the chatter A sends an invitation (instant message) to the chatter B whom chatter A would like to add in the list. The chatter B either accepts the invitation and automatically is added to the chatter A's list or ignores the invitation. The invitation appears as an instant message in a separate private room. If chatter A and chatter B have never met before – which accordingly means that they have not exchanged their email addresses – chatter A invites chatter B by right-clicking B's name as it appears in the chatroom (nickname). All the names of the chatters present in the particular room are listed on the right side of the screen. The email address of chatter B – in case she accepts the invitation – becomes available to chatter A after the acceptance of the invitation. It is worth noting that in online communication in public chatrooms, someone can communicate both in public and private rooms with 'friends' at the same time. The instant messaging enables the chatters not only to communicate with 'friends' synchronically in private rooms but also to send off-line messages to 'friends' who do not appear online. Such off-line messages appear as instant messages, each time a chatter signs into the Messenger. That means that with the support of Messenger, instant messages exchanged between 'friends' are stored and become accessible to 'friends' each time they sign in.

Research design

After briefly discussing the technical 'landscape' of the chatrooms, in which I conducted my case study, I will continue by describing the research design of the empirical work. I will clarify the research tools and the framework in which the empirical work was carried out and will also address the methodological questions that arise in a study of this kind. My research questions aim at understanding and illuminating the notion of reality and community in cyberspace. In order to approach such notions and understand their dimensions in cyberspace I chose to employ a case study in chatrooms that are sustained in cyberspace as a text-based communication forum. The case study focuses on studying and understanding the conditions surrounding the text-based communication in cyberspace with the aim of examining the nature and the conditions of the reality and community emerging and experienced in cyberspace. The reason why I have chosen the study of chatrooms as a mode of online communication, instead of other communicative tools such as email, newsgroups or homepages is the following: Firstly, the chatrooms enable the participants to communicate synchronically, act, react and interact through synchronous-based communication contrary to other means of communication, which are mostly asynchronous. The synchronous communication provides the challenging

¹² Yellow faces next to names of the chatters who are online appear soon after a chatter who belongs to a friends list signs in.

opportunity to study any possible structures of identity and community at the very moment they may emerge; one is placed on the cusp of reaction. Secondly, whereas the other means of on-line communication such as homepages, newsgroups and emails accommodate certain purposes of communication (exchanges of information and ideas on specific topics, provision of information etc.), the chatrooms serve more as meeting places, where the participants meet up to communicate with each other synchronically, without always having clearly defined topics of discussion. Therefore, I am not interested in examining means of computer mediated communication that contribute to maintaining or developing already existing communities, such as emails, but I am rather seeking to explore and understand the potential for new (or renewed) dimensions of community and reality as they are emerging

Moreover, the possibilities that the chatrooms offer for the participants to be anonymous or even to detach themselves from their real selves – in terms of name, status etc. – raises questions about the flexibility or elasticity of the ‘real’ in cyberspace. Since these questions have a central place in the thesis, I think that they need to be questioned and observed empirically in chatrooms. I spent a specific amount of time in researching yahoo chatrooms with the purpose of being familiar with their structure and nature. The reason why I chose yahoo chatrooms are; that they are well structured as they provide different chat channels, which are divided into various chatrooms; they are considered as popular since they have existed for several years and are a visible brand, something that minimises the possibility of being regarded as ephemeral; they are designated for several topics of chat; they provide the exact number of the participants they are populated from, they also provide direct information about the participants when they enter or leave the chatrooms. Moreover they offer the possibility to enter and participate under different pseudonyms.¹³

The empirical work has been divided into two stages: Firstly, the continuous pure observation of one and the same chatroom. The purpose of this kind of study is to obtain a general idea of the kind of activity that takes place in chatrooms. The above research technique resembles techniques used in ethnographic studies, and it concentrates on the direct observation of the everyday life of a particular chatroom, or set of chatrooms, in order to examine the customary actions, the attitudes and the structures as reflected in the context of engaging in chatting.

In the second stage of the empirical work I adopted the research method of active participation in chatrooms, which required involving myself as a participant. More precisely, I observed and participated in the same chatrooms for three months, devoting one month of pure observation or ‘lurking’ and two months of participation. The first month of the case study (August 2003) was fully devoted to the observation of the text-based chat environment selected, and the following two months (September-October 2003) involved the participation of the researcher herself. I have to make clear from the beginning the fact that the results of my observation are not restricted to within the period of the one month, where pure observatory sessions of research were conducted. The results of observation stem from the whole period when the research took place. I need to emphasise that during the participation sessions as

¹³ The yahoo address with which someone logs in the chat site requires the choice of a nickname as already mentioned. A yahoo address enables only one nickname, someone could also use different yahoo addresses/accounts and thus different nicknames, but only one each time.

well, I continued to observe the behaviour and attitudes of the communication in chatrooms, but my main aim was to initiate discussions and to negotiate access in already existing dialogues. My first priority as soon as I left the pure observation sessions was to make efforts to become an active member of the chatrooms in order to enrich my experience from the insider's perspective while conducting the research.

The observation sessions were divided into three different time periods: morning, afternoon and evening sessions. In the observation part of the study I aimed at observing the attitudes of the participants during three different time stages. The observation sessions took place approximately during the following three day periods: From 09.00 until 15.00 pm, from 14.00 pm until 19.00 pm, and 11.00 pm until 04.00 am. I regarded it as important for my observation to collect samples during different time periods in order to include diverse geographical areas which belong in different time zones.

The participation sessions took place between 09.00 and 15.00 approximately.¹⁴ The approximate total time of participation was five to six hours per day. I kept a systematic diary, where I noted details of the sessions and the actual time of the conversations that took part during the second phase of participation. Also, the diary contains details about the specific time of the beginning and end of every session as well as any technical problems faced throughout the participation.¹⁵ Regarding my own presence during the empirical study, given that the entrance in chatrooms requires the choice of a pseudonym I had to adapt an online name; I chose to use the same name consistently during both the observation and participation sessions. I entered the 'friends' chatroom as 'philotis' at the first stage of the study and as 'existenzio' at the second stage.¹⁶ Although I did not state my gender from the beginning, I eventually presented myself as male. The reason of my choice lies upon my desire to exercise my ability as participant to present myself as different from the 'real' and to examine how this presentation would affect the interactions between me and other chatters. From now on, any reference to the above pseudonyms throughout the analysis of the examples will apply to the researcher herself. As mentioned above, participants in chatrooms are provided with the choice to present further attributes of themselves in 'personal profiles'. For the purposes of my study I chose to leave my personal profile empty. The reason behind this choice is my desire to explore the way in which the self-presentation and representation develops, without the provision of additional information from the beginning. My aim to understand how the development of communication affects the perception of the 'real' in chatrooms determined my choice to not provide a profile with certain characteristics of the self. The reason of my choice was related to my interests in terms of the thesis question; I was seeking to know in which way a dialectical revelation of personal information, even if 'unreal', can affect ways in which chatters perceive the 'real' in chatrooms and are united with each other.

¹⁴ The extracts of dialogues provided in Chapter 4 have been taken during these periods of participation.

¹⁵ E.g. on Tuesday, 9th September 2003, the entrance in chatroom 'Friends' began at 09.03 am and ended at 10.58 am. The total time of participation was 1 hour and 57 min. The entrance in chatroom again started at 12.04 pm and ended at 15.10 pm. Accordingly, the total time of participation from where the data collected is 3 hours and 6 min.

¹⁶ I have to mention the pseudonyms at this stage so that my role as participant can be identified in the examples provided in Chapter 4.

Generally, the study does not focus on the discovery of a universal or general truth, applicable to the problematique around cyberspace. Instead, emphasis is put on commenting and describing certain behaviours and patterns that shed light on the thesis question. Therefore, the nature of this case study is more diagnostic than prognostic. It is part of the process of questioning the nature of the environment in which the observation and participation took place and the extent to which that environment enables new or renewed notions of reality and community. I find that the most interesting and helpful research method is the careful synthesis of both the long-term pure observation and the covert participant observation. The first has helped me to acquire a general idea of the history and the function of the chatroom, and the second one assisted me in further exploring life and activity in the chatroom.

By employing the pure observation and participation as the research techniques of my empirical work I adapted the participant observation method¹⁷ and accommodated the case study into the ethnographic realm. By pure observation the researcher is presumed to gain a general understanding of the environment studied and by active participation the researcher aims at gaining a deeper and more direct understanding of the issue studied. Although as I said before, the need for conducting the second part of the case study, the active and covert participation will be justified at the end of this chapter, I will provisionally present some of the characteristics of this research method.

Ethnography in Cyberspace

My case study as a whole represents the effort made to approach the thesis question from the participant's point of view. Therefore, it can become descriptive and quite personal since it reflects the personal experience of the researcher. As such, the research falls under the rubric of ethnography and its agenda since it shares some attributes of the anthropological study. Hammersley and Atkinson define ethnography as follows:

In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions-in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.¹⁸

Travelling experience is associated with the ethnographic study in general. The 'arrival stories' play an essential role for Pratt in the ethnographic field of research. She states that the arrival stories:

¹⁷ I found useful the works by Danny L. Jorgensen, *Participant Observation* (London: Sage, 1989); Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice* (London: Sage, 2001); J. P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Wilson, 1980); J. Friedrichs, *Participant Observation: Theory and Practice* (Saxon House, 1975); Jane Richie and Jane Lewis, (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (London: Sage Publications, 2003).

¹⁸ M. Hammersley and P. Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2nd edition 1995), p. 1.

[...] play the crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork. [...]. Always they are responsible for setting up the initial positionings of the subjects of the ethnographic text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader.¹⁹

Wolf defends ethnographic analysis as research method by saying that: ‘We do research. It is more than something that simply happens to us as a result of being in an exotic place.’²⁰ In defence of ethnographic research as an opportunity to step into the studied field, Van Maanen claims:

Fieldwork of the ethnographic kind is authentic to the degree that it approximates the stranger stepping into a culturally alien community to become, for a time and in an unpredictable way, an active part of the face-to-face relationships in that community.²¹

In my case study, I have chosen to use a kind of ethnographic research method, participant observation, because I aimed at exploring the dynamics, norms and patterns of communication in chatrooms. In order to generate an argument with regard to the nature of reality and community that emerge online, or at least in order to challenge the existing arguments in terms of this theme, I considered my ‘travelling’ into the online environment as essential: It would help me to acquire knowledge of the environment studied from a more personal point of view. In order to support my decision to also take part in the process of ‘chatting’ after having spent some time purely observing it, I refer to Clifford Geertz who states that ‘one can start anywhere in a culture’s repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else. [...]. One has only to learn how to gain access to them.’²²

After having spent a considerable time observing the selected chatrooms I came to realise the necessity of ‘gaining access to’, and also becoming an active member of them by taking part in the online discussions and by trying to approach the questions of the thesis from a less distant and at the same time more ‘subjective’ point of view.

The direct participation in dialogues with the chatters-inhabitants of the environment studied automatically reduces the objectivity of the observation, but I decided to proceed my research in this way. I regard the second part, the participation that follows the pure observation of the ‘research objects’, as essential for the following reasons. Firstly, where the observation of the chatters and their actions provided me with a general idea of the mode of communication among them, the participation itself was required after a time as providing the opportunity for a deeper understanding of actions and motives. Secondly, the ongoing Internet discourse among scholars from various academic fields has been systematically dealing with the

¹⁹ M. L. Pratt, ‘Fieldwork in common places’, in J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 27-50 (32).

²⁰ Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale : Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 127.

²¹ John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: on Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 9.

²² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 453.

examination of the research methods appropriate enough to serve the need of studying cyberspace. Publications, such as Steve Jones edited collection, *Doing Internet Research*²³ indicate acceptance and a growing interest in virtual ethnography among social scientists. Burnett identifies the particularity of employing ethnographic research in online environments where the 'place' is not clearly defined. He suggests: 'you travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining'.²⁴

Hine discusses the new opportunities that the research in the Computer mediated communication opens up for rethinking and reconsidering the field of ethnographic research. She proposes some principles²⁵ for the conduct of virtual ethnography, which characterise to a great extent my case study. She defines virtual ethnography as 'An ethnography of in and through the Internet [that] can be conceived of as an adaptive and wholeheartedly partial approach which draws on connection rather than location in defining the object',²⁶ and she suggests that the relations in the mediated interaction can be examined ethnographically for practical purpose.

I came to realise that my task to research the 'inhabitants' and the 'patterns' of a particular 'space' had dictated ethnography as a research tool in the same way as an anthropologist would use it to carry out her study. In the same way in which an anthropologist would visit a village in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the community that the members of the village sustain, I chose instead of simply continuing to observe the selected chatrooms, to enter and study them from inside. Similarly Geertz insists that 'anthropologists don't study villages [...]; they study *in* villages.'²⁷

I tend to regard my trip, stay and communication in the chatrooms under the same spectrum as being a traveller who visits a country or a place, but keeps her research aims hidden from the inhabitants just to make sure that they will continue to behave naturally as if nobody observed them. It can be said that for this reason my study may be seen through an anthropological lens.

The need to combine observation and participation in the studied online environments is clearly identified by Kate Eichorn who used both methods herself when carrying out ethnographic research of an 'online community'. She states: '[...] it became apparent that understanding my participants was not contingent on witnessing their everyday activities, but instead on participating in their lives as they do [...]'.²⁸ Therefore, my main motive in also participating in chatrooms was to gain a deeper

²³ Jones (ed.), *Doing Internet Research: Critical issues and methods for examining the Net*.

²⁴ Ron Burnett, 'A torn page, ghosts on the computer screen, words, images, labyrinths: exploring the frontiers of cyberspace', in G. E. Marcus (ed.), *Connected: Engagements with Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 67-98 (68). There are also ethnographers of online environments who connect online with offline research. For example Correll besides with her online research met the subjects of her study offline in order to validate issues they claimed about their offline lives. See Shelley Correll, 'The ethnography of an electronic bar: the Lesbian Café'.

²⁵ Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, pp. 63-65.

²⁶ Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, p. 10.

²⁷ Clifford Geertz, *After the fact: Two countries, four decades, one anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 22.

²⁸ Kate Eichorn, 'Sites unseen: ethnographic research in a textual community', in *Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2001), pp. 565-579 (577).

insight and understanding before I draw my concluding remarks.

Ethical Questions

Although various opinions have been expressed in terms of the nature of the participant observation study and especially about the degree of ethicality when the members of a group are not aware of the fact that they are being studied, I regard this particular research model as very important for the present study. Observing and studying the obvious or hidden possibilities to play with, transform or transcend the 'real' status and identity when connected in chatrooms required my own engagement with other participants without them knowing that they became subjects of observation. I wanted to be able to observe chatters 'in their natural habitat' without causing them to change their 'normal' behaviour as a result of them being aware of my observations. As a result, such a method of participation assisted me in my effort to examine the participants without making them transform their usual patterns of behaviour and communication.

Clearly, my aim was not to manipulate the chatroom by trying to conceptualise the meaning of my experience. Instead, I was seeking to approach the chatroom from inside, in order to learn the secret language of the group, in order to unlock the codes, the meanings and any constructed realities that have been embedded into the communication 'tactics' of the participants. Having considered the ethical dimensions²⁹ of the research method I employed, I always kept in mind that my first priority as a researcher was to protect the subjects, i.e. the participants that are coming

²⁹ Various works were taken into account regarding the ethical responsibilities of the researcher. Indicatively see among others Susan C. Herring, 'Linguistic and critical analysis of computer-mediated communication: Some ethical and scholarly considerations', *The Information Society*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1996), pp. 153-168; Susan C. Herring, 'Cyber Violence: Recognizing and Resisting Abuse in Online Environments', *Asian Women*, Vol. 14 (Summer 2002), pp. 187-212; Susan, C. Herring, 'The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment on-line', *The Information Society*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1999), pp. 151-167; Jim Thomas, 'Introduction: A debate about the ethics of fair practices for collecting social sciences data in cyberspace', *The Information Society*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1996), pp. 107-117; John Suler, 'Ethics in Cyberspace Research', *Psychology of Cyberspace* (2000), available online at: <http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/ethics.html>; Joseph B. Walther, 'Research Ethics in Internet-Enabled Research: Human Subjects Issues and Methodological Myopia', *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2002), pp. 205-216; Julian Dibbell, 'A rape in cyberspace, or how an evil clown, a Haitian trickster spirit, two wizards, and a cast of dozens turned a database into a society'; Marjorie Kibby and Brigid Costello, 'Between the image and the act: Interactive sex entertainment on the Internet', *Sexualities: Studies in Culture and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2001), pp. 353-369; Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel and Timothy W. McGuire, 'Social psychological aspects of computer-mediated communication', *American Psychologist*, Vol. 39, No. 10 (1984), pp. 1123-1134; Karen Thomas, 'Girls know way around Net, parents', *USA Today*, February 13, 2002; Lindsey Van Gelder, 'The strange case of the electronic lover', *Ms. Magazine*, (October 1985), pp. 94-124; Charles Ess, 'Beyond false dilemmas: Men and women on the net-A plea for democracy and understanding', *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*, special issue on Philosophical Approaches to Pornography, Free Speech, and CMC, ed. by C. Ess, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1996), electronically available at: <http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1996/jan/ess.html>; Charles Ess and AoIR ethics working committee, 'Ethical decision-making and internet research: recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee' (2002), electronically available at: <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>; Charles Ess, 'Introduction. Special issue on internet research ethics', *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2002), pp. 177-188 and Dag Elgesem, 'What is Special about the Ethical Issues in Online Research?', *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2002), pp. 195-203, electronically available at: http://www.nyu.edu/projects/nissenbaum/ethics_elgesem.html.

under study. The main ethical questions that motivated my research are: the extent to which the subjects (the participants) are affected by the research; the way in which the material gathered by the research is to be used and the way in which confidentiality is to be secured and respected.

My primary ethical obligation was to ensure that the research was not to do harm to the participants. The topic of the thesis itself minimises such a risk: The aim of the thesis is not to approach and analyse the discussions of the participants themselves. But instead, it seeks to explore the possibilities of participation and community construction, the emergence of an online or disembodied structure. Therefore the emphasis was given to the elements, gathered and interpreted through the empirical work, which contribute to the conceptualisation of the 'real', 'participation' and 'community'. Such elements refer to the linguistic form of communication, the anonymity (or 'pseudonymity') as presentation of the self, etc. That means that the aim of the study is not to interpret the content of the dialogues in chatrooms but rather the extent to which the content enables formation and structure of a kind of community.

In order to further minimise any risks: after gathering the data I changed the nicknames of the participants, not only of those who were active in the chatrooms but all the nicknames that appear as indicators of the participants' presence. Along with pseudonyms all other identifying details (place names, organizational and institutional names, etc.) were changed. I secured the data collection without transmitting any information. Furthermore, no video or audiotape recording was used.³⁰ The complete set of the information given on online chat was completely disguised so that someone deliberately seeking to find a subject's identity would be unable to do so. The technique of 'double pseudonym' has been also used (a pseudonym for a frequently used pseudonym), so that the identity of the participants was protected as much as possible.

Internet research as a relatively new subject opens critical issues in terms of ethical requirements.³¹ I think that a complete ethical framework needs to synthesise very carefully the responsibilities described above. The set of ethical responsibilities of my research design gives emphasis to the respect of the human dignity by the protection of the identities, the protection of confidentiality and the assurance of anonymity.

Difficulties encountered

Apart from the ethical concerns, the main difficulties faced throughout the empirical work refer to technical problems associated with network connection and the process of data collection. I could identify four basic categories of difficulties I faced

³⁰ I have to emphasise my intention, given that camera and microphones are applicable in the chatrooms I studied.

³¹ I found it quite interesting and informative to attend the following conferences and workshops devoted to the discussion of the particularities of Internet research: The international conference of Association of Internet Researchers: Internet Research 3.0, NET/WORK/THEORY, Maastricht, the Netherlands, October 13-16, 2002. Also: The 4th Virtual Methods Seminar in ESRC-funded virtual methods series held at LSE, September 27, 2002, and devoted to discussions regarding the qualitative data collection through online interaction.

throughout the performance of the research: Firstly, technical problems, such as connection problems, which are associated with the breakdown of the network. Frequent interruption of network connection resulted in disconnection from chatrooms and causes difficulties in terms of the data collection³². As a result visiting the chatrooms and continuing the study was not always an easy process. Further problems are associated with the vulnerability of the technology. For example, the computer's capacity in memory which led me to apply for additional space quota, and virus problems.³³ The above difficulties affected the consistency of the study to some extent.³⁴

Secondly, further difficulties refer to the language used in chatrooms.³⁵ They can be summarised as the difficulty of distinguishing between relevant and not relevant information, given the enormous amount of the raw data produced in chatrooms. This difficulty underlines the general complexity in finding a way around understanding and interpreting the data while at the same time participating and producing texts. I can therefore identify two limitations that derive from the nature of the study I conducted. Firstly, understanding and interpreting the data as observer and secondly, participating and therefore producing data synchronically while making the effort to understand the electronic environment as a whole in order to notice its particular attributes. Also, distinguishing between 'real', 'unreal' and 'imaginary' could be regarded as a further complexity. But, I have to stress at this point the difficulty in distinguishing between real and imaginary does not refer particularly to the nature of the research conducted; it is connected with the nature of the electronic environment

³² Since Friday, 1st August, 2003, network problems appeared. Connection was usually interrupted under the message: 'Explorer has generated errors and will be closed by windows. You will need to restart the programme. An error log has been created'. In other cases like on Thursday, 7th August, 2003, connection was interrupted under the following message: 'System is low in virtual memory. Windows will increase the size of your virtual memory. During this process memory requests for some applications will be denied'. Also, on Saturday, 16th August, 2003, connection was interrupted under the message: 'The system is very slow in saving word docs. Automatic recovery cannot be done.' Also on Wednesday, 8th October, 2003, according to the message of the day appeared on the screen: 'System work Tuesday 14th October 2003: 08:30-10:00 Rutherford College network will be unavailable due to major network upgrades. Staff will be significantly affected, but public PCs will also be interrupted at times.'

³³ On 23rd September 2003, I received a message from the Computer Office which stated the virus infection: 'We believe that your machine has been infected by the Nachi\Welchi virus that is circulating on Campus. If you have administrator rights (ie you can install software on your machine) then please do the following, otherwise please contact your departmental IT support staff.....'. Through an email and telephone correspondence it was made clear that the antivirus security system of the PC was rather old and needed updated. New F-Secure Antivirus for Windows should have to be installed. On 6th October 2003, the Computing Service recommended me to scan the system since no progress in terms of the virus infection had been made. The Scanning Report on 6th October, 2003, at 13:47:56 produced the following messages: 'F-Secure Antivirus has detected the following viruses in your computer W32/Nachi.A', 'F-Secure Antivirus Disinfection Wizard will guide you through the process of removing the infection in your system', and 'The object could not be disinfected. Object was renamed'. After the Scanning was completed, it was suggested by the Computing Office that Scanning of the system should be repeated in a week. Also, on 7th October 2003 I received email by the Computing Service Helpdesk under the subject: 'Very slow staff network connection', stating among other that: 'Please be aware that large number of staff machines infected with viruses have been causing problems on all of the staff networks since the start of term.'

³⁴ As will be discussed in the first story in chapter 4, the virus problem affected my communication with the chatter 'light'.

³⁵ Discussion on Language in chatrooms takes place in chapter 5.

where chatting takes place and where certain attributes of offline status like gender are hidden. Additionally, the difficulty of distinguishing between 'real' and 'imaginary' instead of a problem can become one of the challenging driving forces to explore the particularity of any kind of 'community' that can emerge in chatrooms.

Thirdly, difficulties are related to synchronous mode of communication, which is supported by the specific chatrooms I studied; since the data is not archived the researcher receives the information as instant phenomena, as occurrences. By leaving the chatrooms the data disappears, and by entering the same chatroom the dialogues that took place before are not accessible. Moreover, the speed in which conversations take place in synchronous communication requires the researcher to implement mechanisms of quick response (like speedy typing). The filtration of the data is another requirement during the process of gathering and analysing the data. Irrelevant material (like pornographic sites that some users systematically send) had to be ignored by the researcher so that she could focus on the dialogues taken place.

Fourthly, further difficulties I faced in chatrooms refer to the artistic way in which some participants tend to formulate their messages. The participants are often very innovative; they have developed their own system and code of expression, which varies between the choice of nicknames and the usage of abbreviations. The observation sessions were helpful in my study in the sense that I had the time to become more familiar with the electronic environment.

2.2. OBSERVATION REPORT

I will now proceed to report my observations in the chatrooms I studied with the purpose of exploring particular patterns of communication, behaviour and interaction between the participants. After providing my initial observations regarding chatters and their activities, I will consider whether such observations open up a discussion on the (re)conceptualisation of reality in cyberspace. The observation report will be assisted by the provision of particular examples stemming from the period when I was purely observing ('lurking') the text-based chatrooms.

Self Presentation

The participants construct their online identity and performance in chatrooms throughout various ways.³⁶ Firstly and necessarily and for practical reasons in order to have access to the chatrooms – as already mentioned – they need to 'invent' a pseudonym (nickname). The nicknames vary among common names, which could

³⁶ A plethora of works has been devoted to the various forms of 'identity' in synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication. For example: Haya Bechar-Israeli examines nicknames in Internet Relay Chat in Haya Bechar-Israeli, 'From <Bonehead> to <cLoNehEAd>: Nicknames, Play and Identity on Internet Relay Chat', in *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (September 1995), electronically available at: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol1/issue2/bechar.html>. Also Reid examines issues of identity in MUDs and MOOs. See Elizabeth Reid, 'Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination', in Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 164-183. Sherry Turkle has characterised the space constructed by the Internet as 'social laboratory for experimenting with the construction and reconstruction of the self that characterises post-modern life'. See Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 180.

and might be real like 'Ron', 'Kelly', or 'Jim'³⁷, also names mixed with numbers like 'Jim_2004', letters in row with no logical continuity (reflecting probably certain symbols for the chatter herself), symbolic names taken from mythology or history, adjectives, adverbs etc. Sometimes, the inventiveness of the chatters can impress someone who visits such an environment for first time, because the names themselves may be constructed by a meaningful whole sentence like 'I_seek_your_friendship'.

The originality and the inventiveness of the nicknames may indicate personality characteristics or desires (like the desire for friendship in the last example) as well as attract the public's attention. The originality may also derive as a result of both the difficulty to choose common names (as most are already taken), and the process of registration, which does not allow the chatters to use identical nicknames. At least an extra underscore or an additional letter can be enough to differentiate the nickname and the user whom the nickname represents. (e.g. 'Jim2004' and 'Jim_2004').

Secondly, the chatters have the option to provide photos and additional information of themselves. By clicking upon the nickname such a provision may be possible. Some of the chatters provide their photos, photos of themselves or others.³⁸ The photos provided are supposed to give extra information for the chatters themselves, it does not necessarily mean though that the photos do represent real faces or bodies. Although it is expected that the photos project the image of the chatter, the chatters very often provide photos of items, animals, abstracts, art, etc. The system allows them to present photos of themselves but does not offer a guarantee that real representation can be secured. That means that the chatters may or may not provide real photos of them and therefore the 'self-presentation' through photos does not necessarily mean 'real-representation'.

The provision of photos aims at either reflecting the truth, the off-line 'reality' (real image) no matter whether it can be checked, and filling the gap that the non face-to-face interaction creates, or challenging the imagination, given that neither the provision of photos itself nor the system guarantee the truth of presentation (in case the photos are not real). In the last case the provision of photos aim at either strengthening (in case the photos support the visual representation if and when the photos are real representation of the self), or weakening the image of the chatter (in the first case when the photos reflect highly attractive personas, in the second case when they reflect unattractive images or even non-human entities). In this second case the choice of particular personae or items may reveal something about the choice matter itself and the way chatters think about themselves, even when humor lies as the basis of their selection.³⁹ In this case, the humoristic dimension may underline a deeper desire for *play and performance*.

³⁷ The names used here as examples do not appear in the actual data. Attention is drawn systematically so that no name and accordingly no actual represented chatter will be revealed. However, most of the names are very common.

³⁸ For ethical reasons such photos cannot be presented as examples.

³⁹ Very often funny images of cartoons or totally unattractive images appear.

Apart from the photos the chatters tend to provide additional information about themselves.⁴⁰ This kind of information may include information about personal status, hobbies, interests, favourite phrases or favourite links, even personal sites that could draw more light upon the chatter persona. Again, this information cannot be tested, which means that it is upon the chatters to provide or not the truth.

Arguably, both the above possibilities enforce choices by participants to challenge the imagination - either by strengthening or weakening the hidden persona, no matter whether it reflects the 'real' or the 'unreal' - and as such are closely connected with play. It is the nature of online communication that makes imagination possible under the absence of any control of verification or falsification. 'The certainty of the uncertainty', related not only with the part of self-presentation presently discussed, but also with the content of the dialogue when it is humoristic. 'Certainty of the uncertainty' is a concept that underlines the dynamics of relations built online. Furthermore it can affect the degree of trust and reliance that can develop among the chatters. The presentation of the self through nicknames, photos and additional information can affect the perception of the 'real' in chatrooms.

The imagination is challenged by both the presence and the absence of photos and additional information. The chatter herself can make use of her chance to play with her image and more specifically with the representation of her image. The presentation of the Self through this extra option may place the chatter into a context of selection, choice or non-choice of images and words that can elaborate her persona or misguide the other chatters. Conversely, the absence of photos and further information underlines, as indicated above, a certain choice by the chatter: *the choice of no choice*. The chatter chooses not to chose the provision of further elements of status, gender etc. and accordingly not to restrict the imagination of other users. Similarly the chatters, who enter the chatrooms and seek additional information about others, may choose to either trust or mistrust the information provided. Having passed through the same moment of choice, they are aware of the option to guide or misguide the other users with regard to their status and attributes.

It is worth reporting that the chatters have the option to choose different nicknames any time they want to enter the chatrooms, under the condition that they cannot enter the chatroom with more than one nickname each time. The use of different pseudonyms can also mean the possibility of provision of different photos and different information each time. The same user may appear with multiple personae.⁴¹ Again, the awareness of this fact may trigger the play with status and identity, and accordingly it may mobilise both the power of imagination (by both the particular chatter who acts so, and the other chatters aware of the possibility) and the power of trust, reliance and belief that develop among the participants. This possibility to play with different pseudonyms, photos or personal information advances the option to present oneself differently, to choose to represent oneself as different and this option itself can transform the whole domain of the chatrooms as a sphere of performance and play. Different costumes (photos, information), different roles each time reduce the possibility of certain and fixed identity, since it depends on the chatters how they

⁴⁰ By right clicking the name of the chatter, additional info may appear in case that the chatter has enriched her profile information.

⁴¹ See also Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.

present their online and their offline status each time.

The continuity in the use of nicknames, photos and other information directs the recognition process: The more often the chatters use the same pseudonyms, the easier it becomes for them to be recognised. And furthermore, the continuity of identity and status (no matter whether the 'real' is represented through 'unreal' photos or information) may encourage some degree of trust and reliance in regard with the time it lasts.

Throughout my observation I have found that the chatters, who frequently appear in chatrooms under the same nickname and are instantly recognised by their names, tend to present the same tools of self-representation (photos, information). Of course, it cannot be tested whether the same chatters use different nicknames. But what is more important to us is whether the continuity of the elastic and fluid identities can become an important factor of recognition in the environment of chatrooms, and whether this can facilitate any conceptualisation of 'reality' and 'community' in chatrooms.

My interest in the continuity of identity and the power of recognition and its role to the establishment of a kind of community in the chatrooms has derived from the following speculation: Let us imagine that two people meet and talk face to face. The next time they meet they remember one another or they can find various cues (face, body, body language etc.) that enable them to recall and establish the identity of the other. Or perhaps they do not seem to remember but they act as they meet for the first time. Are there any analogous possibilities in chatrooms? When the face to face interaction is absent, and the cues for recalling identities are not based on visual presence, are the 'real' (or the offline) identities secret? Are there any informal codes and procedures in chatrooms for recalling characteristics (non physical) and easily remember and recalling identities? Are there any patterns in online communication deriving from offline communication that assist the conceptualisation of the Self and the perception of the 'real? Are the same procedures of offline mechanisms for establishing and recalling the identity of a stranger, applicable online?

The following example reveals that the recall of personal information may be a factor of recognising and recalling identity on line:

<Jim : whats up
Jim:how are ya
Maria: *hey Jim*
Jim: heya Maria
Jim: is that Esther?
Ron: pics and webcam are up at
Maria: *yeah why*
Cross: yeah that's Esther
Jim: havent seen you on in a while
Jim: at least not on the other name
Maria: *lol*>⁴²

⁴² Thursday, 28th August 2003 (01:20-03:18).

The above example shows the recognition between 'Jim' and 'Maria' unfolding. A third chatter 'Cross' confirms that the chatter 'Maria' uses a different nickname. The chatters seem to know each other, except the fact they can use different pseudonyms. Probably 'Maria' has been recognised as identical to 'Esther' by Jim after he accessed her personal information provided in her profile. The play with nicknames is also indicative.

Similarly:

<Victim: ok where's Pirate?

Rene: ☐ Angel is Pirate

Angel: I'm also Pirate

Victim: hey Pirate

Victim: do you mind if i PM you real quick?

Victim: it's kinda important>⁴³

Here the play with nicknames prevails. The recognition of 'Angel' by 'Victim' is assisted by the confirmation given by the third chatter 'Rene'. The private discussion that might have followed will probably unfold familiarity between the two chatters. No questions are posed about the 'real' 'Angel'. It seems that it is taken for granted that 'Angel' tells the truth. Similarly:

<Trace: yeah i remember that name>⁴⁴

And further on in the same session:

<someone: left the room

Lyco: ok I remember

a_blonde : hi

york: joined the room.

a_blonde : 23/f

Lyco: >🇺🇸<vice

Leo: I forgot your name

cht_friend_2003 joined the room.

Vice: *do i know you Lyco?*

sara joined the room.

Lyco: yup

a_blonde: oh?

sena left the room.

vice: <~~~~~october?

Lyco: Dedry

vice: *Mao?*

mystic joined the room.

malia joined the room.

vice: *ok hiya Dedry*>

In the above examples informal cues of recognition seem to be used by the chatters. It

⁴³ Thursday, 28th August 2003 (01:20-03 :18).

⁴⁴ Sunday, 3rd August 2003 (08:53-11:18).

is also obvious that they tend to reveal different names under which they are known by chatters. In the above example 'Lyco' uses different nicknames, a tendency accepted by 'Vice' who can recall information about 'Lyco' only when connecting 'Lyco' with 'Dedry'.

Even when a chatter is recognisable by her nickname the interest in the 'real' (in the sense of offline) name has been observed throughout the study. The chatters often tend to ask about the 'real' name which of course cannot be tested. But it seems that further questions about the 'real' name can become a further step for the development of familiarity. Sometimes the usage of different nicknames becomes frustrating for other chatters.

<[Honey](#): *i was talking to someone that had like 21 different id's*>⁴⁵

From my observation I would suggest that the initial tools for recognition are the nicknames or the 'real' names that the chatters exchange throughout their interactions. I have to repeat that the 'real' cannot be tested, but 'real' gains its meaning by what is offered as 'real' online, something that could direct the discussion into the exploration of the question: To what extent does the 'real' matter in online interactions, and accordingly for the emergence of an online community? The question whether the 'real' is represented in the chatrooms is central in my study. If out of chatrooms' environment, a community with certain characteristics and dynamics can emerge, how 'real' can this community be regarded? Does online communication share common patterns with offline communication? Do invented nicknames present, represent and reflect 'real' entities, or do they just trigger play with the 'no-real'? How do the chatters conceptualise the 'real' in chatrooms where the presentation of assumed identities is possible?

Communication

My attempt to pay close attention to emerging processes during the empirical part of the study, has led me to indicate patterns of communication that appear in chatrooms. The direct and participating observation carried out in this study seems to offer a way of studying something that is very difficult to quantify, such as the exact time that chatters spend on-line. Therefore, the approximate time that chatters spend on-line can be based more on qualitative than quantitative data and stems from the particular observatory data that has been recorded. Generally, numerous chatters tend to spend just a few minutes or seconds in a chatroom which results in the creation of a very amorphous and messy environment:

<[boxer](#) left the room.

[dami](#) joined the room.

[SOMI](#) joined the room.

[randol](#) left the room.

[addidas](#) left the room.

[Together](#) joined the room.

[cool](#) joined the room.

⁴⁵ Monday, 18th August 2003 (14:16-16:19).

ED left the room.
body joined the room.
angel left the room.
rocky left the room.
mixed joined the room.
vikara joined the room.
talk to you soon left the room.
everywhere always left the room.
SOMI left the room>⁴⁶

The chatters just come and go, particularly when there are no responses to their greetings. On the other hand, there are chatters who seem to spend more than two hours online. These are the chatters who probably group together and seem to have developed familiarity with others after having become regular visitors:

<Pirate: hell, theres been bs since before i came to this room, that was almost 3 years ago.....
Eric: yea i know eric
Chic: sup yall
Zizi: I have been chattin for 8 years never had a single day with out bs>⁴⁷

The certainty of the uncertainty prevails. Since the chatters have the option to open private discussions,⁴⁸ we cannot be certain when and how often some of the chatters decide to open their own private rooms of discussions. Therefore, no conclusion can be drawn in terms of the time they spend in the public chatrooms. But, what attracts the interest of the present study are the tendencies that appear among the chatters who stay in the chatroom for some time and the frequency they appear in the same chatroom.

<Eternal: hi julie, long time no see! How r u?>⁴⁹

Here the chatter seems to recognise the other chatter by name, and they possibly have spent time together.

<w: every one i knew left
bis joined the room.
W: about
w: i hardly know any one anymore
wis: hello
w: and i use to know every one
dill left the room.
w: lol>⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Thursday, 7th August 2003 (08:45-11:03).

⁴⁷ Tuesday, 26th August 2003 (01:01-03:06).

⁴⁸ By sending private messages to other chatters. However these messages are not publicly accessible, only the rejection of such messages appear in the dialogue body.

⁴⁹ Monday, 11th August 2003 (16:15-18:27).

⁵⁰ Tuesday, 12th August 2003 (14:22-16:12).

'W' admits that he has not been visiting the chatroom for a long time now, he cannot find familiar chatters any more.

<xxx: Nobody talking today>⁵¹

The above chatter seems to have familiarity with the particular chatroom. Actually the specific session was very quiet as most of the chatters were passive and 'xxx' could not initiate contact with anyone.

After the first month of observation I have indicated that certain participants keep re-appearing in the same chatroom. These chatters develop a sense of easy movement and communication within the environment. Some examples suggest bonds between the participants, which reveal a sense of familiarity among them. The frequent appearance of the same nicknames support the possibility of recognition but further communication is needed in order for the process of identification to take place. I regard recognition and identification as a two-level process necessary for the development and establishment of familiarity. Although as mentioned before, the chatroom environment appears to be amorphous and full of traffic, the frequency of the appearance of the same nicknames support the continuity of identity, even when fragile and not firmly established due to the possibility of multiple personae. Such frequency also supports the continuity of identity in the sense that chatters choose to use the same pseudonyms consistently.

The frequent appearance of the same nicknames also increases the possibility of closer connection among the participants, because it accelerates the process of recognition and identification. I have also observed certain communicative tools that the chatters use in order to make their presence publicly known. Entrance of chatters in the rooms is accompanied by greetings as the following:

<erick: *hi room*.

negative : all to do with the codeig and run.s

sad: ok

bo:li: ANY BAY AREA PEOPLE ?

sad : he was here the other morning>⁵²

<Lecia: *hello all*

Lecia: *how is everybody*>⁵³

<liddo: *hello room*>⁵⁴

The most frequently used greeting seems to be 'hi room' and 'hi all'. These particular greetings suggest that the chatters do not probably recognise other participants and make an effort to attract responses. These general greetings suggest that the chatters are 'newcomers' or have not spent much time in the room. I found that the chatters whose entrance in the chatrooms is accompanied by such general greetings do not engage in conversations very easily.

⁵¹ Saturday, 16th August 2003 (15:58-17:53).

⁵² Thursday, 7th August 2003 (11:56-14:37).

⁵³ Sunday, 3rd August 2003 (08:53-11:18).

⁵⁴ Sunday, 3rd August 2003 (13:00-15:09).

<[jack](#): wow wheres every one at i dun recognize any one here today>⁵⁵

'Jack' seems not recognise the chatters. He is not a 'newcomer', but he expects to find a familiar chatter to contact with. Opposed to the above tension, there are users who recognise others and start conversations by referring to certain chatters. Additionally, there may be users who tend to be totally apathetic, without dropping a greeting line.

There is also an interesting example by which the chatter herself characterises the chatters:

<[GARETH](#) hi roooooomies>⁵⁶

There are also chatters who begin their first contacts in the chatroom with the greeting 'hi friends'

<[lecia](#): hey friends...
lecia: how are you all>⁵⁷

In many such cases the participants in chatrooms do not pay attention to that particular greeting. It seems that this is a general greeting, though friendly and 'interested', is not specific enough to engage other participants. Moreover this reveals that friendship cannot be taken for granted; it is not the expressed desire for friendship that makes it possible, but probably the time spent online and the familiarity among the participants.

The participants, who do not find responses to their first messages, often just leave the chatroom:

<[Big](#): Hey everybody
.....
[Big](#): left the room>⁵⁸

The chatter leaves the chatroom after a few seconds, nobody responded to her greeting. On the other hand, they may continue their efforts to attract attention. I have also observed some examples where the chatters desperately seek for communication and others where the chatters characterise the chatroom as 'not challenging' or 'very quite'.

Communication: Common Questions

By observing certain codes of presence within chatrooms and by trying to elaborate the mechanisms that the chatters use in order to make their presence obvious I came to the conclusion that when a first interaction takes place the most frequently asked question is about age, gender and location. These three factors seem to become

⁵⁵ Wednesday, 13th August 2003 (14:36-15:59).

⁵⁶ Wednesday, 20th August 2003 (15:02-16:03).

⁵⁷ Wednesday, 20th August 2003 (15:02-16:03).

⁵⁸ Sunday, 10th August 2003 (08:53-11:00).

starting points of contacts in the chatrooms I observed.

<Hunk: hi sunshine

Sun: hi ya zee

Hunk: lets chat sunshine

Hunk ur asl sun

Sun: 25/f/Connecticut

Sun: you hunk?>⁵⁹

And:

<christina: hi all

christina: 24 m uk>⁶⁰

This question appears more often than the question about the 'real' name. Age, gender and location are aspects of status, which, due to the absence of face to face interaction cannot be checked. Further, the faceless interaction opens up possibilities for playing with status by providing false information. The chatters can disguise their status, and represent themselves as they wish. The provision of false information can mislead the chatter who asks, but since the truth or falsehood of the information cannot be verified, dialogues continue 'as normal' even if they are structured by 'lies'.

The frequent question about gender, age and location may underline the desire of chatters to visualise, through the answers, the abstract personae which are hidden under pseudonyms. Or, it may indicate the first step towards the 'real' persona which due to non face-to-face contact is difficult to be defined. This question may be the first attempt to bridge the gap created by the abstractification of the personae presented through pseudonyms.

The next frequently asked question is about nationality and location. Information about nationality reveals permanent aspects of status because it may indirectly give further information about language, religion and national belonging. Location applies to information about temporary status. I believe that the interest about nationality is combined with an effort to approach the off-line or 'real' status by filling the gap that the on-line communication creates. Also, interest about place and location may reflect an effort to overcome the virtuality of the electronic space.

<lay: hi, I'm Charles from Nigeria>⁶¹

<name: Where are you from Danny?

name: How old are you?>⁶²

⁵⁹ Sunday, 10th August 2003 (08:53-11:00).

⁶⁰ Monday, 18th August 2003 (14:16-16:19).

⁶¹ Friday, 8th August 2003 (09:01-11:09).

⁶² Saturday, 9th August 2003 (09:07-11:30).

Although it is difficult to maintain a conversation for a long time when the chatters are 'newcomers',⁶³ the above questions seem to be clichés, starting points for a conversation regardless of its duration. Once more, the play regarding the provision of information is possible, since the answers cannot be tested because of lack of face-to-face communication (race, colour). But, I think that one factor can play a catalytic role, and may prevent the chatters from escaping the truth about place and nationality: the expectations of the discussants when and if the conversation continues. For example, it is very difficult for a chatter to claim that she comes from a particular national group, or, that she is located in certain place, when and if the next question will focus on certain aspects of that group. Especially when on the other side, the chatter who poses the question is familiar with such a group. Therefore, chatters may feel a responsibility or pressure from the peer group to maintain the personae accurately, even though it does not matter whether the information relates to the offline personae.

Similarly, the chatters can not take the risk of lying when they do not possess the command of a particular language they need to, according to their answer. Because electronic communication is textual⁶⁴ the command of language is an element that can be tested. The written communication matters as it is a tool for expression and online communication; the chatters are represented through typed texts.⁶⁵

As these kinds of information can be checked to a certain degree, the answers can play some role in the creation of trust between the discussants, or at least, trust is difficult to be built when the answers for the above reasons turn out to be false. Obviously, when a chatter is multilingual and familiar with many places and cultures the possibility of play and performance increases. The 'lingua franca' of the chatrooms I visited is English.⁶⁶ The chatters I observed use English as their language of communication, and in the case that someone attempts to use a different language they generally remained isolated without, at least publicly, responses being given:

<[Giga](#): sive should learn English>⁶⁷

In this case, for example, the communication was deemed impossible due to the poor level of English of one of the chatters.

Gender, age, place and nationality appear to be the most frequently posed questions. The chatters by posing such questions and by performing textual messages in various stylistic ways (fonts, colours, repeated words) tend to reveal their desire to receive responses to their initial greetings. To what extent this desire for general

⁶³ I think that discussion more easily takes place between 'newcomers', as the chatters who are already engaged in a conversation do not seem to interrupt the already on-going conversation to welcome the new chatters and asking these initial questions.

⁶⁴ The use of microphones and cameras is also possible, but I tried to keep my study close to purely textual chatrooms.

⁶⁵ The role of the language will be discussed in chapter 5.

⁶⁶ Mitra and Cohen from different perspective examine the the global World Wide Web and state that 'Increasingly, the lingua franca of the WWW is English'. See Ananda Mitra and Elisia Cohen, 'Analyzing the Web. Directions and Challenges', in Jones (ed.), *Doing Internet research. Critical methods and issues for examining the Net*, pp. 179-202 (189).

⁶⁷ Tuesday, 12th August 2003 (14:22-16:12).

communication can move on to a more noticeable desire for making bonds with other chatters remains to be examined. At this point, as it stems out of the observation, it is important to classify the different kinds of desire that may lead the participants to try to sustain a more permanent form of contact.

Communication: Forming Relations

The study revealed that seeking sexual bonds or at least online sexual ‘interaction’, which presumably can be supported by the use of webcams,⁶⁸ is a common desire among chatroom users. However, this kind of activity would belong to a more sociological and psychological investigation and does not directly attract the attention of my study. However it is worth mentioning that the disguised identity and more particularly the disguised sex, assisted by the online anonymity, plays a role in the way the chatters act: those who are only interested in online sexual interaction cease to respond and do not continue contact after ‘finding out’ -only through claims and assumptions- that the chatter who have started contact with is not of the gender they are interested in. The chatters whose desire to maintain contact which is sexually orientated, tend to stop having contact when the answer to the frequent triadic question ‘asl’ (age, sex, location), does not fit their expectations.⁶⁹

The masked identity directs the extent to which communication can be put forward. In online text-based communication the expectations of the chatters, due to the reason that attributes of Self cannot be checked because of the lack of the physical presence, can trigger the imagination – as discussed above – and affect any further interaction. This is most obvious when chatters looking for online sex lose their interest in further communication if the ‘wrong’ sex responds to their messages.

To sum up, sexual interaction or even experimentation is one kind of desire that may force the participants to go on with communication. This argument is also supported by the analysis of photos that are provided online and give additional information about the chatters. Photos which give emphasis to the physical outfit – no matter whether they represent the true image – and information that clarify certain erotic desires, reflect particular desire for erotic interaction.⁷⁰ This study does not analyse

⁶⁸ It is worth mentioning the fact that the present study does not focus on communication forms that may include the use of microphones or/and webcams. Although the most of chat environments technically support the use of such communicative accessories I tried to keep distant from personally contacting with chatters who use them. I think that the use of both microphones and webcams resemble forms of offline synchronous communication such as telephone and as this study focuses on the online synchronous textual communication, it does not examine the provision of such additional accessories. Basically the certain chatrooms I studied are based on textual communication. The use of webcams is also only possible when the chatters open their own private chat boxes (dialogue boxes), which are not publicly accessible.

⁶⁹ ‘Dating’ can be a reason for chatting. See discussions by Lynn Schofield Clark, ‘Dating on the Net: Teens and the Rise of “Pure” Relationships’, in Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0.: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 159-183; Dennis Waskul, Mark Douglass and Charles Edgley, ‘Cybersex Outcourse and the Enselfment of the Body’, *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2000), pp. 375-397; J. K. Biber, D. Doverspike, K. Baznik, A. Cober and B. A. Ritter, ‘Sexual harassment in online communications : Effects of gender and discourse medium’, *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2002), pp. 33-42.

⁷⁰ There are various chatrooms fully devoted to the seeking for erotic partners. Waldmeir connects anonymity of the Net with pornographic activity. See Patti Waldmeir, ‘How porn is taming the wild,

this online behaviour in greater depth even though it does show how chatrooms users play with their identities. As mentioned before we do not study such behaviour systematically because such kinds of sexual bonds apply to more sociological and psychological investigations and, moreover, because the centre of the study is the exploration of the nature of community – if any – that the online communication creates. Accordingly, the quality of online bonds and relationships are mentioned here as supporting factors for the creation of a kind of community and not for the evaluation of the relationship itself.

I have also identified another form of desire for communication in the chatrooms I have studied; this is the desire for taking part in discussions no matter the specific content. The chatters who enter the chatrooms and make their appearance obvious by sending greetings or specifying their age, sex and location tend to seek instant responses and tend to stay in the chatroom provided they receive responses to their messages.

<aussie: Hello! 23 female, Australia>⁷¹

<Amar: 28/m/Ireland>⁷²

The above chatters received no response and left the chatrooms after a few seconds.

After the first exchange of initial information about themselves the participants either seem totally uninterested to continue the conversation and leave the chatroom or they go on contacting one another by exchanging views over common topic areas like weather or more often about the place they live in or their occupation. Further conversations seem to be prompted by the answers given to the most frequently posed questions about gender, age and nationality.

The desire to take part in a more concrete discussion under a certain topic may reveal the general desire of the participants for communication. The ‘newcomers’ quite often ask about the topic of the current discussion as soon as they enter the room. As various discussions take place in the same chatroom at the same time, the ‘newcomers’ pose the question about the topics discussed so that they can be engaged in the dialogues.

<ange: hi room

angel: whats the topic here

angel: the topic?>⁷³

wild web’, *Financial Times*, 13/10/2003. She states that anonymity makes the Internet unique and as such it becomes ‘an attractive medium for pornographers’.

⁷¹ Thursday, 7th August 2003 (08:45-11:03)

⁷² Wednesday, 10th September 2003 (09:15-11:30)

⁷³ Monday, 15th September 2003 (12:00-14:12)

In numerous examples some chatters seem to be familiar with others. The familiarity can result from the time spent online and the frequency of the visits in the same chatroom. Various examples suggest that some chatters seem more comfortable with others and in other examples certain chatters sustain their discussions which last for almost the whole studied session.

<mio: if u gotta go go but stick around i like chatting with ya
jay: any ladies from new york
pirate lol ok few more mins
mio: u have always been so cool 2 me
mio: cool
pirate: me too
mio: cool
pirate: i have over a 1000 friends on here so i do like chat
sushi joined the room.>⁷⁴

And:

<Wild: i use to come in here all the time and talk to some friends dont' even know if they still come here or not
melani aww ppl have changed ID's lots now>⁷⁵

Or:

<sumy: do you teach tonight?
jack left the room.
feti: yes>⁷⁶

The process of recognition, which is assisted by the frequency of the appearance of the nicknames and photos, and additional information provided, may support the degree of familiarity among the chatters. According to the examples there are cases where the chatters seem to have spent time together, visited the same chatroom for a long time, and expressed their desire to continue the contact. Whether the initial and very elastic bonds identified among the participants lead to a more stable unity or even a kind of friendship is a topic that has attracted considerable attention.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Monday, 4th August 2003 (08:59-11:16)

⁷⁵ Tuesday, 12th August 2003 (14:22-16:12)

⁷⁶ Wednesday, 13th August 2003 (14:36-15:59)

⁷⁷ Adams examines the dynamics of online friendship. See Rebecca Adams, 'The demise of territorial determinism : online friendships', in Rebecca G. Adams and Graham Alan (eds), *Placing Friendship in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 153-182. Also Whitty and Gavin examine the 'social presence theory' in order to identify the dynamics of online friendship. See Monica T. Whitty and Jeff Gavin, 'Age/Sex/Location: Uncovering the Social Cues in the Development of Online Relationships', *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (2001), pp. 623-630. Whitty also argues that in chatrooms as in offline communication the development of trust is gradual. See Monica Whitty, 'Liar, liar! An Examination of how open, supportive and honest people are in chatrooms', *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 18 (2002), pp. 343-352. Slouka argues that a sense of intimacy is provided by the electronic communication but without the emotional investment that leads to close and enduring relationships. See Slouka, *War of the worlds*.

Openness, faith, trust and honesty are essential factors for the development of friendship. Among the difficulties faced by this study was the lack of a concrete method to test and check the degree of honesty, openness and trust built among the chatters. The nature of the study itself, which is ethnographically oriented and based upon participant observation, does not provide obvious means to measuring the above characteristics of friendship. On the other hand, I think that faith, trust, honesty and familiarity are developed in an environment of interaction and exchange as an experience and they can be more experienced than observed.

At this point I have to draw the distinction between the possible relatedness –even friendship- that can develop between the chatters throughout their online interaction, and the cultivation of the already existing friendship in the environment of online communication. The closer intimacy that can stem from the electronic environment and the supporting role that online communication as a new communicative medium and tool can play regarding already existing relationships has been extensively researched.⁷⁸

Cyberspace is considered to be a meeting place for people who seek to have contact from time to time. Several critiques and references in the literature address the increasing phenomenon of ‘online friendships’:

But is the Internet – a huge force for shaping our existence- fostering a world in increasingly perfect harmony, or just leading millions of people to form pointless and superficial friendships with people they have never met?⁷⁹

Our observations suggest that the chatters appreciated the value of friendship and recognise its importance. In various cases they express their views towards Friendship and reveal information about their experience in chatrooms in terms of the relationships they have built and maintained.

<little: the only thing what i want is making friends>⁸⁰

<david: anna????hey there happy friendship's day!!!!>⁸¹

⁷⁸ For the analysis of the debate see for example Sara Kiesler et al, ‘Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication’; J. B. Walther, ‘Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal and hyperpersonal interaction’, *Communication Research*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1996), pp. 3-43 and Jonathon M. Cummings, Brian Butler and Robert Kraut, ‘The quality of Online Social Relationships’, *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 45, No. 7 (July 2002), pp. 103-108.

Also the impacts of intimate Internet relationships on the offline life are examined by Aaron Ben-Ze’ev. See: Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Also see M. Lea, and R. Spears, ‘Love at first byte’, in J. T. Wood and S. Duck, (eds), *Understudied relationships* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 1995), pp. 197-236; K. Y. A. McKenna, A. S. Green and M. E. J. Gleason, ‘Relationship formation on the Internet: What’s the big attraction?’, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 58 (2002), pp. 9-31.

⁷⁹ *The Sunday Times*, August 10, 2003. For the trends in regard with the online social networking see also report by Wendy Grossman, ‘Friends like these. Social networks are the next big thing: flirt or swap gossip online with people just like you’, available at: http://news.independent.co.uk/world/science_technology/story.jsp?story=511131; John Gapper, ‘How to win virtual friends and influence people online’, *Financial Times*, 30 March, 2004; Report by Jack Schofield, ‘Let’s be Friendsters’, *The Guardian*, on 19 February, 2004.

⁸⁰ Tuesday, 12th August 2003 (14:22-16:12).

<chatty: HAPPY FRIENDSHIP TO ALL OF U FROM ME>⁸²

<kim: HAPPY FRIENDSHIP DAY ROOM>⁸³

I have identified some examples which suggest that some chatters take friendship for granted: the 'newcomers' enter the rooms with the greeting 'hi friends':

<virgo: hey friends...
virgo: how are you all>⁸⁴

And others express clearly and openly their desire to find friends:

<sea: lookin 4 friend 2 chat
sea: lookin 4 friends,haloooo>⁸⁵

Friendship therefore is both valued and desired in cyberspace. However, it is clear that there is no single 'method' to follow but a complex of statement and response which may lead to closer ties. Thus, cyberspace does not eradicate many of the tensions that exist in the offline world when forming relations but it does shift emphasis and context; participants have to respond to the strictures and potentialities of the environment.

Communication and Play

According to the findings the chatters demonstrate a desire to play both in terms of how they interact in their dialogues and in the way they present themselves. As was mentioned before, the chatters are represented through the messages they type and send, and the textual representation indicates a desire for play. I have identified two interconnected forms of play in the chatrooms I studied: firstly play as a cause of communication and interaction and secondly play as an effect of communication and interaction. Some chatters find entertainment and pleasure by communicating with others. In various examples the chatters themselves admit their will to play when entering the chatrooms. They enter the chatroom and communicate because they want to play:

<colar: ok i am going to play on the room
colar: talk to ya all tommrow some time depend how pt go>⁸⁶

Their desire to play is constituted also by using various fonts, colours, capital letters and generally typed-language tools in order to differentiate themselves (their typed messages through which the chatters are represented) from others or in order to attract attention. Such textual performance constructs the chatroom into a performative place;

⁸¹ Monday, 4th August 2003 (08:59-11:16).

⁸² Monday, 4th August 2003 (08:59-11:16).

⁸³ Monday, 4th August 2003 (08:59-11:16).

⁸⁴ Sunday, 3rd August 2003 (08:53-11:18).

⁸⁵ Tuesday, 5th August 2003 (09:12-11:18).

⁸⁶ Thursday, 7th August 2003 (08:45-11:03).

they deliberately use smileys and emoticons which are icons used to express emotions and feelings.⁸⁷ As a result the chatroom is accommodated by a variety of different colours, fonts and figures. The use of symbolic acronyms like 'asl' (age, sex, location) indicates also the use of certain linguistic patterns that can constitute certain communicative tools among the chatters who share the same communicative place.

The first form of play as a cause of communication can be related to Huizinga's theorisation on Play. According to Huizinga play is based on will and desire to play. '[...] all play is a voluntary activity.'⁸⁸ The choice of the chatters to present themselves as different, to invent pseudonyms, suggests that the chatters can choose to play with their self-presentation. Besides, provision of photos and personal information, without the possibility of verification, supports this suggestion. The chatters can choose to play with their self-presentation and furthermore can choose to challenge the imagination of the others, which is one of elements of play:

<ghost: so u got a nu 1D since yesterday..??>⁸⁹

<vera: hi leisa

leisa: hi 😊

fire left the room

vera: r u really leisa or someone else>⁹⁰

<honey: i was talking to someone that had like 21 different id's>⁹¹

It is instructive to remember at this point that, as Turner explains, 'entertainment' refers to 'to hold between', deriving its substantial meaning from the words 'entre', which means 'between', and 'tenir', which means 'to hold'. 'That is, it can be construed as the making of liminality, the betwixt and between state.' Furthermore, 'entertainment is liminoid rather than liminal, it is suffused with freedom. It involves profoundly the power of *play*, and play democratizes.'⁹²

Entertainment in the present study is closely connected with the use of multiple pseudonyms, which may originate in the desire to play. The use of pseudonyms can also transform the whole place from a pure place of communication interaction to a more theatrically structured event where the chatters perform themselves through masks-as a matter of their choice- and through their typed messages. Such choices are enriched by the participants' efforts to become and remain distinctive by using various fonts, sizes and colours. I think that the choice and use of pseudonyms, and also the use and choice of particular patterns of self-representation is connected with the use of masks in theatrical events. And that is why I believe that play in chatrooms can also be considered as an effect of communication among the chatters: It is not

⁸⁷ For the use of emoticons in chatrooms see Danet, *Cyberpl@y*.

⁸⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Routledge, 1949), p. 26.

⁸⁹ Sunday, 10th August 2003 (08:53-11:00).

⁹⁰ Saturday, 16th August 2003 (13:58-15:56).

⁹¹ Monday, 18th August 2003 (14:16-16:19).

⁹² Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the human seriousness of play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), pp. 120-121.

only the desire of chatters to play with each other but also the whole environment that becomes a playground itself by using playful tools like forms of representation, assumed identity or even options of pretence, lying and disguise.

Moreover, I think that the choice of the chatters to perform in various ways, to use different styles while communicating, transforms the chatrooms more into a stage ; stepping out of their offline reality. In chatrooms, in a paradoxical way, the chatters become –at least they have the chance to become- actors and spectators at the same time. Therefore the amorphous environment of chatrooms as discussed before gains its own morphological dimensions by becoming a place where pretence, disguise and imagination can give force to a sort of ‘ecstasis’ in Aristotelian terms, a ‘standing-out’ of reality.

2.3. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that such ‘standing-out of reality’ is related to a temporary ‘standing-out’ of identity, in the sense that online personae become representation of offline selves through pseudonyms. This point enforces a discussion of ‘rites of passage’ and chatrooms. But, the observatory data can only provide assumptions about the context in which a ‘standing-out’ of reality is possible in chatrooms. ‘Standing-out’ of reality –at least out of offline reality- is only reflected upon the use of pseudonyms by which the participants are represented. What derives from the observation is that users under certain pseudonyms enter chatrooms, take part in conversations, produce textual data and communicate with each other. In essence, the observatory findings do not offer a deep insight into the personae hidden behind pseudonyms and into the process in which such ‘standing-out’ takes place.

As a result, throughout the observation not the participants but rather the pseudonyms as ‘signs’ of represented users become the centre of chatrooms’ activities. ‘Signs’ as representation of participants become in a Baudrillardian sense what has actually replaced the participants. In other words, what can be observed in chatrooms are pure ‘signs’ as presentation of online personae, as total representations of offline users. The total representation of reality in chatrooms can be claimed if we exclusively base the arguments on the observation sessions. ‘Signs’ of users include pseudonyms and images, which signify the personae hidden behind them. In that sense, ‘signs’ are observed as the dominant figures in the activities in chatrooms. The relationship between ‘signs’ and ‘offline reality’ is not known and therefore, in order for the environment to sustain itself, must not matter.

Up to that point Baudrillard’s theory over total representation of reality which becomes dominant in the sense that it appears as the absolute reality, seems to be served throughout the observation. Pseudonyms appear as a kind of ‘simulacra’, as copies without original, since the authenticity of the copies can only be observed but not experienced. This is the main reason why I think that is essential for the purposes of my study to proceed in experiencing the ‘reality’ of chatrooms after having observed it. Exclusively using the observation data could limit our examination of ‘reality’ in chatrooms. Do the ‘signs’ in chatrooms suggest a total representation of ‘reality’? How is the reality *experienced* through ‘signs’? Do the pseudonyms suggest a ‘stepping-into’ a new reality, or do they just reproduce offline reality?

Answering these and a range of other questions requires the active participation of the researcher in chatrooms with the aim to 'access reality' in the studied environment. Beyond the observations the active participation can offer a more enriched insight of the participation and interaction in chatrooms. Additionally, the active participation could also offer a deeper analysis of the data already observed and described.

The access to 'what is going on' in chatrooms is not always possible; time spent online cannot be easily counted. The chatters, as already mentioned, are offered the chance to open their own dialogue boxes, their own private rooms while taking part in the public exchange of messages in the public chatroom. It depends on the chatter who receives the message whether she will accept to have private discussions. Chatters can have both private and public discussions at the same time. It can be provisionally argued that the private discussions may mean a step forward for the development of encounters between chatters. The present observatory findings can not negotiate meanings regarding what is actually going on in private discussions as the observation in private rooms is not possible.

Further elaboration of this point can only be provided after the researcher herself steps into the public rooms and gains experience; moreover, when the researcher not only experiences how communication takes place but also whether the development of communication reveals any critical moments that affect the conceptualization of 'reality' and lead to the emergence of community. This is the reason why, beyond pure observation, active participation was also employed as a research tool for the empirical study. The active participation tends to perceive the 'real' of chatrooms from inside and decode any hidden meanings that may play crucial role in the development of community among the participants.

But, since the access to the 'real' of chatrooms – no matter the final conclusion about its nature – requires the 'stepping-into' the specific environment, it engages the notion of participation and recalls theories of the 'rite of passage'; how are presentation, representation and participation taking place in chatrooms? Do the represented users become autonomous vehicles of 'reality', 'signs', or they become products of a dialectical process that shares similarities with 'rite of passage'? The approach dictated by these questions opens up the discussion on 'rite of passage' and 'liminality', before the study investigates the results of the active participation.

3. PARTICIPATION, LIMINALITY AND PLAY

Any society which hopes to be imperishable must whittle out for itself a piece of space and a while of time, in which it can look honestly at itself [...].¹

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter highlighted a number of serious issues that arise in the observation of chatrooms. Not only were there areas that were not 'observable' (private rooms) but there was also a sense in which one is *forced* to participate because even when lurking in chatrooms, one enters the conceit. Nevertheless, most striking was the impression of moving *into* something, a transition, strained by ambiguity and difference. The movement from the 'outside' to the 'inside' (counter intuitive to the Baudrillardian perspective on reality) needs to be further explored as the paradoxical findings of the observation of chatrooms is that there can be no observation as such; participation and experience must follow. Therefore, what is needed is a conceptual framework that helps to articulate this movement 'into' and participation 'in' cyberspace so as to give the second empirical study a theoretical grounding.

There are a number of similarities between the overall structure of rites of passages and cyberspace that suggest that the latter might be closely related to the former [...].²

In order to better understand participation and experience in this environment, a number of writers have pointed to the likeness between rites of passage and the movement into and out of cyberspace.³ However, the comparisons have tended to remain on the level of generalisation and have not been adopted in a specific, bounded study. Therefore, the work of Turner and by association Van Gennep will be explored and analysed with emphasis placed on the language symbols of liminal, *communitas* and liminoid that emerge. Moreover, the lines that Turner follows in order to distinguish rites of passage in a modern, industrial setting will be investigated, and reflected on in light of the environment under study. It will be argued that spaces are 'found', 'created' and 'maintained' through modern practices in order for individualised (and potentially collective) rites to take place. As the following chapter will demonstrate, there is a great deal to be gleaned from taking seriously the connection between rites of passage and cyberspace.

¹ Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publishers, 1986), p. 122.

² David Tomas, 'Old Rituals for New Space: Rites de Passage and William Gibson's Cultural Model of Cyberspace', in Benedikt (ed.) *Cyberspace: First Steps*, pp. 31-47 (40).

³ For example see Tomas, 'Old Rituals for New Space: Rites de Passage and William Gibson's Cultural Model of Cyberspace', pp. 31-47; Rob Shields, *The Virtual* (London: Routledge 2003), pp. 11-15; Gretchen Barbatsis and Michael Fegan 'The Performance of Cyberspace: An Exploration Into Computer Mediated Reality', *JCMC*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (September 1999), electronically available at: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol5/issue1/barbatsis.html> .

The greatest freedom cyberspace promises is that of recasting the self: from static beings, bound by the body and betrayed by experiences, Net surfers may reconstruct themselves in a multiplicity of dazzling roles, changing from moment to moment [...].⁴

The issues relating to the potential for malleable self-representation through pseudonyms, imaging and so on, raised in the previous chapter, also link into the nature of rites of passage and need further exploration. Central to the environment is the potential for ambiguity, for deviation from everyday self-presentation. There is a clear element of performance and play⁵ that permeates participation in cyberspace, a theme that has been pursued by a number of authors to date, given centrality in Danet's *Cyberplay*⁶ for example. This chapter will return to the classic discussion of play in the work of Huizinga in an effort to survey the relevance of this broad literature for the present study.

Lastly, by analysing cyberspace, rites of passage, and play *together*, fundamental questions about human experience emerge. It will be suggested that the study of chatrooms provides an opportunity to see how this modern phenomena may still resonate with 'reality'. It shows that although the Baudrillardian challenge sees ambiguity as man's final detachment from the possibility of discerning what is real, it is ambiguity that we find in the reality of human experience; it is what nourishes participation in the real and makes a detailed study of cyberspace imperative.

3.2. ENTRANCE INTO CYBERSPACE AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

[E]xisting theories of ritual processes can provide important insights into the socially engineered cultural dimensions of cyberspace [...].⁷

3.2.1. Turner and the rite of passage

Rites of passage as an area of study have had considerable coverage in anthropological literature and beyond.⁸ The work of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep⁹ and Victor Turner¹⁰ is often used axiomatically when approaching the

⁴ Julian Stallabrass, 'Empowering Technology: The Exploration of Cyberspace', *New Left Review*, No. 211 (May/June 1995), pp. 3-33 (15).

⁵ Or perhaps playfulness is a more accurate characterisation. The distinction between play and playfulness will be explored later in the chapter.

⁶ Brenda Danet, *Cyberpl@y*.

⁷ David Tomas 'Old Rituals for New Space', p. 33.

⁸ See for example Robert Rutherford, 'Canada's August Festival: Communitas, Liminality and Social Memory', *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 77 (June 1996), pp. 221-249; Marc D. Rich and Karen Rasmussen, 'Covenants, Liminality, and Transformations: The Communicative Import of Four Narratives', *American Communication Journal*, Vol. 6, Issue 1 (Fall 2002), electronically available at: <http://www.acjournal.org/holdings/vol6/iss1/special/rich.htm>; Colin Turnbull, 'Liminality: a synthesis of subjective and objective experience', in Richard Schechner and Will Appel (eds), *By means of performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 50-81.

⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960. First published 1909).

subject and will be used accordingly in this study. The following section will provide a brief overview of the meaning and interpretation of rites of passage before analysis of key terminology and the application to cyberspace is undertaken.

First published in 1908 (in English in 1960) van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* opens up a discussion on the underlying similarity of collective and individual 'rites', ceremonies, trials and crises that mark a 'transition' in social positioning. While many examples of 'rites' are given, generally it is argued that a life lived in *any* society will go through periods of change, whether concerned with birth, marriage, fatherhood, initiation or the many other possibilities. However, there is a danger in studying these rites individually; as far as van Gennep is concerned, there is a need to respond to "anthropological" procedure' which at the time tended to 'extract rites' and consider them 'in isolation'.¹¹ Such an approach was divisive as by ignoring the context, they ignored that which 'gives them meaning and reveals their position in a dynamic whole.'¹² By studying the movement from one social status (for example childhood) to another (adulthood) it becomes clear to van Gennep that the movement between states is analogous across cultural divides: Through observations of a plethora of rites, from the Chamar's adoption ceremony¹³ to the Sikh's initiation ritual,¹⁴ van Gennep perceived a unifying process at work. He argues that:

Their positions may vary, depending on whether the occasion is birth or death, initiation or marriage, but the differences lie only in matters of detail. The underlying arrangement is always the same. Beneath the multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites of passage*.¹⁵

The 'underlying arrangement' which constitutes a 'rites of passage' is elucidated through a division of the 'passage' into a tripartite structure.¹⁶ He describes the three stages as follows:

Consequentially, I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*.¹⁷

¹⁰ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: structure and antistructure* (New York: Aldine, 1969); Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: aspects of Ndembu rituals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); Victor W. Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: anthropological perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Victor Turner, *Blaizing the Trail: way marks in the exploration of symbols* (ed. Edith Turner), (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1992).

¹¹ van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 89.

¹² van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 89.

¹³ van Gennep, p. 38.

¹⁴ van Gennep, p. 97.

¹⁵ van Gennep, p. 191.

¹⁶ There are many examples of the three stages in Van Gennep's work. However, one of the clearest illustrations given is that of the rites at Eleusis found in Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, pp. 89-91.

¹⁷ van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 21.

Van Gennep was perceptive and by stepping back from the wealth of material available clearly sensed a commonality in societies which were ostensibly disparate and isolated. However, although his basic framework continues to be useful, it is in the work of Turner that it is more clearly laid out and the middle phase, the liminal, is profoundly explored. Nevertheless, Turner is unambiguous in his admiration for van Gennep's breakthrough which he saw as the identification of 'a major innovative, transformative dimension of the social'.¹⁸

Turner observes the phases that mark all *rites of passage* as mentioned above. He explains that the first phase of separation signifies the detachment of the individual or group, which is the ritual unit, from a status which represents an earlier fixed point or condition within the social structure. The second phase of margin or *limen*¹⁹ underlines the transition of the ritual unit from the pre-state to the new post-state;²⁰ the 'liminal phase' is the in-between phase. The third phase of reaggregation includes the process of incorporation of the individual or the group into the new state.²¹ Between the first and the third phase, the second phase, the liminal phase plays the major role: It is the in-between phase which links decisively the other two phases and makes possible the whole process of the rite of passage. Nevertheless, writing later Turner seemed to have discovered that the tripartite structure which van Gennep developed may have overlooked the liminal character of the *whole* ritual process. Thus, rather than isolating the middle phase, he believes that 'all rituals are more or less *liminal*, whatever their internal segmentation or lack thereof, in that they are interposed between stretched of "ordinary" time, or occur in places "set apart" from ordinary activities [...].'²² Nevertheless, this seems to be a distinction which guards against overlooking the liminal character of certain rites, rather than changing the nature of the interpretation, which still maintains a starting state, a transition and a new state.

During the intervening phase of *transition*, called by Van Gennep 'margin' or 'limen' [...] the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are more crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses

¹⁸ Victor Turner, 'Introduction: pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon' in Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 1-39 (2).

¹⁹ From Latin denoting 'a threshold between spaces or times'. See Stefan Rossbach, *Gnostic Wars: The Cold War in the Context of a History of Western Spirituality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 5; Victor Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', *Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1985), pp. 205-217 (205).

²⁰ Turner stresses that by 'state', he means, '“a relatively fixed or stable condition”....and would include in its meaning such social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree....State, in short, is a more inclusive concept than status or office and refers to any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized'. See Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', in Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, pp. 93-111 (93-94).

²¹ An example that Turner gives of the three phases is the initiation of the senior chief in the Ndembu of Zambia, the tribe he studied for his doctorate. But only many years after this was completed (1954-55), after reading the first English translation of Van Gennep in 1963, did he realise the significance of the rituals. Mathieu Deflem 'Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1991), pp. 1-25.

²² Victor Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', p. 209.

or cultural states.²³

The phase of transition is marked by the notion of liminality, the liminal moment, which is the point before adopting or entering the new status. 'Limen', as the very period of transition, divides according to Turner, two different spaces, and two different times. It is the in-between moment and the in-between point if we regard the ritual process as linear. 'The liminal moment [...] exists when all hangs in the balance, when change might be possible [...] For liminality is essential to social transition, and it means crossing an abyss.'²⁴ Although the boundaries of the phase of transition and the phase of reaggregation are visible, the limen period lacks any visible borders.

Therefore, fundamentally what is revealed by Turner is that an individual's or group's movement through society – through different structures and states – is not simply a movement from one type of order to another ('being' a boy then 'being' a man) but a movement which is punctured by the dissolution of order and a totality of ambiguity. In this liminal phase something happens, which forces the participants to 'step outside' and thus is often likened to death or darkness.²⁵ The query that arises in light of the present study is whether or not the 'stepping outside' might be linked to 'stepping into' cyberspace. Nevertheless, before this is contemplated, the notion of liminality needs to be further scrutinised with the characteristics of those *in* a liminal moment clarified.

Turner calls the ritual entity during the in-between period 'liminal persona'. These ritual entities are not classified in terms of gender, sex, name, because they are characterised by ambiguity.²⁶ They do not belong into a specific space or time. They are neither here nor there. They are between and betwixt geographical and timing positions, due to the fact that they are moving in a stage where space and time has no place. Indeed, van Gennep pointed to this when he claimed that 'whoever passes from one [sacred zone] to the other finds himself physically and macro-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition.'²⁷ Also characteristic of the transitional beings is that 'they have nothing'.²⁸ As Turner explains, 'rights over property, goods, and services inhere in positions in the politico-jural structure. Since they do not occupy such positions, neophytes exercise no such rights.'²⁹ Moreover, it is argued that the 'attributes of sexlessness and anonymity are highly characteristic of liminality'.³⁰ And furthermore: 'The structural "invisibility" of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified.'³¹ These neophytes in the in-between liminal period represent 'in the words of King Lear

²³ Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual', in Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, pp. 20-60 (24).

²⁴ Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', p. 207.

²⁵ Victor Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94-130 (95).

²⁶ Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', in Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, pp. 93-111 (95).

²⁷ van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 18.

²⁸ Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', p. 98.

²⁹ Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', p. 99.

³⁰ Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94-130 (102).

³¹ Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', p. 96. Emphasis as in text.

[..]“naked unaccommodated man”³².

Turner develops a vocabulary of binary opposition through which one can distinguish between properties of liminality and those of the status system (which exists either side of the liminal phase). Amongst the key terms of the liminal mentioned are ‘transition’, ‘totality’, ‘equality’, ‘anonymity’, ‘absence of status’, ‘humility’, ‘unselfishness’, ‘sacredness’ and ‘foolishness’.³³ With such properties, it is suggested that the liminal moment is not simply the absence of social status systems but an opportunity to see one’s self and the world differently. Indeed, Turner argues that ‘The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status’³⁴.

The theory of Turner expresses the dynamics that appear during the liminal phase of the rite of passage, the transition period; the unstructured character and context of the liminal phase of the rite of passage dramatically gives rise to the ritual subject’s unstructured character. Accordingly, the behaviour of the participant in this in-between phase poses questions about the possibility of creating or sustaining new forms of community through the ritual process. Turner does not ignore the above question. He believes that ‘all rituals have this exemplary, model-displaying character; in a sense, they might be said to “create” society [...]’.³⁵ But how and under which conditions do forms of society in the rite of passage emerge?

3.2.2. The emergence of *communitas* during the liminal phase

[...] the liminal space-time ‘point’ [can] be regarded as society’s subjunctive mood, the mood of may-be, might-be, as-if, possibility, hypothesis, speculation. Liminal space is potentially, before refilling, a realm of meonic feeling.³⁶

Turner points out that the ritual events that occur in social life can be characterised as liminal, causing a ‘destructuring’ of social processes into ‘*communitas*’. He argues that ‘*communitas* emerges where social structure is not’.³⁷ Entering the liminal phase amounts to a transformative experience which goes to the root of each person’s being because, during the separation phase, the neophyte is stripped of the artifices of society that defines her as a social entity and locates her in the structured positions of society. And since the same happens to all members of the ritual group, she will find that she is surrounded by uniformity and thus finds in the root of her being something profoundly communal and shared. The bonds which emerge in such moments are generic bonds between human beings, and as such may evoke a sentiment of ‘humankindness’.³⁸

³² Turner, ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage’, p. 99.

³³ Turner, ‘Liminality and *Communitas*’, in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94-130 (106-107).

³⁴ Turner, ‘Liminality and *Communitas*’, p. 103.

³⁵ Turner, ‘Liminality and *Communitas*’, p. 117.

³⁶ Turner, ‘Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media’, p. 210.

³⁷ Turner, ‘Liminality and *Communitas*’, p. 126.

³⁸ Turner, ‘Liminality and *Communitas*’, p. 128.

This new kind of society which emerges in the liminal period is a relatively undifferentiated and unstructured community, a homogenous totality. Turner uses the Latin term *communitas*³⁹ instead of 'community' in order to distinguish such uniformity from an understanding of society as a sphere in which human interrelatedness is mediated by structures. Turner makes the distinction clear when he writes of the two 'models':

The first [community] is a society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less'. The second [*communitas*] [...] is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated [...].⁴⁰

Furthermore, the sacredness of this process is also explicated. As Rossbach explains:

The powers and forces shaping the neophytes in liminality are often felt to be more than human even though they are invoked and channelled by the representatives of the community. Hence, liminality brings the neophyte into close connection with the sacred or with superhuman powers of great potency, with what is regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless. Accordingly, *communitas* is held to be sacred or holy, and its manifestations may be regarded with both awe and suspicion as they transgress or dissolve the norms which govern structured or institutionalised relationships in an area of 'common living'.⁴¹

In the marginal phase of the rite of passage, any particular language, law and custom has no place yet. These elements were clearly defined during the first stage, and they are going to be redefined at the third stage. Turner believes that:

communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority.⁴²

The marginal stage in which the 'passengers', the ritual units come in the rites of passage, gives way to the creation of *communitas*. '[...] men are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalised by their experience of *communitas*'.⁴³

Exploring Turner's theory on the rite of passage, one can stress that the transitional and transformational process of ritual events, as they have been analysed above, lead to a liminal state of community, with a particular dynamic. But this transitional character of the process provides only momental and not stable attributes to the

³⁹ Turner mentions Buber's usage of the term: He says that Buber uses the term 'community' for 'communitas': 'Community is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but *with* one another of a multitude of persons.' See Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', pp. 126-127.

⁴⁰ Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', p. 96.

⁴¹ Rossbach, *Gnostic Wars*, pp. 6-7.

⁴² Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', p. 128.

⁴³ Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', p. 129.

communitas constructed. That means that the ‘communitas’ which are created during the liminal period of transition, may be seen only in the spectrum of the second phase of the ritual process; they are the communities created after leaving the communities of the first stage, and just before the communities constructed in the third phase of the incorporation into the new reality. Thus it seems that communitas is created and dissolved within the overall rites of passage. Turner himself wonders about the ambiguous nature of communitas.

What then *is* communitas? Has it any reality base, or is it a persistent fantasy of mankind, a sort of collective return to the womb? [...] For me communitas preserves individual distinctiveness – it is neither regression to infancy, nor is it emotional, nor is it ‘merging’ in fantasy.⁴⁴

For Turner communitas is composed of some form of homogenous group of people who maintain individuals even though they lose features of individuation used by society. Moreover, their very being and association is in contrast to that which supports the rites of passage at either ‘end’, community. Consequentially, there is a situation where opposites are mutually supportive of one another and indeed constitute one another; as Turner says they are ‘mutually indispensable’.⁴⁵

Turner points out that the creation of communitas during the stage of transition and marginality *prepares* the participants for the experience of the new structure constructed after their incorporation in the new reality which appears after reaggregation. Therefore ‘Communitas has also an aspect of potentiality’.⁴⁶ Turner reveals the ‘political’ implication of his theory on communitas when he says:

Exaggeration of communitas, in certain religious or political movements of the leveling type, may be speedily followed by despotism, overbureaucratization, or other modes of structural rigidification.⁴⁷

Communitas is spontaneous; it emerges in liminal moments. Thus, if it is to be preserved, artificially, it will lead to its opposite. Thus, ‘maximization of communitas provokes maximization of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas’.⁴⁸ For Turner, politics is about the relationship between community (structure) and communitas.⁴⁹

Turner also distinguishes between three different types of communitas: 1. *existential or spontaneous* communitas, 2. *normative* communitas, and 3. *ideological* communitas. The existential or spontaneous communitas emerges spontaneously, it just happens. ‘It has something “magical” about it. Subjectively there is in it a feeling of endless power’.⁵⁰ One could say that the magical substance of the spontaneous communitas offers its members automatically a sense of *ecstasy*. Etymologically ec-

⁴⁴ Turner, ‘Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual’, in *From Ritual to Theatre*, pp. 20-60 (45-46).

⁴⁵ Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’, in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94-130 (97).

⁴⁶ Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’, p. 127.

⁴⁷ Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’, p. 129.

⁴⁸ Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’, p. 129.

⁴⁹ Rossbach, *Gnostic Wars*, pp. 5-11.

⁵⁰ Turner, ‘Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual’, pp. 20-60 (47-49).

stasy means 'to stand out'.⁵¹ Hence, the concept of the spontaneous *communitas* can be connected with the state of standing out, of being distant from the totality of structural positions. A further analysis on this type of community will follow later.

The normative *communitas* is a 'perduring social system',⁵² which attempts to preserve spontaneous *communitas* but on a more persistent basis. There is the dominant necessity for social control and mobilisation of the social resources that characterise the normative *communitas*. Ideological *communitas* 'is a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on existential *communitas*'.⁵³ The spontaneous *communitas* is underlined by 'grace', where normative *communitas* is defined more by 'law'. The spontaneous *communitas* is closely related to what Martin Buber has called 'das Zwischenmenschliche'.⁵⁴ The community - according to Turner - to which Buber refers, has analogies with the spontaneous *communitas*. Buber is not talking about institutionalised structures and persisting social groups, but he refers to the community created when the 'I' experiences the 'Thou'. But as Turner believes, when Buber explains the relationship between total and concrete persons, he is not referring exclusively to the dyadic relationship as it is developed between two people. The independent 'I' and 'Thou', according to Turner, may concern independent groups of people with particular responsibilities, who communicate with each other and sustain spontaneous communities. As Turner indicates, 'there is no specific social form that is held to express spontaneous *communitas*'⁵⁵ and, 'spontaneous *communitas* is a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition'.⁵⁶ We could argue that spontaneous *communitas* as they are presented by Turner have transitional character, while the other two forms try to make permanent and to symbolise what is intrinsically transitional. Spontaneous *communitas* may arise unpredictably at any time between persons-participants in a group, or never.

The contingency of Self and 'reality' that results from entering cyberspace makes the study of cyberspace a great challenge because it raises questions about the notions of belonging and participation as well as of any possible relations among the 'passengers'. The movement into cyberspace, though simple at first glance, may lead to a reconsideration of the notion of participation and possibly to new types of community. If we accept Turner's theory that the *communitas* appears when social structure lacks, entrance into cyberspace could allow the creation of a new form of society. The participants in cyberspace who move under anonymity, uniformity, sexlessness, may construct a society, in which no name, no gender, no sex, no particular status - at least temporarily - exists as the driving force of the social structure. The new society will somehow have its 'boundaries' but what exactly it will look like remains open. Does structure eventually return in cyberspace?

⁵¹ In ancient Greek, 'ec' means 'out' and 'stasy' means 'the state of standing'.

⁵² Turner, 'Communitas: Model and Process', in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 131-165 (132).

⁵³ Turner, 'Communitas: Model and Process', p. 132.

⁵⁴ Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94-130 (127).

⁵⁵ Turner, 'Communitas: Model and Process', in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 131-165 (138).

⁵⁶ Turner, 'Communitas: Model and Process', p. 140.

It is important for our study to add that *communitas* has to be understood in relation to the social context from where it emerges because it emerges as departure from structure. The meaning of *communitas* hence can be grasped in relation to structure although *communitas* itself is unstructured. It may be that the type of community (if any) experienced in cyberspace is comparable to one of the types of *communitas*, or that there are some corresponding themes. Nevertheless, such an argument would be more concrete if the similarities between rites of passage and entrance into cyberspace are clearly exposed.

3.2.3. Modern 'Rites of passage' and cyberspace

Having presented the main points of Turner's theorisation of rites of passage, it is high time to examine the extent to which it could be incorporated into the study of cyberspace. The following section will examine the similarity between the 'forced participation'⁵⁷ in cyberspace (specifically chatrooms) and the processional rites of passage. It will be argued that it necessary to consider how Turner adopted his model for the modern industrial period and developed the liminal and liminoid distinction; indeed, the reasoning *for* the creation of this distinction is instructive for the current study. Lastly, it will be argued that a fuller examination of the potential liminal/liminoid experience in cyberspace must be interceded by a meditation on the overlapping of theme of play and performance which duly follows in the next section.

Cyberspace appears as a part of contemporary life and society. The technological innovations of recent years have contributed to the broader use of cyberspace and extended the possibilities of entering it. Our task at this stage is to penetrate the meaning of cyberspace and explore its area in terms of Turner's theory. The question posed is whether the movement into and out of cyberspace can be examined as a rite of passage.

As we have already said the rite of passage accompanies every movement in status, the whole movement from some particular conditions to other ones. Therefore cyberspace could be explored in terms of the three different stages: a.separation, b.transition, and c.incorporation or reaggregation. When somebody enters cyberspace she leaves the space, the 'off-line' space, and moves into a new, 'virtual' or 'hyper' space. It is the initial stage of entering cyberspace and characterises the beginning of the whole movement of entrance. Certain procedures or rites may reflect this beginning movement such as turning the computer on, placing hands on keyboard and mouse followed by the fixity of vision onto the screen and the inputting of identifying information. The detachment from the reality, which the 'neophyte' in cyberspace experiences, is an important part of this phase. There may, or may not, be a 'reality' of a different nature hidden behind the entrance. A more detailed analysis of such possibilities involved will follow after the description of the empirical study. The second stage, it could be suggested, is that of the online experience itself. The journey is undefined and largely unknown and orientation and interaction occur amongst secluded souls, mediated by a screen which hides nearly all structural, societal elements. The dissolution of fixity and consequentially the ambiguity which is

⁵⁷ As was explained in Chapter 2.

overriding clearly resonates with the framework Turner developed. The third phase, the phase of reaggregation refers to the incorporation of the participant into the new status or, in this context, to a return to a 'reality' which may now be informed by an insight gained in the in-between period. The term 'insight' is used here referring to liminality as 'a stage of reflection, where participants who go through the initiation ritual are "alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society."'”⁵⁸ The return to the 'burden' of a largely fixed physical and social presence and the ritualised ending of the process by 'logging out', switching the power off and looking 'elsewhere' follows.

The limen, the marginal stage is the one which characterises, according to Turner, the essence of movement from one status to another. But is there any liminality in cyberspace as understood by Turner? By entering cyberspace the participant leaves (or may leave) behind, her name, her gender, her status. She becomes invisible in a space, where reality is ambiguous. The transition from offline to online world may be the crucial aspect of the entrance to cyberspace. The participant in cyberspace experiences the possibility of leaving her identity and moving in ambiguity into a space where her real identity - at first - could not be defined. The uniformity, invisibility, anonymity, sexlessness, neutrality characterise the second stage of marginality. The participant is 'marginalised', because she belongs nowhere, the reality she experiences is not yet defined, it may be a virtual reality. Her status is not definable yet, she is ambiguous, and she could not be defined as belonging to a particular class: because her name, her gender, her sex cannot be checked, verified or falsified, -at least at first- and therefore cannot 'define' her. Her ambiguity as a result of the absence of any specific elements of Self characterisation raises questions over the notion of self presentation in general: perhaps this is indeed Turner's '*tabula rasa*'.

As has already been mentioned, the particular names, gender, status, are important attributes of the structured status. The notion of identity includes the above terms. But during the entrance in cyberspace, the participant lacks those characteristics - if she wants to - and is moving in anonymity, and ambiguity as a matter of choice and preference. At the second stage of the transition the participant can be compared with the neophytes, to use Turner's term. It could be argued that the participant in cyberspace is moving in purity and nothingness due to the fact that structural attributes of her identity are not obvious and to some extent could be changed. Nothingness and everythingness at the same time are possible in cyberspace⁵⁹, potentiality is abundant: Temporary changes in name, status, gender, self-presentation etc. are possible in cyberspace and, hence, whatever status is adopted is likely to be temporary. The emancipation of the participant, the 'passenger' according to Turner, from any kind of social structure, the detachment of herself from her real status, defines the second phase of the entrance. There are some clear indications that similarities hold between the movement Turner described and movement into and out of cyberspace.

⁵⁸ Arpad Szokolczai, 'Experiential sociology', *Theoria*, i.103 (April 2004), pp. 59-87 (65). Szokolczai cites Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de passage', in Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, p. 105.

⁵⁹ I use the term 'cyberspace', referring to the chatrooms where the empirical study has been performed.

Nevertheless, there are elements of Turner's work that do not fit rites of passage as he described them. Firstly, there is no obvious guide for the neophytes, no clear instructions. The volatility inherent in the liminal phase was realised to be dangerous and as such, the process was overseen with a clear marking out of beginning and end. At first sight, it appears the online experience is dictated by the individual, in terms of its length and form. The rite of passage as it develops during a religious ceremony is more a collective experience than a choice of the individual. The individual may wish to participate but the nature of the ceremony - the group of people who take part, the collective experience, the fact that the participants share the common desire of participating in the ceremony, the fact that they share a common place and time - gives the whole process of ceremony a collective character. In contrast, the rite of passage as it appears in actions such as entering cyberspace is based on a more individual basis, the choice of the individual, which is not institutionalised in society as a ritual. In modern societies the multiple roles and the complex core of the social structure give the notion of liminality a different character. Moreover, the individualised nature of the experience also seems to undermine the potential for *communitas*.

Turner approaches rites of passage from an anthropological point of view, and draws his arguments and conclusions from an examination of tribal societies and their social actions: ceremonies and religious activities. He suggests that the different levels of the rite of passage are obvious in every aspect of social and cultural life but his theory above all is formulated for tribal societies. The contemporary aspects of society, part of which is the focus of the research, did not belong directly to Turner's terrain of interests. Nevertheless, he poses the question: 'Where is liminality today in relation to our mainline politicoeconomic structures?'⁶⁰ He indicates that 'in tribal societies, liminality is often functional, in the sense of being a special duty or performance *required* in the course of work or activity'.⁶¹

Online reality may be understood as a liminal stage, because it is rooted in the 'stepping-out' of the reality. The entrance into cyberspace probably establishes an 'in-between' status and furthermore a reorientation of the Self, given that the Self can be presented through various ways. But one may characterise the entrance into cyberspace as 'liminoid' rather than as 'liminal'. This distinction goes back to Turner himself. 'In the so-called "high culture" of complex societies, the liminoid is not only removed from a rite de passage context, it is also "individualized."⁶² On the distinction between 'liminal' and 'liminoid' Turner explains: 'The solitary artist *creates* the liminoid phenomena, the collectivity *experiences* collective liminal symbols.'⁶³ The 'liminal', stems, according to Turner, from the collective action and behavior while the 'liminoid' is rooted in the choice and desire of the individual.

⁶⁰ Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', p. 212.

⁶¹ Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', p. 212.

⁶² Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', p. 213.

⁶³ Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', p. 213.

According to Turner 'liminoid' or 'quasi-liminal' are:

terms describing the many genres found in modern industrial leisure that have features resembling those of liminality. These genres are akin to the ritually liminal, but not identical with it.⁶⁴ They often represent the dismembering of the liminal, for various components that are joined in liminal situations split off to pursue separate destinies as specialized genres [...]. They are plural, fragmentary (from the point of view of the total inventory of liminoid thoughts, words, and deeds), experimental, idiosyncratic, quirky, subversive, utopian, and characteristically produced and consumed by identifiable individuals, in contrast to liminal phenomena [...] which are often anonymous or divine in origin.⁶⁵

Thus, liminality in modern societies gains a different character than in tribal societies. This is the reason why Turner introduced the term 'liminoid'. One may argue that 'liminoid' is the pre-stage of liminal in that it is much softer in meaning and power. Turner distinguishes liminal from liminoid phenomena as follows:

Liminal phenomena tend to predominate in tribal and early agrarian societies [...]. *Liminoid phenomena* flourish in societies with 'organic solidarity', [...] *liminal phenomena* tend to be collective, [...] *liminoid phenomena* [...] are more characteristically individual products [...].⁶⁶

With these qualifications in mind, the entrance in cyberspace could be characterised, in some sense, as a rite of passage, as a liminoid *or* liminal phenomenon. This provisional characterization opens more questions than answers about 'liminality' and 'liminoid' in cyberspace. After the description and discussion of the empirical study, 'liminality' and 'liminoid', will be (re)discussed and (re)discovered. Nevertheless, Turner points to the importance of play in understanding 'lost' liminal and liminoid phenomena in the modern period.⁶⁷ Therefore, in the following section the notion of play will be explored to determine its direct relation to participation in cyberspace which a number of authors have implied, as well as to support the concluding remarks on the clarification of an observable(?) underlying experience in Turner's modern rites and play.

3.3. THEORISING THE EXPERIENCE OF LIMINAL/LIMINOID: (CYBER)SPACES FOR PLAY AND PERFORMANCE

If man is a sapient animal, a toolmaking animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps, that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that man is a self-performing animal – his performances are, in a

⁶⁴ My emphasis.

⁶⁵ Turner and Turner, 'Appendix A: Notes on Processual Symbolic Analysis' in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 243-255 (253).

⁶⁶ Turner, 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', pp. 213-215.

⁶⁷ Victor Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', in *Blaizing the Trail: way marks in the exploration of symbols*, pp. 48-65 (54).

way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself. This can be in two ways: the actor may come to know himself better through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by another set of human beings.⁶⁸

3.3.1. Huizinga and play

The notion of play and its role in culture are elaborated in Johan Huizinga's work. He approaches 'play' historically as a cultural phenomenon, and considers it as part of our life and culture. Huizinga believes that 'play is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility.'⁶⁹ In tackling the problem of play, Huizinga approaches 'play' as a special form of activity, as a significant form with social function. He discusses the etymological roots of the word 'play'. 'Play' derives from the Greek 'pais' that means 'child'. It refers to actions that belong to the everyday life of the child. But Huizinga finds that 'play' is marked by serious features of life at every level of age.

Various discussions of the play-concept can be found in the breadth of literature. The Platonic identification of play is one of those closely connecting 'play' with life. He says:

What, then, will be the right way to live? A man should spend his whole life at 'play'- sacrificing, singing, dancing – so that he can win the favour of the gods and protect himself from his enemies and conquer them in battle.⁷⁰

Plato acknowledges the value of play and points out that the relation between play and life is of great importance.

In an effort to grasp the meaning of play it is necessary to explore its fundamental characteristics as presented by Huizinga. To start with, play is based on the desire and will to play. '[...] all play is a voluntary activity',⁷¹ as Huizinga indicates. It is not ruled by obligations and duties, only if it is embodied in the process of cultural functions such as ceremonies. The main characteristic of the play is that: 'it is free, is in fact freedom'.⁷² Further, Huizinga claims we can find several aspects of game in society: law, history, art, philosophy, poiesis. These occur because play is a 'function of the living'⁷³; it develops in various forms of societies and is situated aesthetically in everyday life. Already the similarities with the liminoid, and participation in chatrooms, are obvious.

⁶⁸ Victor Turner, 'The Anthropology of Performance' in Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), pp. 72-98 (81).

⁶⁹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Laws* (trans. Trevor J. Saunders), (New York: Penguin, 1970), vii, 803.

⁷¹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 26.

⁷² Huizinga, p. 26.

⁷³ Huizinga, p. 25.

The event of play is not connected with any particular stage of civilisation. It is a thing on its own, and exists in every culture. Aesthetics is the area where 'play' first finds its origins. It is linked to beauty and it can be described under the notions of beauty such as: harmony, rhythm, balance, imagination, creativity. Both imagination and creativity are proved to gain their importance from 'freedom', that is one of the main features of 'play'. Imagination and creativity convey the power of freedom, because they arise and develop only under the condition of freedom. The aesthetic experience that 'play' creates is hidden behind various emotions such as *fun* and *pleasure* and common feelings which emerge through 'play'.

Another characteristic of 'play' is the absence of any restriction of place and time: 'Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is "over". It plays itself to an end.'⁷⁴ It is exactly this that makes 'play' not a common part of 'ordinary' or 'real' life. Huizinga believes 'it is rather a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own'.⁷⁵ The 'stepping-out' of reality requires the separation from reality and the entrance into a new or reformed reality. That may be possible under pretence and disguise, which become significant mechanisms of 'play'. One can play a role, one can be someone else, and one can reject his or her real identity and be someone else during play. 'The disguised or masked individual "plays" another part, another being. He *is* another being.'⁷⁶ The very essence of 'play' is its mimetic character.

But the stepping out of common reality into another order is taking place in parallel with our consciousness about it: 'We play and know that we play...'⁷⁷ Therefore although 'play' tends to move beyond the real life through pretence and disguise, it is accompanied by the consciousness of the players that play. 'Play' is embodied according to Huizinga in our life: 'We might, in a purely formal sense, call all society a game, if we bear in mind that this game is the principle of all civilization.'⁷⁸ The game of playing different roles becomes interesting, especially when it emerges in our complex society as it does in cyberspace. We are going to explore these links further but before, we have to focus on a particular expression of 'play': theatre and performance.

⁷⁴ Huizinga, p. 28.

⁷⁵ Huizinga, p. 26.

⁷⁶ Huizinga, p. 32.

⁷⁷ Huizinga, p. 22.

⁷⁸ Huizinga, p. 122.

3.3.2. Theatre and Performance

The works of Artaud, Brook, Geertz, Schechner, Turner and others,⁷⁹ could be regarded as attempts to reintroduce theatre into general anthropology, and to investigate the power of acting. The notion of ‘play’ and its mimetic character as an integral part of social and cultural experience is the fundamental point of theatre. As Kirsten Hastrup indicates ‘Theatre belongs to the domain of art. [...] The main point of departure, however, is not theatre as *art* as much as theatre as *life*.’⁸⁰ The power of theatre steps beyond art and is associated with life to the extent that it reflects actions of life.

In this context let us briefly investigate the meaning of tragedy which is one of the oldest and most representative aspects of theatre. The first complete definition of tragedy was given by Aristotle in *Poetics*. He ‘defines tragedy as an imitation of action, or literally as a mimesis of praxis, and claims that it represents “an action which is complete and of a certain magnitude.”’⁸¹ According to Aristotle the tragedy is orientated by the process of acting and its main purpose, its *telos*, is ‘catharsis’.

The origins of Greek tragedy can be found in the tragic chorus, which were groups of people singing during mystical ceremonies during the fairs devoted to Dionysus.⁸² The participants in those ceremonies were singing songs devoted to Dionysus which were created spontaneously. A conductor would normally control the rhythm and the harmony of the song. One of the most famous conductors of such fairs was Thespis, who had the innovative idea to open a dialogue with the chorus, while they were singing. He posed a question to one member of the chorus. The question asked was relevant to the context of the fair. The member of the chorus answered and the dialogue started. Tragedy as an expression of the human spirit was born. Needless to say that it took a long period until the final form of tragedy is shaped and completed.

⁷⁹ See Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double: essays* (trans. Caroline Richards), (New York: Grove Press, 1958); Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1968); Clifford Geertz, *Negara: the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*; Victor Turner, ‘Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?’, in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (eds), *By means of performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 8-19. For a collection of essential theorists and theories of theatre see also Daniel Gerould (ed.), *Theatre, Theory, Theatre: the major critical texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel* (London: Applause Books, 2000).

⁸⁰ Kirsten Hastrup, ‘Theatre as a site of passage. Some reflections on the magic of acting’, in Felicia Hughes-Freeland (ed.), *Ritual, Performance, Media* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 29-45 (30).

⁸¹ Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (London: Duckworth, 1987), p. 39. For a discussion on this see Daniel Gerould, ‘Aristotle: The Poetics (4th c. B.C.)’ (Translation by I. Bywater), in Daniel Gerould (ed.), *Theatre, Theory, Theatre*, pp. 43-67. Also, for the original text see Aristotle, [*Poetics*] *De arte poetica liber* (trans. I. Bywater), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 1449b, 20-30.

⁸² A famous discussion of this is given by Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The Birth of Tragedy’, in F. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music* (trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner), (London: Penguin, 1993). He refers not only to the origins of tragedy but also to its decline.

The basic purpose of tragedy, as Aristotle indicates, is ‘catharsis’. But before we examine the telos of tragedy, it is important to consider modern theories of theatrical events. Schechner argued that: ‘Theater comes into existence when a *separation* occurs between audience and performers.’⁸³ Turner uses performance analogies and dramaturgical metaphors in order to support his arguments on rites of passage. Ritual has also been compared to theatre because it is between reality and imagination and contains a sense of disbelief in actuality, or authenticity.⁸⁴ The actor at the stage pretends that he is someone else, and generally he plays by changing roles and moving in the game of imitation. The actor is conscious that she is performing before the audience and the audience is aware of this play.

The whole play as in a ritual ‘the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world...[...]’⁸⁵ The actor on the stage detaches himself from her own identity and tries to be integrated into the above fusion of dreamed-of and lived-in reality. The new reality she experiences is the reality of the stage, and the new identity she adopts is the identity of the character she plays. The more easily she adopts the new identity, the better actor she is. Nevertheless Stanislavski suggests that the actor should bring his old life from reality into the theatre and to continue to live it on the stage.⁸⁶ Stanislavski believes that the actor must preserve his own identity, his feelings, his emotions, whatever the particular character he imitates. ‘[...] an actor cannot be merely someone, somewhere, at some time or other. He must be I, here, today.’⁸⁷

However, in what sense does or can the actor preserve her own identity on the stage? The play of roles is tempting enough to make her forget herself for a moment and to be completely incorporated into the time and space of the play. The separation from her reality and the entrance into a new one, the reality of the stage, with temporal and local orientation, underlines the actor’s task. Still, the actor, as we said, remains aware of the fact that she plays. Schechner indicates:

Performer training focuses its techniques not on making one person into another but on permitting the performer to act in between identities; in this sense performing is a paradigm of liminality.⁸⁸

The telos of the theatre event, as has been already mentioned, is ‘catharsis’. Catharsis derives from the word ‘catharon’ that means ‘clear, pure’. Therefore ‘catharsis’ is the procedure of becoming pure. Catharsis is considered to be the final purpose of tragedy

⁸³ Richard Schechner, *Essays on performance theory, 1970-1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), p. 79.

⁸⁴ Barbara Myerhoff, ‘The transformation of consciousness in ritual performances: some thoughts and questions’, in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (eds), *By means of performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 245-249.

⁸⁵ Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System’, in Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the study of religion* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), pp. 1-46 (28).

⁸⁶ Timothy J. Wiles, *The Theater Event: modern theories of performance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1980), p. 36.

⁸⁷ Constantin Stanislavski, ‘The Life of a True Artist’, in Constantin Stanislavski, *Stanislavski’s Legacy* (ed. and trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood), (New York: Theatre Art Books, 1958), p. 76.

⁸⁸ Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, p. 123.

and possibly of any theatrical event, in the sense that it creates emotions and feelings among the audience. The audience experiences the notions of happiness, misfortune, sadness, passion, etc. which actors present, and absorb the feelings that actors feel -- at least virtually and not really – and think of the solution of the dramatic conflict, thereby taking pleasure from the play. The audience may pose questions relevant to the play, consider the status of the heroes, and approach the heroes with empathy or sympathy. The audience gains experience by seeing the play - the experience gained from the same play may vary among the individual spectators - and this experience may, or may not, inspire future actions. Either it remains a simple pleasure or it is transformed into a dialogue with oneself, a reconsideration of values and ideas. (That is the ideal catharsis that every playwright would like to cause). But is entering cyberspace conducive to catharsis?

3.3.3. Play and Theatre in cyberspace

Ritual, performance and media all raise questions about the framing of reality [...], all three are in some sense virtual realities, mediated by technologies, be they magical or mechanical.⁸⁹

The entrance into cyberspace raises questions about reality, and hence leads to a reconsideration of the nature of reality and the line between real and unreal experience. Playing in a game means establishing a new reality, or at least the ‘stepping-out’ of reality. Someone who enters cyberspace leaves behind her original identity and can pretend that she is someone else. The presentation of different gender, sex, name of the original, is part of the rules of the game in cyberspace.

During the play, and accordingly during the movement into chatrooms, imagination takes place, which gives power to the disguise with the assistance of the opportunities offered for various self presentation. Under disguise somebody becomes ‘somebody else’. Automatically, ‘a stepping-out’ of the reality reveals a ‘stepping out’ of concrete attributes of the off-line constructed Self. More specifically, by participating in chatrooms, someone may become ‘someone else’; someone can put on a virtual mask. The adaptation of a pseudonym occurs at the very beginning of the entrance and can be found analogous to a kind of ‘masking’. The anonymity and invisibility in cyberspace assists that possibility. But a further definition and description of *who* somebody becomes *after the disguise*, requires, firstly, the definition of *who* somebody was, *before the disguise*. Therefore, we have to examine two different categories: who the participant in the game was before starting playing and who the participant is in the cyberspace game is after having started playing. Those points are to be clarified in the chapter on empirical study where the terms of participation and Self presentation are under focus.

The movement in cyberspace as a play may create emotions of fun and pleasure as well. The entrance into cyberspace could be considered as sharing points of theatre and performance: The actors on the stage are performing a drama, stepping out of their own character, and detaching themselves from their real life.

⁸⁹ Felicia Hughes-Freeland, ‘Introduction’, in Hughes-Freeland, *Ritual, Performance, Media*, pp. 1-28 (10-11).

They present the reality of the character they represent, and the absorption of the same experience by the audience depends on the quality of their art.

The actors and the audience, as main parts of the drama body present a new reality, the reality of the stage: '[...] performativity is not only endemic to human being-in-the-world but fundamental to the process of constructing a human reality'.⁹⁰ The entrance into cyberspace could be compared to a drama, if we accept that the participant separates herself from her reality and enters a new one. But in cyberspace the theatre, if it can be found, is more interactive, because the actor, the audience, the director is the same person at the same time, the participant. The changing roles in chatrooms are indicated particularly by the nature of the synchronous text-based communication. The chatters become writers, senders, readers of texts sent and received in the context of interaction. Cyberspace becomes a playground - at least temporarily - as soon as the participants choose to be represented by 'signs', by pseudonyms. The consistency of their representation by 'signs', is dependent on their individual choice and directs the extent to which playful activities or even illusions as result of representation will continue.

As regards catharsis in cyberspace, the escape from the real, could be served as a purification of oneself and a reorientation of self-knowledge. The participant by moving into a newly perceived, 'virtual reality', might reconsider her offline reality, and acquire knowledge and experience in terms of self-understanding and determination. With no intention to provide hypothetical answers, one can not exclude the possibility at this stage that participation in cyberspace could simply contribute to the pleasure of the participant, or just be a part of ordinary everyday life. The dialectical process in which the participant is engaged through her participation in cyberspace, and the implications of that process remain to be investigated and further illustrated after the discussion of the empirical research.

3.4. CONCLUSIONS: RITES, PLAY AND CYBERSPACE

Turner's observation on 'entertainment' becomes a link between our previous discussion on cyberspace as a liminal/liminoid phenomenon and our present discussion on performance and play. One of the possibilities that cyberspace offers, is that of entertainment. The entrance into chatrooms could be regarded as a source of entertainment. As Turner explains, 'entertainment' means 'to hold between', deriving its substantial meaning from the words *entre*, that means 'between', and *tenir*, that means 'to hold'. 'That is, it can be construed as the making of liminality, the betwixt and between state.' Moreover, 'entertainment is liminoid rather than liminal, it is suffused with freedom. It involves profoundly the power of *play*, and play democratizes.'⁹¹

⁹⁰ Edward L. Schieffelin, 'Problematizing performance', in Hughes-Freeland, *Ritual, Performance, Media*, pp. 194-207 (205).

⁹¹ Turner, 'Acting in everyday life and everyday life in acting', in *From Ritual to Theatre*, pp. 102-123 (120-121).

Underlying the discussion of play and that of liminal and liminoid experiences seem to be a number of common elements. Firstly, there is recognition, and indeed a necessity to recognise difference; that is to say that one's experience of the world alters when 'playing' or when in a liminal state. Previous discussions have alluded to a 'stepping out of reality' and certainly on the surface level this is comparable. Secondly, there is ambiguity so as to make the 'difference' not that of going from one objectified structure to another, but of moving from a (relatively) stable structure to the dissolution of structure. In the liminal phase and in play, individuals, by *participating* and losing 'themselves' as they have been defined through social order, find 'something rather than nothing.' As such it is through participation (suggesting the potentially mechanical composition of 'everyday' existence) that recognition occurs and that the Baudrillardian 'unremitting simulation' may be undone. Thirdly, both the discussion on play and rites of passage suggest something foundational for human society in the experiences they outline. In relation to the section on Baudrillard, he is pulled back from claiming the total annihilation of the real precisely because he sensed that latent in human culture is the potentiality to rediscover reality.

When Turner asserts that 'liminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*'⁹² there is a clear line of human experience that he taps in to. One not only turns from being a boy to being a man, but, through rites of passage, one assesses that which is left behind, that which may come, one's place in society, world, cosmos. Moreover, in leaving behind previous identities, one faces that which remains, elements of self that cannot be erased. Participation in cyberspace may lead to playfulness with identity but this process in turn requires an element of potentiality (one considers what (not) to 'become') which comes *before*. Participating in cyberspace may indeed require us to look at ourselves 'honestly' just as play and liminality do. Moreover, it emerges as a place in which 'reflections *upon* the matter of fact world' rather than a 'reflection of it' may be undertaken.

Nevertheless, there are ambiguities in Turner's theory as well as notions of play that may lead to further discussion after the empirical study. Perhaps chief amongst these is the question of community. Given the assertions made previously, the difference between liminal and liminoid informs the type of participation, structured and collective with the former, individualised and open-ended with the latter. However, it may be that this distinction cannot be made in such a clear cut manner when looking at cyberspace. There are elements of both types of transition and certainly there is a tension between communal and individualised experience that is difficult to differentiate. Therefore, this topic is best approached in response to the evidence uncovered in the following chapter.

⁹² Turner, 'Introduction: Pilgrimage as a Liminoid Phenomenon', in Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 1-39 (3).

4. EMPIRICAL STUDY PART II: FROM OBSERVATION TO PARTICIPATION

Neo: exist dont know the exact time in your country?huh

esistenza: sorry, I didn't see your question

Neo: esistenza do you really exist? (-;

esistenza: yes, why?¹

Our previous empirical work in Chapter 2 has led us to the conclusion that 'observation' is not sufficient in our attempt to understand online 'being' in chatrooms. First of all, we noted that a 'pure', distant, uninvolved observation of chatrooms is impossible already for technical reasons. In order to be able to observe the dialogues, the observer must join the chatroom and, because of the technology and software, the other users will be made aware of the observer's presence. Even if the observer remains 'passive' and does not respond to messages, her entrance is a form of 'appearance' in the chatroom area. Second, we also noted that much of what is happening in chatrooms takes place in 'private rooms'. Again, because of the way in which the software organises these private rooms, they cannot be observed from the outside. The technology dictates, therefore, that private rooms can only be experienced and not observed. This reference to experience is significant because it led us to an investigation of 'rites of passage' and liminality. As we noted in Chapter 1, Baudrillard considers the 'obliteration of the original reference' as a characteristic feature of hyperreality. But joining a chatroom is an 'entrance', a movement, a transition: it has a 'before' and an 'after'. This movement is experienced as a detachment, a separation, which is reflected in the choice of a nickname. Arguably, therefore, the 'original reference' is not obliterated, but remains 'present' as the 'before' of the movement. Thus, as soon as we focus on experience, Baudrillard's generalisations become questionable.

We therefore move on to a presentation of the results of our 'participant observation' in chatrooms. We will present three stories of three unfolding online encounters. In many ways these studies can be understood as an exercise in virtual ethnography. As much as possible we let these encounters speak for themselves, but we will add reflections on our own experience as appropriate. We think these reflections are significant especially for those moments in the unfolding encounters in which we took decisions as to what our online personae was to be like. A full analysis of these encounters and our experience will follow in Chapter 5.

4.1. 'EXISTENZIO' AND 'LIGHT'

The first interaction between 'esistenza' and 'light'² took place on 11th September 2003 in the public room I had been observing since 1st August 2003. I had participated

¹ Extract from a brief dialogue with 'neo' at the beginning of my participation in chatrooms. Wednesday, 10th September 2003 ('Friends room', Lobby 1 – 1st session).

² Following the ethical principles that I have already addressed, I have replaced the nickname/pseudonym of the participant.

in the same room since the beginning of September 2003. During the session,³ I was having a dialogue with two participants named 'charles' and 'clue' respectively, which was interrupted by 'light' as he entered the room. I present the following dialogue – just before 'light' enters the room – in order to give an idea of how I had established my self-presentation just before I met 'light':

kima2003 left the room.
existenzio: charles???
charles: i type a little slow so bear with me
existenzio: ok
the: joined the room.
existenzio: don't worry
charles: how old are you existenzio?
silver2000 joined the room.
debbby: left the room.
charles: and where are you from

This was the first time during this session that I was asked to provide information about my age and location. As noted previously in Chapter 2, questions about age, gender and location are generally the first questions that chatters ask each other. I give here my answers to the above questions because, as we will see below, the same questions were asked again later on by 'light'. We list an extended segment of public chatroom dialogue in order to illustrate the amorphous and chaotic character of the environment.

bratt: left the room.
babies: joined the room.
existenzio: 27
existenzio: and you?
charles: 36
the: left the room.
lover: joined the room.
existenzio: nice, where do you live?
charles: I asked first existenzio. Anyway, New Zealand
charles: and you
salita: joined the room.
existenzio: New Zealand? very interesting, I live in uk
Sandy: left the room.
rania: left the room.
silver: left the room.
tido: left the room.
barbara: joined the room
barbara: Hey
barbara: hows everyone doing? 20/f/webcaam
charles: never seen you before here
existenzio: charles, do you often visit this room?
clue: **i am alone exit**
blood3 pokes in the chest
xxox_mike_hunt_xxox joined the room.
clue: **i am alone with no friends**

³ Thursday, 11th September 2003 ('Friends room' - Lobby 1-1st session).

charles: are you still here exist

clue: **i made real friends from this net**

existenzio: hi clue!!

clue: **along time ago**

clue: **hi**

existenzio: yes, charles I am here

charles: well we are doing something ha ha

nee: joined the room.

rena: **Check my pics and webcam here**

clue: **do you have kids exist**

charles: london come back

rena: **ahhh you gotta see this**

raaj1 joined the room.

existenzio: london is back

clue: **what???**

clue: **london**

clue: **i asked you**

<http://onlineforyou@stacys>

clueless 1900: **do you have kids**

existenzio: sorry I lost you. did you ask me something?

clue: **yes**

charles: hey i guess someone was trying to talk to me i was talking to you

existenzio: no kids

jenna joined the room.

existenzio: what about you?

clue: **how long have you been married**

kate: **hey sweetie**

<http://wowseexy@stacys>

clue: **me 1 year and have kids**

clue: **i love them**

deny: left the room.

charles: do not worry i will be here for you clue

randy: joined the room.

clue: **hey hey hey**

existenzio: male or female clue?

clue: **i am a man as you existenzio**

<http://wowseexy@stacys>

sally joined the room.

Charles: how come you don't have friends clue?

clue: **dont missunderstand**

<http://seexylive@stacys>

rania joined the room.

clue: **i choosed my friends after many tests**

charles: what city

clue: **barca**

reo: left the room.

clue: **no problem**

charles: london are you a man or woman

<http://mmm@stacys>

light: Hi Room

light: existenzio?

This was the first time that ‘light’ referred to ‘existenzio’ directly. He sent a general greeting to the room, as numerous visitors do in chatrooms. I was engaged in a conversation with ‘clue’ and ‘charles’ and was surprised that a new participant, whose name I had not known until then, would ‘call’ my name. I was intrigued that a ‘stranger’ should be interested in me. Existenzio instantly responded by sending a greeting. The very fact that ‘light’ used my name and approached me directly attracted my immediate attention. Perhaps I was also flattered to have attracted someone else’s interest. The printout cannot fully capture the speed of these exchanges, and it is quite clear that any delay in responding threatens the continuation of the dialogue. Existenzio therefore responded without delay.

I was not certain whether ‘light’ had already observed the interaction that had taken place earlier between me as existenzio, ‘charles’ and ‘clue’. Up to the moment that ‘light’ called ‘existenzio’ I had already presented existenzio as a 27 year old living in London. No information had been provided about existenzio’s gender. But when I asked ‘clue’ about his gender he did not only answer my question but took it for granted that ‘existenzio’ was ‘a man like him’. Therefore, the answers ‘existenzio’ had given to ‘charles’ and ‘clue’ and also the fact that without any obvious reason ‘clue’ had imagined ‘existenzio’ as a man affected my self-presentation towards ‘light’. The reason for this is that I was not certain when exactly ‘light’ had entered the room and thus how much he knew about ‘existenzio’. Therefore, having in mind that ‘light’ might have had an idea of how I had presented my self so far, I did not want to play with ‘light’; I tried to remain consistent as I continue to develop existenzio’s story. In order to not lose ‘light’, who had expressed some interest in existenzio by calling ‘his’ name, I wanted to establish continuity in my self-presentation not only for ‘light’ but also for ‘clue’ and ‘charles’, who were still in the public room. No matter whether ‘clue’ and ‘charles’ were paying attention to my answers to ‘light’, the possibility that they were observing ‘existenzio’s’ answers in the public room was an additional reason why I chose to continue my self presentation as I had started it. Therefore, the answer that I provided to the question ‘a/s/l’ (age, sex, location) was the same as the answer that had been given to ‘clue’. It seemed to me that the sooner and faster I was able to give the answers to such questions the more ‘convincing’ the answers would appear.

alien joined the room.

existenzio: hi light

Play: left the room.

light: asl

existenzio: 27/m/uk

existenzio: what about you light?

light: 30/m/spain

SUMo joined the room.

existenzio: nice to meet you

light: same here

This moment where I presented myself – as above (Age: 27, Location: UK, Gender: male) – was very important for my further contacts with ‘light’. Until our interactions

started to take place more regularly, this information was a sole presentation of existenzio. It was only after and during my interactions with 'light' that this information needed to be sustained and confirmed in various way as I will explain later. At the moment when I presented my self as such, I had already stepped-out from my off-line reality but only partly. Information on age and gender cannot be checked, verified or falsified in the electronic environment, and thus the performance of the self could not be perceived as 'truth', 'lie' or 'pretence' by 'light'. As for the location, although it cannot be checked as well, since I had to provide my answer first, I could not 'play' with such a piece of information and present a location other than my actual location. Until now, 'light' was a total stranger to 'existenzio' – at least as a name – and I was concerned that future cross-checking of information would cause problems of accuracy and consistency. Presenting a different location than my actual location could always turn out to be costly – for example, if 'light' was more familiar with the location than I was. In other words, already at this stage I was concerned about the vulnerability of existenzio's online profile. Therefore, I chose to play safely, and to step-out from my offline reality partly, to the extent that my online representation could be sustained and supported by my offline experience.

sun joined the room.

clue: hi light

light: hi clue

clue: welcome into this room

light: thanx

light: asl clue

clue: i hope you nice chat here

clue: c you all

kimo: joined the room.

existenzio: clue, are you leaving?

clue is away (Be Right Back)

light: soon

light: clue

<http://onlinelive@stacys>

clue: yes

light: 😊

clue: a min plz

sumo: left the room.

light: i will wait

light: where are u from clue

shalina: joined the room.

light: hi shalina

is back

clue: again

sincere friend joined the room.

clue: hi

kalls20m joined the room.

light: hi

talgil: hi

<http://mmmlive@stacys>

clue: i am from a remote island

light: are u there clue

clue: yes

shalina: left the room.

light: remote island

light: ok

clue: you

manos: joined the room.

light: i am form spain

clue: cool

perfecto: joined the room.

<http://mlive@stacys>

clue: do you know french

kamo: left the room.

existenzio: hi sincere friend

light: Sorry, where is exist?

In this segment, 'light' seemed to wonder where 'existenzio' was. The problems I faced with the internet connection made it sometimes difficult for me to stay in the room for longer periods of time. As the connection was interrupted, I had to re-enter the room. Many chatters complain about connection problems as such problems affect the continuity of chatroom conversations. When I, as 'existenzio', entered the chatroom again, I realised that 'light' had noticed my absence. At least he had realised that 'existenzio' was missing, which again was a sign to me that 'light' was interested in making contact with 'existenzio'.

janie: joined the room.

light: clue

<http://veryseexy@stacys>

clue: yes

light: are u studing or working

existenzio: I'm here again, sorry problems with the connection

clue: why are you asking 😬

clue: check my profile man

manu joined the room.

clue: i will check yours

<http://livedancing@stacys>

pida: pics and webcam are up at

manoj left the room.

Scooby joined the room.

light: sorry

light: ur are polite

light: rU

clue: for what

alpha: Check my pics and webcam here
billy: joined the room.

clue: thank you anyway

clue: thank you

alpha: ahhh you gotta see this

light: thanks for what

rita: joined the room.

clue: i must leave now

light: are you coming back later? 😊

light: BYE

existenzio: bye clue

clue: but i will be back light and exist

alpha: Check my pics and webcam here

light: C U SOON

existenzio: see you tomorrow clue
harry: joined the room.

clue: wait for me guys

rita: HI ROOM

clue: bye

clue: thanks light for calling me polite

rita: anyone here?

a18ag: pics and webcam are up at
deepa left the room.

clu: c u guys soon

ses joined the room.
Samantha: joined the room.

clue: 😊 bye friends

existenzio: bye clue

a18ag: ahhh you gotta see this

master joined the room.

clue left the room.

light: by clue 😊

navy: where is rita?

light: Now existen

light: what about u

light: 😊

sun left the room.

existenzio: what about you??

sams: hi room

light: I asked first mate, are u working or studying?

esistenza: working

esistenza: are you studying light?

In this public conversation, 'light' started to pay more attention to 'esistenza' and he was the one who initiated questions in order to gain further information about 'esistenza'. I did not feel comfortable in the situation as I was the first who had to provide information about the online self. I therefore tried to reverse the situation by repeating 'light's' questions but it became clear that 'light' as well wanted to have the leading role in our first contact. Up to now he did not doubt the initial information I had given, and when he called me 'mate' I was more certain than before that he perceived me as male. Having 'light' called 'esistenza' as 'mate', was a first recognition of my gender, and although it did not match my offline gender, the recognition implied that this particular feature of existencia's profile had to be maintained and sustained.

The question regarding 'esistenza's' professional occupation was offered as a further tool for me to be used for the building-up of my self presentation. Until that moment, before 'light' confronted existencia with this choice – studying or working – of alternatives, 'esistenza' could have been doing many different things. And still, even after 'light' posed his question in this restrictive manner, I could have ignored light's prompt and opted for a third possibility, i.e. neither working nor studying. However, light's prompt was welcome in that it structured the infinite range of possible occupations for me. Furthermore, any delay in answering such questions can cause problems and thus is 'accepted' one of the two possible answers that light had suggested. It was decided, therefore, that existencia was working. This answer seemed general enough to give me more time to think about future choices resulting from this one. I have to stress the fact that I did not actually have a clear idea in my mind of how existencia should be presented – in other words, it was not clear to me 'who' existencia was. Therefore the simple answer 'working' was a spontaneous answer to light's question but it also made me wonder, more than before, what existencia was actually doing. Light's questioning helped me to enrich existencia's profile because up to this point in the interaction, neither light nor existencia had a clear idea of existencia's occupation.

a18ag: ahhh you gotta see this

light: nope I have finished with studying

slimy left the room.

Rania: left the room.

esistenza: what have you studied exactly?

light: 😊 wanna know?

esistenza: can I ask you something first?

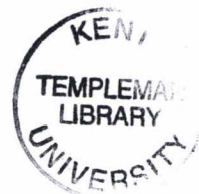
esistenza: what does light mean?

light: light is my name

SPOILED joined the room.

a18ag: pics and webcam are up at

lalu_rahul left the room.



existenzio: oh, i see
demian:left the room.
Karen: joined the room.
existenzio: do you often visit this room light?
light: it means dream and
a18ag: ahhh you gotta see this
light: eternity⁴
light: very often exist, always here.
sivon left the room.
existenzio: very nice meaning I have to say
love i
light: whats ur real name exist?
denia left the room.
a18ag: ahhh you gotta see this
light: thanx
existenzio: i like you to call me exist
hello joined the room.
a18ag: pics and webcam are up at
light: exist
light: what it means, why existenzio?
SPOILED) left the room.
existenzio: I don't like my name, and I will tell you why in due course
light: No your name is nice man. I like existenzio
light 😊
ari left the room.
existenzio: existenzio, derives from 'exist'
a look joined the room.
talqamal joined the room.
Prova joined the room.
a18ag: Check my pics and webcam here
light: hope to see you again here friend
existenzio: light, do you come every day at the same time here?
beauty left the room.
vabil joined the room.
summer joined the room.
light: YES EXIST BUT DON'T LEAVE YET, STAY MORE

'Light's' question about 'existenzio's' real name was the first question so far in my interaction with 'light' where the term 'real' came up. It was the first contact with 'light', a quite explorative one, where the question of 'reality' was posed as a question about the name, the first representation of the online persona. 'Real' here is associated with 'off-line', with attributes of status that are used for offline interaction and self-representation. All chatroom visitors know that they need to choose a pseudonym in order to be able to enter the room. The pseudonym may or may not be related to the visitor's 'real', offline name. What struck me in relation to the question about the 'real name' was the fact that 'light' seemed interested in finding out attributes of my off-line persona based on what was 'obviously' 'unreal'. For example, he did not ask me about my 'real' gender, neither about my 'real' location, but he chose to ask me about my 'real' name, probably because 'existenzio' as a name did not meet standard expectations regarding an off-line name. It is obvious that 'existenzio' cannot stand as a 'real' name, and this was probably what led 'light' to ask his question. Additionally,

⁴ I need to state here that I replaced my contact's nickname with the name 'light' following the ethical rules discussed in Chapter 2.

'light's' question alarmed me because it made me realise that 'existenzio' could be perceived as 'real' as soon as the attributes of the self were provided in a 'real', off-line way or as soon as the characteristics of 'existenzio' were able to meet off-line and therefore 'real' criteria. It was the first time in the interaction with 'light' that 'existenzio' was perceived as 'real' in terms of all given characteristics of status (location, age, gender) so far apart from the name, given that only the name was questioned.

In my first reply to 'light's' question I decided to not fully present 'existenzio', not to provide all the characteristics from the beginning. Moreover, I was in exploration of 'existenzio' and the question of the 'reality' of the name had not yet crossed my mind. I promised though – as a sign of good will and worried how 'light' might respond – to provide the 'real' name in due course. Given that 'light' liked the name 'existenzio' according to his words, I decided to remain 'existenzio' for the moment. 'Light' seemed to be satisfied with, or at least he accepted, my response and he too continued to use the name 'existenzio' for the image he had created of 'existenzio'. I have to add that, for me as well, the image of 'existenzio' became more stable after 'light's' question about the 'reality' of the name. Although 'existenzio's' profile was different from my offline life, 'existenzio' started to appear 'real' to me as well, given that light had accepted him as real. 'Light's' acceptance was a movement for me towards the recognition of 'existenzio' as 'real' - with the name as the only 'unreal' element.

existenzio: ok, I will see you tomorrow definitely

light: 😊

existenzio: but, don't worry, I won't leave now

a18ag: Check my pics and webcam here

light: bYE

trisha left the room.

existenzio: not yet

hello left the room.

sunrise left the room.

light: U ARE FROM UK

a18ag: pics and webcam are up at

Akar joined the room.

existenzio: yep and you from Spain, right?

light: Yes, and I am computer scientist

existenzio: you are a computer scientist? you may help me with my computer

passion left the room.

lela joined the room.

sifan left the room.

randdhend@.net is back

a18ag: Seen my webcam yet? try this

light: Sure, everything you need

look left the room.

existenzio: you are very polite

Unfortunately, the rest of the dialogue has not been saved, due to technical problems. The interaction lasted only for a while and it was about a piece of advice given by 'light' to 'existenzio'. The fact is that the technical questions I asked 'light' were 'real' questions regarding some difficulties I faced when entering the chatrooms. 'Light' offered his assistance trying to give some advice on the matter but he disappeared very suddenly without a greeting, something that made me wonder

whether his disappearance was due to connection problems or he had lost interest in 'esistenzaio'. It was not until September 19 that 'light' appeared again in the public room, the same room where we met for first time.⁵

light: joined the room.

esistenzaio: hi death!!!

korky: u Russians are not better than americans

korky: you are the same

smarty joined the room.

agatha joined the room.

light: Hi existenzio

angel: yeah i enjoy chatting

esistenzaio: HI light!!!!!! How are you????

light: quite fine

death left the room.

light: what about u

esistenzaio: light, I haven't seen you for days, where are you?

Since I was engaged in an exchange of messages with other participants at the time, I did not notice 'light's' entering the chatroom. But, most importantly, 'light' just after joining the room referred to me, actually to 'esistenzaio' by sending a greeting. It was one of the times during my participation that I felt I recognised a 'familiar face' even if my previous discussion with 'light' was very general. However, I instantly remembered the name 'light' and again I was impressed by the fact that he started to talk to me first. Up to that moment 'light' was still a 'sign' to me. I remembered that we had exchanged messages days ago – when this dialogue took place I did not immediately remember when our last conversation had taken place. The name 'light' at that moment represented a participant with whom I had had an interaction and nothing more. As the following dialogue shows, although I remembered the name 'light', I was not able to recall further information about 'light'. 'Light's' reaction is interesting.

salev: korky - sorry i`m lost your message - please try again

light: 😊

light: existenzio

korky: 31 u?

light: ??????????????????//

esistenzaio: light, I am back, sorry

light: 😊

charos joined the room.

⁵ The following extracts are from the dialogue that took place on Friday, 19th September 2003, ('Friends room' - Lobby 1-1st session).

charos: ANY GUYS FRM STATES HERE?

karen2 left the room.

existenzio: light, I am here!!!!

light: ok

light: now how are u

korky: how old r u stacy?

salev: ooooooh - i don` t say to You 😊

light: ?

most left the room.

honeyt joined the room.

Waver joined the room.

salev: Батл -????

existenzio: light, well I don't remember where you are from....

robby: a kak je

kate joined the room.

korky: what is that?

light: existen

light: _____ thats not fair....I remember everything about you....you are from uk

salev: ты чего....????

devil left the room.

light: u also deleted me from ur friend list in messenger

light: existenzio

korky: i dont understand

salev: korky - ok let's go to our room

kate left the room.

existenzio: oh, no lightt!!!!

korky: okkay

existenzio: when?

light: I sent you an instant message some days ago, but you deleted it, remember?

existenzio: Sorry, light, but it must have be done accidentally. Will add you now? is it ok?

rabbo: ti?

light: please, exist

existenzio: can I ???

light: **do it right now please**

salev: from kazakhstan, and you???

existenzio: just a moment contact, now.....

magic left the room.

angel: **Let me chat then=I am fun too**

something left the room.

rabbo: ya iz moskvi

ithaca left the room.

waver: hey mel 😊

korky: want to go to msn?

waver left the room.

Rania joined the room.

british joined the room.

korky: come on answer

existenzio: light, can you check it? I think it's ok now

existenzio: light???????

existenzio: light, are you still here????

When I realised that I could not recall any specific information about 'light' I chose to be honest and ask him a question about his location. The name 'light' appeared at that moment as a pure sign of a represented participant, but I needed to know more about 'light' in order to remember who he was, and how 'light' was defined by the information he provided during our last interaction. What actually mattered for me as 'existenzio' was not who the 'real' – in terms of off-line – 'light' was but how 'light' had already presented himself to 'existenzio'. My aim was to continue the conversation where it had last ended, but I had difficulties remembering crucial details. I was impressed that 'light' remembered that 'existenzio' was located in uk – actually he wrote that 'existenzio' came from the UK although I never claimed that. His strong reaction to my forgetfulness introduced a notion of 'fairness'. According to 'light', it was 'unfair' to forget someone else's online profile. The truth is that up to then 'light' mattered to me only to the extent that I was able to recognise his name, and that I recognised his name and only his name as a pure representation of his online persona. Moreover, the fact that 'existenzio' was recognised by 'light' as more than a pseudonym assisted me in realising that 'existenzio' was not just a pure representation of an online persona but that, at least for 'light', 'existenzio' had certain features and characteristics which I had only revealed during our first interaction.

It was not until this interaction that I realised that 'light' had disappeared not because of a lack of interest but because I accidentally deleted one of his messages in which he had asked me to add him to my Friends List, allowing both me and him to become aware of each other's online presence. By clicking on the name of a participant on the screen a menu of options appears. For example, users can look at the profiles of other participants or they can send an instant message to a participant in order to ask for her/his permission for adding her/him to the Friends List so that both are notified when the other is online. As soon as I realised that I had overlooked 'light's' earlier invitation, I added him instantly to my Friends List and he accepted my invitation. This was a very decisive moment for our further interaction, since the addition of each other's name in the Friends List was a further step for our communication which

esistenza: me? no
light: Reply late. How come?
esistenza: really?
light: any how now tell about ur place, you are from uk right? A real Englishman?
esistenza: no, I am not chatting with someone else
esistenza: I live in london, I am not english though
light: i am curious to know
esistenza: I live in a very busy part of london, north london very central as well
light: so london is not ur native place. Where you come from?
esistenza: sometimes I am fed up with the traffic
esistenza: I am german
esistenza: But I have lived here for many years,
esistenza: I mean I first came here with my parents
light: All ur family is setteled in london
esistenza: I very much like germany, though
light: do u ever go to germany
esistenza: this year my parents are back
esistenza: yes, of course,
esistenza: but all my friends are here,
light: u are not living with ur parents
light: ?
esistenza: I go in germany every Christmas
esistenza: ah, no
light: thats nice
esistenza: oh, come on light you are very quick!!!
esistenza: I am impressed!
light: thanx
esistenza: you are a chat expert
esistenza: no, I don't live with my parents
light: Not chat expert
esistenza: do you live alone?
light: but i am computer graduate that why very much familiar with computer
light: no i live with my parents
esistenza: how old are you light?
light: comming oct. i will be of 30
light: and U
esistenza: when in october? I am 27
light: 15th of Oct
light: and ur birthday
esistenza: 26 january
light: thats nice. Will you remember my birthday?
esistenza: I will remember your birthday definitely

My behaviour as 'esistenza' was in some ways determined by 'light's' expectations. The delay of my responses made him wonder whether I was speaking with other chatters at the same time. It seemed to me that he needed to have my full attention, and his questions about the delay of my messages made me be more careful in terms of the speed of my replies. I was not certain though whether he was talking to me only

or whether he was simply quicker in communicating at different levels (with other chatters) at the same time. Moreover, I felt that I had to be open towards him and provide more information about myself, about 'existenzio', which actually I had not prepared in advance, but his questions guided me in producing information about 'existenzio'. Although I had already explained where I lived, I decided not to present myself as English. The detachment of myself from my real origins took place as soon as I made the choice to present 'existenzio' as German. But this information needed to be based on a further story that I invented based again on his question about my family, therefore, my story as 'existenzio' was assisted to a certain extent by the questions that 'light' asked me. My self-presentation as German enriched the image of 'existenzio' not only for 'light' but also for myself. Although that information did not reflect my off-line persona, my choice was made deliberately: I was not certain whether 'light' was Spanish – it was the only information that he provided about himself – and thus I did not know at that stage whether 'light' had a better command of the English language that could 'trap me' in a situation in which my language skills would not meet his expectations. In addition, I wanted to use this opportunity to 'play' with the possibility to present myself as different from his expectations (English) but felt obliged to tell a story that could make sense. The choice to present myself as German was not accidental; It conveyed something from the 'real' in the sense that it was rather based on my ability to prove language skills if I needed to (something that appears in a later dialogue). The fact that 'light' did not react to my answer in German, gave me the impression that I was 'safe' enough to continue building-up the image of 'existenzio' with the choices already made. The provision of information about birthdays is very important as we see in a later dialogue. Although it seems to be a routine discussion it really mattered for 'light' as he expected 'existenzio' to remember his birthday.⁶

existenzio: light, it is not very long since I started visiting the chatrooms....
existenzio: but I cannot find interesting persons like you
existenzio: you know what I mean?
light: I too exist, you are very nice
existenzio: it is so difficult to have nice chat
light: my good luck i find friend like U exist
existenzio: how long are you chatting light?
light: any how nice to chat u i really missed it but i have urgent piece of work i will be write back in 15 to 20 mins
existenzio: thank you, I also believe the same for you
light: bye take care and please wait if possible
existenzio: ok, contact, see you in a while!!!
existenzio: take your time, don't worry

'Existenzio' had to be nice not only as a choice but because 'light' had already – though indirectly – had developed certain expectations about 'existenzio'. Although 'existenzio's' profile was different from my self-presentation, I felt flattered by the fact that the way I chatted with 'light' made a good impression. The repetition of the word 'friend' as well as 'light's' desire to 'see' (in terms of online meetings)

⁶ The dialogue continues with a story by 'light' about birthday celebrations in his country. For ethical reasons I do not provided those extracts that reveal the real origins of the participant.

'existenzio' later, made me believe that 'existenzio' started to matter for 'light', not just as a name, as a pseudonym, or as a sign of an online persona, but also as a representation of an off-line persona. After the information I provided, 'existenzio' started to matter to me as well; the desire expressed by 'light' to meet up later made me realise that no matter whether the information reflected the off-line truth, I only could have interaction with 'light' as 'existenzio', and every information or interaction from now on would make 'existenzio' more a 'living body' and less a pure sign of a participant. 'Light' was back online later on:⁷

light: Hi existen

light: I am back

existenzio: hello!!!

light: Hi

light: where are u

existenzio: helllo!!!!

light: i am searching for u Long ago

existenzio: really? I am online

existenzio: you couldnt find me?

light: I can

light: thats why we are chating again. I need to leave the office for some time. I want to tell you that I will be here tomorrow ok?

existenzio: done. Looking forward to seeing you again.

On the next day, on 23rd September, 'light' as promised sent an instant message inviting me in a private room. Although I was participating in the public room, I did not see him entering the public room, but I accepted his invitation with pleasure. That session was quite problematic; 'light' was sending messages and I responded but he was not able to see my messages. He started using capital letters, and he seemed a bit angry because he thought that I did not pay proper attention to him. Finally he sent me the following message: 'anyway existen, bless you, take care'.⁸ I was a bit worried that 'light' probably had misunderstood me and I did not want to give a false impression. I eventually managed to contact him again and the following dialogue ensued:

existenzio: LIGHT????????

existenzio: CAN YOU SEE ME????

existenzio: YOU WERE ANGRY AND i DON'T KNOW WHY!!!!!!

existenzio: i WAS WRITING TO YOU, BUT IT SEEMS THAT YOU COULD NOT RECEIVE MY MESSAGES!!!!

existenzio: LIGHT, TELL, ME CAN YOU RECEIVE MY MESSAGES NOW???

⁷ 'Light' logged off at 10:52 and he came back sending an instant message and inviting me to a private chat at 11:47.

⁸ That message was retrieved from my records as I was not able to copy and paste the last part of that dialogue. My experience in chatrooms suggests that sometimes sent messages are not received. In that case, according to my experience, it is advisable to log off the room or the Messenger and log on again. This is what I did in that case after 'light' seemed unable to receive my messages.

light: Yes
light: existen
existenzio: light,
existenzio: something happened
light: Nice to see u back
existenzio: you were very angry
existenzio: nice to see you too
light: nothing
light: I am never angry
existenzio: I was writing and writing...can you tell me something?
light: I am as cool as calm breeze
existenzio: good, but i really want to ask something
existenzio: you were writing, I was able to see your messages, i was writing too, but you seemed you did not receive my messages,
light: actually i have sent u many messages but no reply thats why i think that i am disturbing U
existenzio: I was obliged to log off, and then log in again
light: you want to talk to me existen, don't you?
existenzio: no, no light, you are not disturbing me at all. I was writing like crazy,
existenzio: why that happened?
existenzio: I mean it seemed that I had connection, but you didn't receive my messages....
existenzio: also, I could not click on your name any longer
existenzio: sorry for any misunderstanding but you didn't disturb me at all
existenzio: hello???
existenzio: light??
light: Most probably there may be some problem with my Pc
light: Still there is some problem
existenzio: I also have problems, with the connection
existenzio: now it seems to be very slow
existenzio: now, there is the secure anti virus for windows and makes the connection much slower
existenzio: light???
existenzio: hope you can see me
light: Sorry for all this mishap I am still not getting ur messages but hoping that we may connect again
existenzio: ok, I am leaving now, and i will try to reconnect immediately, ok?
existenzio: hope you have seen my message

When 'existenzio' came back online 'light' had disappeared. I started wondering whether the bad connection or technical problems could affect our further communication. I wanted to make clear to 'light' that he did not disturb me at all, and after that dialogue I had the feeling that probably I was unable to reassure him. I was hoping for another opportunity to meet him online in order to tell him that it was a pleasure to chat with him. Next day I found 'light' online and I invited him to a private discussion:⁹

⁹ The following dialogue took place on Wednesday, 24th September 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

esistenza: light can you see me?
light: Hi existen!
esistenza: light, if you can see me please tell me
esistenza: hellooooo
esistenza: light, I suspect you are busy
light: NO
esistenza: don't worry
esistenza: I am preparing my lunch!!!
light: there is some net problem
esistenza: oh, I see, it happens sometimes, it seems that my connection is ok at the moment,
esistenza: don't worry
light: hi again!!!!
esistenza: hello again
lights: actually net problems
esistenza: and what do you do to solve them?
light: I have changed my IP
esistenza: why is that?
light: now its ok
esistenza: I know, I know, silly question
esistenza: but I don't know
light: not a silly question
light: IP means Internet Protocoll address
light: each pc has an IP
esistenza: yes i know
esistenza: and?
light: so checking me
light: ?
esistenza: what are you saying?
light: its raining heavily here
light: existen what are u preparing for lunch
esistenza: here, not, but i think that the winter is very close
esistenza: mmm, light, nothing special, an omelette
light: yes winter is close
light: thats nice i love omellete
esistenza: I am fed up with the food preparation, I like cooking but sometimes I dont want to spend time
esistenza: by the way, I like spanish food
light: thats nice
esistenza: especially paellia
light: you have good taste!!!
light: anyway, we are chatting since long but we dont know each others name
light: whats ur name existen?
esistenza: but I guess, that the restaurants here don't make original Spanish food

esistenza: mmmm,
light: I will send u a recipe what ever u like
esistenza: yes pleaseeeee

light: anyhow whats ur name.
light: ?????????????????????????
existenzio: markus
existenzio: I don't like it at allllll
light: no, it is a nice name
light: but what does it mean?
existenzio: nothing at all
existenzio: original german name
light: ok
existenzio: and yours light???
light: light
light: its in my id
existenzio: light is your first name?
light: yes
existenzio: does it mean anything?
light: Yes
light: it means dream and eternity
existenzio: oh, I see
existenzio: very nice
existenzio: I like these names

That day I was offered the opportunity, through ‘light’s’ questioning, to further enrich ‘existenzio’s’ profile by providing a ‘real’ name. Although ‘light’ seemed to be satisfied with using my pseudonym during our first contacts, after a few dialogues, he seemed to need further details. That made me wonder whether ‘existenzio’s’ profile appeared more complete after the provision of a name, although it was still an assumed name. I have to state that given the information I had already given about ‘existenzio’s’ country of origin, I tried to choose a name accordingly. From that day onwards ‘existenzio’ had a particular, ‘real’ name, which was not always used by ‘light’. There were times in the future when ‘light’ used the name ‘Markus’, and there were other times when he preferred ‘existenzio’. Choosing a name and presenting it as additional information about ‘existenzio’ was a step forward for the online existence of ‘existenzio’. ‘Markus’ from now on was not the representation of ‘existenzio’ but of what had been represented as ‘existenzio’ so far, and it had to be enriched by further details as we will see below. The choice of the name reflected my personal choice which was triggered by ‘light’s’ question. ‘Existenzio’s’ profile became more complete in a dialectical manner, not only for ‘light’ but also for me, given that the information about ‘existenzio’ was provided after ‘light’ requested it.

Our dialogue continued during the following days¹⁰:

existenzio: don't worry light, iam sure everything will go ok with your job. Such things happen everywhere

light: markus, do u mail me

existenzio: what do you mean?

light: do u send me mail

light: ?

existenzio: mail?

existenzio: you mean instant messages, or email?

light: email

light: markus

existenzio: yes,

existenzio: no, I am sending you email, But I will if you want me

light: markus what does it mean yes, no

lightr: yes or no

existenzio: light, I havent sent you an email

light: when

existenzio: I am sending you instant messages, oh come on

light: i still not get it

light: oh yes

existenzio: when I added you in my friends list

existenzio: probably i sent you a message

light: No, I mean email no messages

existenzio: why are you asking ?

light : Just i want to know more abut u

existenzio: aaa that is

existenzio: ok ask me about me

light: thats why

existenzio: I would like to send you an email

light: tell abut ur family

light: thats it

existenzio: I have a sister

existenzio: ok, I will send you an email as well

existenzio: what is your address?

existenzio: I think I know

light: <>@<>

light: please send me on this address

light: ok

existenzio: just a moment to write it down

light: oh thats so nice of U

light: tell urs email

light: i will send u a mail write now

existenzio: <@>

existenzio: aaaa please send me an email.....

light: yes u are telling something abut ur sis

¹⁰ The following extracts are from the dialogue that took place on Thursday, 25th September 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

existenzio: I have an older sister
light: ok
existenzio: very nice
existenzio: very busy
existenzio: very smart
existenzio: i love her
light: thats nice
existenzio: she is the opposite of me
light: is she more smart than U
light: I dont belive it
existenzio: come on dont play with me;....!!!!!!
light: Please i am not playing with u
existenzio: ok, i am just joking
existenzio: so my sister travels around europe because of her work
existenzio: we have a very good relationship
existenzio: we talk a lot about us, our relationships, you know
existenzio: do you have any sisters, brothers?
existenzio: oh, no you are the only one
existenzio: Now i remember
light: u know i am very shy type of guy and not like to chat with anyone
light: I like to chat with u
existenzio: really? me too , light, I totally understand you
light: so how I believe that some one is more smart than u
light: Thats nice
light: we are of same type

A further step forward in the dialogue between 'light' and 'existenzio' was taken as 'light' expressed his wish to receive emails from 'Markus'. The step from synchronous to asynchronous type of communication, however, was not taken for the first time but after we had already exchanged messages and more personal information. Examining the dialogues in retrospect, I could argue that probably it is not accidental that this step was taken on the same day that 'light' asked me about my 'real' name. Perhaps 'light' felt closer to 'existenzio' after learning about his name. I did not understand the importance of the exchange of emails between 'light' and 'existenzio', until I received the first email by 'light', sent to 'existenzio', in which he called me 'Markus'. I was the first who sent an email; the details will be described later. What struck me in that particular dialogue, was the fact that 'light' was taking our communication very seriously, and he did not seem to 'play' with me, something that made feel that I needed to be very careful and cautious with 'light' so as to not disappoint him. It crossed my mind how it would be to reveal the truth to 'light' and what his reactions would be, but such a thought never lasted for more than a few seconds, given that I had a certain feeling that I would disappoint 'light'. I could not understand on which basis he regarded 'us' as of the same type, but this was a further indication that he had developed certain expectations about me as 'existenzio' or 'Markus'.

existenzio: I started not long ago to chat with people
light: ok
existenzio: my girlfriend hates me because she doesnt like it at all

light: tell her she will chat with me once
existenzio: ha ha ha
existenzio: she is nice, but she is very bored of talking on the net
light: i will talk to her about u
existenzio: how long are you talking in chatrooms light?
light: whats her name
existenzio: my sisters?
light: from morning 9 to evening 6 my office timing
existenzio: or my girlfriend's?
light: not ur g
light: girlfriend
existenzio: Suzanna
light: Suzanna
light: nice name
existenzio: yes
existenzio: she is very nice,
existenzio: come on light, are you chatting when you are working?
light: u are also nice thats why
existenzio: thank you my friend
light: No, only when i am free
existenzio: its very nice to talk to someone who is polite like you
existenzio: there is so crap in the chatrooms
light: this time for example i dont have much work
existenzio: they are impolite
existenzio: i see
light: are u still in chat room
existenzio: me ? no
existenzio: I visited one earlier about 1 hour ago
existenzio: but no interest
existenzio: are you in a chatroom?
light: no
light: noway
existenzio: why not?
light: I was confused in chatroom today
existenzio: why?
light: everybody chatting with everyone
light: so hochpoch
existenzio: yes, this is true
existenzio: but I cannot believe that there are not interesting people too
light: yes, there are some
light: thats why we met
existenzio: what I hate is when somebody know somebody else, they use their own code and they don't talk to anyone else!
existenzio: yes, light
light: yes
existenzio: light, do you think that you can make real friends in the chatrooms?
light: dont know exactly
light: but im trying
existenzio: do you have any friends ?
light: yes

esistenza: people you met on the net, but you continued to have contact?
light: yes markus
light: many
esistenza: really? how many? I am impressed, because I never thought that you can make real friends online
esistenza: probably i am convinced by suzanna
light: why u think so
esistenza: look, i think that its very difficult to make friends nowadays, probably online you may find some friends, but you cannot see them!!!
esistenza: do you know what I mean? you cant go out for dinner together!
light: so what
light: u cant see them so what? u can chat with them
esistenza: yes, you are right, I agree with you, but i havent met anyone
light: u have an opportunity to chat with them
esistenza: you are the first person i feel very comfortable with,
light: that nice of U, same with me
light: Now i am going, rain stopped and its also closing time of my office
light: Bye markus
esistenza: ok, light
light: C u tomorrow
esistenza: take care
esistenza: yes, see you tomorrow!
light: take care of u and ur gf
esistenza: bye light
light: bye my friend, take care

I had to invent the story of my girlfriend in order to make my story more ‘real’. I added that parameter as an additional factor to make ‘Markus’s’ profile more complete, and surprisingly ‘light’ seemed to remember everything about our conversations and he always mentioned my ‘girlfriend’ in his emails that follow. In the following example, based on ‘light’s’ question, I tried to add further details to my relationship with my ‘girlfriend’, even by producing imaginary fights with her. For example, such an invented fight was proposed in an indirect way by ‘light’; his question seemed to express his expectations of what such a relationship would be like, therefore once more my answers were following his questions.¹¹

light: Hi markus!
esistenza: hi!!!
esistenza: How are you?
light: how are U
light: fine thank U
light: what abut U
esistenza: so and so
esistenza: I don't know but today I am not in a good mood
light: why markus anything happened with your girlfriend?
light: ????????????????????

¹¹ The following dialogue took place on Friday, 26th September 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

esistenza:
esistenza: had a fight with my girlfriend
esistenza: such things happen sometimes
light: oh no
light: cool down
esistenza: ok
esistenza: I haven't sent you the email yet
esistenza: sorry for that
light: May i know what is topic of dispute
esistenza: nothing special
esistenza: you know, women are very strange sometimes
light: ok daily routine
light: lol
light: yes
light: their is saying in Spain
esistenza: what about you?
esistenza: really ? what do they say in Spain?
light: that a man cant get the exact thinking of women heart it is as deep as sea
esistenza: very good , I must say!
esistenza: thanks for that, I will use it when necessary!
esistenza: do you have a girlfriend light?
light: no exist, not now
esistenza: good for you my friend
esistenza: you are very young, so take your time

I did not only present myself as of different gender, but I had to present my online gender as expressing general understandings of the opposite sex!

light: hi exist
esistenza: hello !!!
esistenza: what happened?
esistenza: I lost you!
light: Internet problem
light: connection
light: problem
esistenza: ah, did you hear about the chatrooms?
light which type of chatrooms
esistenza: msn chatrooms
light: oh, yes. Why are they doing that?
esistenza: microsoft will close them all outside US, Canada, and Japan
light: yesterday in news i hear that microsoft is going to close
esistenza: yes, thats right!
esistenza: have you ever used these msn chatrooms?
light: yes of course
light: we were talking about your GF
esistenza: what?
light: I dont have any girlfriend now
esistenza: my girlfriend?
light: yes

existenzio: just a moment light, she just called me.....

light: please i wanna to talk with her

light: Please

This was the first time that my 'reality' was challenged in that 'light' wanted to interact with my imagined 'reality'. Until then this imagined offline reality seemed to make good sense, but I became very worried when 'light' insisted that he wanted to talk to my 'girlfriend'. I just hoped that he would not remember later on. Although I was certain that I could avoid such an event, I continued to worry what to tell and how to avoid it.

existenzio: I am with you in a moment light

light: ok

existenzio: here I am

existenzio: light, do you want to talk to her?

light: yes

existenzio: why? tell me

light: because she will like me. I'll talk to her about you, how good person you are

existenzio: do you want to talk to her about me?

light: she is very good girl

existenzio: and how do you know that she is a good girl?

light: because she is friend of Ur

light: isn't?

existenzio: oh, thank you, but she doesn't like chat

existenzio: I know that,

light: ok no probs

existenzio: I tried to explain to her that chat is very nice because you may find some friends there, and she was laughing

existenzio: she was very happy yesterday when she heard the news about MSN chatrooms

light: REALLY?

existenzio: she told me that all the chatrooms will close

light: Ha Ha

existenzio: she doesn't know anything about this matter, man

existenzio: personally i dont think that the chatrooms will close

light: but tell her yahoo is with Us Yahoo is never closing¹²

¹² During the last week of September and the first week of October, many chatters were discussing Microsoft's decision to close the free unmoderated chatrooms in several countries including the UK. For further information on this issue see *BBC News* at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology> on 24th September 2003 and 14th October 2003. In chronological order see also comments and reports appearing in the following newspapers: *Independent*, 'Microsoft closes chatrooms to curb paedophile threat', 24/09/2003; *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 'Microsoft stellt Chat-Räume ein', 25/09/2003; *Financial Times*, 'Rivals condemn Microsoft closure', 25/09/2003; *The Economist*, 'Online chatrooms, Shut up. What is the real reason Microsoft is planning to close its free chatrooms', 27/09/2003 and *Financial Times* of 27/09/2003, 'Chat-up lines? The bottom line is that talk is too cheap'.

This was the first time that the pronoun 'us' was used by 'light' as an expression of some kind of unity between 'light' and 'esistenza'. 'Us' represented 'light' and 'esistenza' for 'light'. At that moment, 'esistenza' – no matter whether 'esistenza' really existed – was connected with 'light' in an 'Us'. As for my feelings, I could only feel connected with 'light' as 'esistenza', as we were spending time together. A kind of a relaxed unity had already developed, which is not easily to be explained in retrospect, but it was felt by me every time I was communicating as 'esistenza'.

esistenza: she thinks that she knows everything

light: God of all chat lovers

light: exist?

esistenza: yes light?

light: mostly girls think that they know every thing even they didnt know anything about it

esistenza: yes, this is true

esistenza: anyway

light: but Girls are Innocent

esistenza: you mean innocent?

Light: So far my opinion is concerned

light: oh sorry yes

light: chatting with some one else also

light: U know there is a problem with my PC that I can open more than one window thats why i am chatting with U only

light: exist?????????????????

light: where are U

esistenza: yes, here I am

esistenza: I am sure that your pc is far better than mine

esistenza: I have problems with my pc very often

light: why

light: ??????????

esistenza: light

light: ok

esistenza: I don't know but sometimes the connection is very very slow

light: which u supposed to by

light: buy

light: thats not the problem of Pc

light: thats ur connection problem

esistenza: ah, you mean that it may be a connection problem

esistenza: ah yes

light: yes

esistenza: but, even when I am not connected

esistenza: the pc is very slow

light: U have which version of Windows

esistenza: probably today its not my day....

esistenza: 2000

esistenza: what about you?

light: never say this

light: that today is not urs

light: its is of urs
light: just keep on going
esistenzaio: you know something light?
light: going!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
light: what
esistenzaio: how old are you? 30?
light: ?
esistenzaio: 30?
light: yest
esistenzaio: you seem to be very mature, my friend
light: yes
light: 30
esistenzaio: it is very good you have positive thinking
light: yes i have
light: u know why
esistenzaio: really, you sound much older
esistenzaio: why?
light: Because I take everything very lightly except my friends
light: I dont have any GF
esistenzaio: you mean that you take your friends very seriously?
light: women belong to another category
light: yes
esistenzaio: so, you have time to spend with your friends
light: I always want to make my friends happy
light: Not much but I make it
esistenzaio: light, do you consider me as a friend?
light: obviously u are my friend
esistenzaio: I was chatting one day with someone , and he told me that he cannot trust anyone in the chatroom because he cannot see anyone
esistenzaio: I am wondering
light: because if i dont consider U as my friend I never chat with U like this
esistenzaio: is it so important to be able to see anyone in order to make him friend?
light: No light, I think exactly the same
light: No wonder world is full of all type of peoples
light: he is may be one of them
light: "IF U ARE GOOD EVERYTHING IS GOOD IF U ARE BAD THAT EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE BAD"
esistenzaio: yes, thats true
light: I am just leaving my bench for 1 or 2 minutes i will be back in few ...
esistenzaio: I know that you are spending time in chatrooms for example. Do you feel the same sympathy for everyone there?
esistenzaio: ah, ok, light, take your time
light: this is not sympathy exist
esistenzaio: what is it?
light: this is what i feel
esistenzaio: ok, dont think of me, now
light: why?????????????
esistenzaio: just tell me what you believe after having such an experience
esistenzaio: I mean, do you have other friends, you chatting with?

esistenza: apart from me
light: yes
light: i have
esistenza: and what do you feel for them?
light: there are three friends of mine
esistenza: are they your friends?
light: out of them one is my friend
light: he is in US
esistenza: but you didnt meet him in the chatroom?
light: in chatroom yes, and i like to chat with him
light: There is another more friend whom i met in chat room
esistenza: do you have a good contact with him? for a long time?
Light : he is good friend of mine he send me mail also we met on 10 sept
esistenza: really? is he from Spain?
light: NO
light: he is from china
esistenza: and how did you manage to meet up?
light: God knows whether we meet or not but we are still friends
light: everything i leave on god
esistenza: aaaaa, you mean you met each other on 10 september in the chatroom?
light: yes
esistenza: aaaa, now I understand
light: oh I think i have cleared it
esistenza: its so difficult to find someone to communicate with
light: anyhow
light: we also met in chat room so, you see it is not so difficult
esistenza: exactly
light: U dont like to chat with me
esistenza: if the chatroom didnt exist, I wouldnt have met you
light: ??????????????????/
esistenza: what?
light: yes
esistenza: I dont like to chat with you?
esistenza: why are you saying that light?
esistenza: what am I doing now?
esistenza: light?
light: Because what u said that why I am wondering why they want to close the chatrooms
light: sorry if u mind it
light: please

esistenza: no, no, I dont mean that I want to go to chatrooms all the time
esistenza: i just feel that the people have the opportunity there to make friends
light: exactly
light: !!!!!!!11
esistenza: ok, there may exist some dangers for children etc, but the fact that we met online and we are having now such a good chat
esistenza: is due to the chatrooms
esistenza: dont you agree with that?
esistenza: light?

light: No
existenzio: why not?
light: because for childrens it is a fun not a danger
light: In Spain it is very popular
existenzio: ah you mean that even the children must use the chatrooms
light: mostly children dont know about it
existenzio: the internet in general or the chatrooms particularly?
existenzio: about the internet you mean
light: anyhow forget it all
light: tell why u not online yesterday afternoon

I realised after the above question that 'existenzio' mattered to 'light'. I was impressed by the fact that 'light' noticed my absence and was quite flattered by the fact that 'existenzio's' absence could be noticed! 'Existenzio' – I started to feel – existed for 'light', and could be either present or absent. But of course, according to the above question, according to 'light', 'existenzio' was not online, because he was off-line. In essence, 'existenzio' was, either online or offline. The absence of 'existenzio's' online presentation meant for 'light' automatically the presence of 'existenzio's' off-line presentation. When I was thinking why 'existenzio' was absent, I tried to remember the actual reason that kept me off-line that afternoon and I realised that the above question could have been better expressed by 'light' as: why weren't you yesterday afternoon?

existenzio: aaaaa yesterday
existenzio: sorry for that light
existenzio: I was out in the afternoon
existenzio: I had a lot of work to do
light: today u are free
existenzio: Actually I am very glad you missed me because I missed you too
light: yes
existenzio: today, I have to work from home, but i will be at home, the same time tomorrow
light: because I can chat very long but my circle is very small
existenzio: I am very glad you noticed that I didnt chat yesterday
existenzio: your circle?
existenzio: you mean your friends?
light: means my friend circle
light: yes
existenzio: the friends you chat with?
existenzio: but light, tell me something, how many hours are you chatting every day?
light: actually i am online everyday
existenzio: really? for how many hours? I am impressed now
light: but chat only when i find friends in messenger
existenzio: so, you dont go to chatrooms at all,
light: most probable from morning 9 to evening 6 or 6:30 pm
existenzio: I go to chatrooms sometimes, but there is no much interest
light: until you find someone interesting

light: but some time when i am totally free
light: us I also told u that i am working in a development office
light: having a PC with me
light: so i am chatting from my office

existenzio: yes, i know that, and you also told me that you have your connection on when you are working
existenzio: but you don't have a problem with that?
light: exactly!!!!!!!1
existenzio: I mean what about your supervisors?
existenzio: Do they agree with that?
light: actually i am In charge here
light: everyone is under my belt
existenzio: how long have you been working light?
light: no one say anything to me
light: for the last 4 year
existenzio: after finishing school?
light: later
existenzio: did you think to go to the university?
light: I have completed all my studies

(general discussion on educational system followed)

light: U know there is a course of German language starting just near my office from 10th of Oct
light: I am supposed to join it. Tell me something in German
existenzio: like what?

As mentioned earlier, I chose 'existenzio' to be German because I know the language to some extent. If someone wanted to 'test' my profile by asking me to write sentences in German, I would normally be able to do this, to 'pass' the test. In this case, I was not certain whether 'light' really wanted to make use of my language skills, or whether he wanted to test me. It crossed my mind that it was not inconceivable that 'light' knew German, and that he just wanted to find out whether I was telling the truth. But for no specific reason, I did not think that this was the case. 'Light' seemed to be spontaneous so far and I think that he could have 'tested' 'existenzio' much earlier if he had wanted to.

light: please tell me
existenzio: yes, it would be good for your job as well to learn german
existenzio: yes? I am listening to you...
light: tell me How we say I LOVE U. The leader of the course will be really cute.....if you know what I mean
light: I have hold my pen and paper please write
existenzio: ich liebe Dich
light: Ich = I
light: Liebe = Love
existenzio: liebe = love

light: exist
light: how are U today
esistenza: finally I managed to talk to you!!!
esistenza: I am ok, I am trying
light: wont u belive that i am missing u from last few day and u are not online for a couple of days too!
light: am i right?
esistenza: yes, I know, I werent online
esistenza: sorry for that
esistenza: i wasnt in london
light: how is ur life going on?
esistenza: thats why
light: ok
esistenza: but now i am back
esistenza: very very tired
light: enjoiing somewhere or work tour
esistenza: no, for work purposes
esistenza: it was not so nice,
esistenza: I had a cold and couldnt enjoy it
esistenza: how about you? how are you?
esistenza: hope you can still see me, I have problems with the conneciton
esistenza: connection
esistenza: are you under pressure at work?
light: Not that much
esistenza: I have sent you an email sinev last week, did you receive it?
light: actually two days back I have had a medicene which reacts thats why

light: No I didnt get ur mail
esistenza: ah I see, try to eat well and drink orangejuice
esistenza: look at this
light: ok
esistenza: <@>
esistenza: is that your email? because my yahoo was unable to deliver message to this address...is this yours?
light: yes
esistenza: are you sure? and why I cant send you the email?
esistenza: do you probably have a yahoo email?
esistenza: are you still there?
esistenza: light???
light: yes it is my email
light: <>
light: yes i have
light: u may send email at <>hotmail.com or <> yahoo.com
light: yes
esistenza: just a moment to write it down
esistenza: ok, I will send you an email to these addresses to check it
light: remember that my name is <Light> but email is <@>
esistenza: yes, yes don't worry
light: I will wait for ur mail
esistenza: ok!

light: anyhow how is ur GF
existenzio: aaaa, my girlfriend is ok, very busy
light: yes
existenzio: she is out now
existenzio: do you think that we will lose our contact?
existenzio: how can they do such a thing?
light: oh no!
light: but we have email ids of each other so dont worry

It seems that the asynchronous communication is what makes ‘light’ believe that we cannot lose contact. He did not hesitate to give me an alternative email address, and I gave him mine (actually it was a particular email address I had created for research reasons). According to the following extract, ‘light’ seemed to believe in a connection that had been created between him and ‘existenzio’, and he explicitly said so. Even after the exchange of emails – which could mean that our communication was possibly becoming more stable – I did not feel that it was ‘friendship’ that connected ‘existenzio’ and ‘light’. I felt very comfortable being and communicating with ‘light’ and I was happy every time I found him online, but I never expressed strong feelings about friendship as he did.

light: No please
light: never
existenzio: yes, thats why I want to send you email at the above addresses, to check that they work
existenzio: if the people are so crazy and shut down our connection.....i don't think so
light: We have our ids
light: u know I also have space on net
light: i can make my website too
light: so we cant loose each other
existenzio: I worry after what I heard about microsoft
light: no exist if we are real friends then nobody can do anything
existenzio: yes, you are right

‘Light’ was not online – at least as ‘light’ – until 13th October. I was sending him instant messages through Messenger,¹⁴ I was asking him about his professional life, as I was already aware of some details. But our next interaction took place only days later.¹⁵

existenzio: anyway, tell me about you. what did you do during the weekend.
existenzio: did you have fun?
light: am i disturbing U?
light: No
existenzio: no, what are you saying? I want to talk to you

¹⁴ Instant messages that appear on the screen everytime someone logs into Messenger.

¹⁵ The following dialogue took place on Monday, 13th October 2003 (2nd session, Messenger).

light: why u didnt mail me
existenzio: I have emailed you, and I have sent you instant messages as well.
existenzio: i used your 2nd email address.
light: yes i have got that message but not email
light: which one if u remembered
existenzio: I sent you email, and I expected yours
existenzio: I used the yahoo email
light: actually i am a bad Initiative thats why i didnt mail U
existenzio: why don't you email me at : <@>
light: But i didnt get it
existenzio: and I will reply to the address you will use
existenzio: either your yahoo or your hotmail
existenzio: ok
light: exist
light: no mail
light: from U
existenzio: I am wondering, I sent you an email,
existenzio: look, why dont you send me an email and I will reply, I don't know
what the problem is...
light: My bad luck
light: I will send
existenzio: send me an email today and i will reply,
existenzio: ok
light: ok
existenzio: and tomorrow, if you havent received my reply send me an instant
message
existenzio: good
existenzio: so, what else?
existenzio: how was your weekend?
light: nothing
light: fine
light: U are missing something
light: ???/?
existenzio: what am I missing?
light: think
existenzio: mmm, let me think
light: Please !!!!!!!!!!!
existenzio: ohhhhhh
light: exist?????????
existenzio: yesssssss
existenzio: HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!
existenzio: A!!
light: Thank U

This was one of the finest moments in my connection with 'light'. Firstly, I felt happy that I – although a bit late – remembered his birthday. Recalling such information was clearly very important to him. Secondly I was surprised that I remembered 'light's' birthdays. When 'light' informed that 'I was missing something', I started wondering and felt insecure. But, when I remembered his

I could not understand what was happening. It was obvious that a connection problem did not allow the interaction between ‘light’ and ‘existenzio’ to continue. But his sentence about the virus surprised me. ‘Light’ disappeared and I started wondering what he was referring to in his last sentence. I was very disappointed because he disappeared suddenly and I did not have the time to explain that I did not do anything wrong deliberately. I remembered that the computer I was using had been infected by a virus days ago. I did not want such an unfortunate event to affect my connection with ‘light’. I sent him an email expressing my wishes for his birthday and asking him what he meant by his last sentence.¹⁶ It was the first time that I expected his email in order to find out what he really thought of me. And what he really thought of me was simply what he thought of ‘existenzio’. In no case did I want him to start thinking negatively about ‘existenzio’. Later in that day, I saw ‘light’ appearing online.¹⁷

existenzio: light???

light: Hi

existenzio: what happened earlier?

existenzio: first of all did you receive my email?

light: light has gone to Boss, I am his friend Andy

existenzio: nice to meet you

light: same here

existenzio: how did you know my name?

existenzio: how did you manage to send me an invitation for adding me in your friends'list?

This contact came from nowhere! I was happy when I found ‘light’ online because I thought I would have the chance to ask him about the virus, but under the name ‘light’ someone else appeared. The fact as such did not make sense to me at all. ‘Andy’ appeared as a friend of ‘light’ and he sent me invitation in order to accept to become one of his ‘friends’ in his Friends List. I could not understand anything at all: how could ‘Andy’ use ‘light’s’ messenger? Was really ‘Andy’ a friend of ‘light’? Since the whole situation did not make sense at all, I found myself being detached from ‘existenzio’ and trying to think that probably ‘light’ played the same game as I did. Or perhaps ‘light’ was playing with his identity in order to test ‘existenzio’. In retrospect I regret that I did not accept ‘Andy’s’ invitation. It could have been a way to find out more about the meaning of the situation. But, I chose not to accept the invitation because I, as ‘existenzio’, firstly did not want to become a ‘friend’ of someone I had not previous contact with, and secondly, I did not know whether it was just a game by ‘light’ in order to check if ‘existenzio’ very easily accepts invitations and thus becomes ‘friend’ with any participant. I was afraid that this would have made my connection with ‘light’ less special, at a time when we had achieved a fairly regular form of interaction. When later that day I checked my messages I found that ‘light’ had sent me an email thanking me for my wishes, asking about my girlfriend – which had already started to be a point of reference for ‘existenzio’ – and explaining that he was a bit aggressive, because every instant message I was sending to him was accompanied by a warning that it was conveying a certain virus.¹⁸ I felt more relaxed after his email, but I continued wondering about the interaction with ‘Andy’.

¹⁶ Email to ‘light’ on Monday, 13th October 2003.

¹⁷ The following discussion took place on Monday, 13th October 2003 (2nd Session, Messenger).

¹⁸ Email by ‘light’ found on 14th October 2003.

Next day 'existenzio' and 'light' met again:¹⁹

light: exist

light: Hi

existenzio: Hellooo

light: How ar U today

existenzio: how are you?

existenzio: I am fine,

lightr: fine

existenzio: I received your email and I replied

light: really i didnt checked

existenzio: I asked you also to tell me if you still receive virus alerts

light: this time its not

light: but yesterday

existenzio: good

existenzio: yes?

light: with everymessage there is virus alert

light: anyhow how is ur GF

existenzio: really?

existenzio: you mean with every message I sent in messenger?

light: yes

existenzio: and why didn't you tell me anything?

existenzio: I didn't know what was going on

existenzio: and I received a message from you.....hope i get a virus as well, or something like this

light: actually i am trying to get rid of that virus

existenzio: do you mean that your system is being infected?

light: No please dont think so

light: leave it

light: tell how is ur going on????

existenzio: sorry if I caused something, but had no idea at all

existenzio: I am fine, still working on that paper

light: I dosent mean that u are responsible for all that

existenzio: how about you, how did you celebrate yesterday?

light: please dont think about it.

existenzio: its ok

existenzio: tell me about yesterday, did you do something special?

existenzio: or you were tired after the work?

light: wont u belive yesterday i am in office till evening 8 then went to bed at 8:30

nothing i did

light: I didnt drink

existenzio: really? yes, I know, it happens when you work

existenzio: that's ok, don't worry, you will find another day to celebrate

light oh so nice of u

¹⁹ The following discussion took place on Tuesday, 14th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger)

light: u know today also i have to work till 8
existenzio: oh, god
light: or so
light: but no probs.....

Only two days later I found the chance to ask him about his friend ‘Andy’:²⁰

light: Hi
existenzio: hello!
light: Good evening exist.
light: How are U today?
existenzio: helloo light!
existenzio: I am just fine!
existenzio: you?
light: what are u doing now?
existenzio: working?
light: have u completed ur papers
existenzio: I am writing a letter
existenzio: I am writing this letter to the partner...
existenzio: I will see him tomorrow
existenzio: or on Friday, I am expecting his call
light: oh!
light: this letter is in contact with ur working partner
existenzio: no,
light: or ur going to join new job
existenzio: the partner is a partner of the firm I cooperate
existenzio: no
light: oh!
existenzio: I am doing something like consultancy for a firm
light: oh!
light: u are a consultant
existenzio: mmmm, nope exactly, sort of
existenzio: I have studied law
light: oh!
existenzio: I was working as solicitor
light: nice

existenzio: you know
existenzio: nothing is easy in the market
existenzio: and the competition is very high
light: when ever u getting pain that means u are gaining something
light: yes
existenzio: thats true, I agree
existenzio: how is your friend?
light: u know these days i am also working hard
light: which one?
existenzio: your friend I met 3 days ago!

²⁰ The following discussion took place on Thursday, 16th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

light: oh
light: he is fine
existenzio: what is his name?
light: andy
existenzio: aha,
existenzio: I was impressed
light: u like to chat with him
existenzio: because, he started to talk under your name!!!
light: ?????
existenzio: isn't that strange?
light: yes
light: actually he is not my friend
light: he is just my office mate
existenzio: what did he tell you?
existenzio: I am just curious
light: he didnt say anything to me
existenzio: I cant understand , how he used your pc and started to talk in 'your' messenger....
light: but I catch him using my ID
existenzio: and what are you doing?
existenzio: a moment to close the window....
existenzio: ok, back
light: actually I have just left my PC for a while thats why
existenzio: I mean, this is very strange
existenzio: oh, I see
existenzio: did he tell you that he sent me an invitation?
light: NO
existenzio: not only 1
existenzio: more than 1
light: he thinks u are a girl
light: and he is a big womaniser
existenzio: I found it very strange, you know very impolite, to send a message to someone without knowing him
existenzio: anyway, I wouldnt have a problem to accept his invitation...
existenzio: helloooooo????
light: yes
existenzio: can you wait for a moment
light: yes please

This exchange between ‘existenzio’ and ‘light’ came as a surprise to me. I could not know what was ‘real’, what ‘light’ was thinking of, and whether the whole story was just invented by ‘light’ in the same way that I had invented ‘existenzio’. Did ‘light’ think that ‘existenzio’ was a woman and try to find ways to discover the truth? Or did ‘Andy’ really exist and ‘light’ was truthful? I was not able to find an answer. However, I did not want to press on ‘light’ for an answer because I was worried that it would make him question my identity. Therefore the above dialogue did not reveal anything more in terms of my questions. Our interaction continued:²¹

²¹ The following dialogue took place on Friday, 17th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

light: Hi
light: how are U today
existenzio: hello there!
existenzio: I am fine!
existenzio: how are you?
light: fine
existenzio: yesterday
existenzio: you left and
light: sorry yesterday there was a power cut thats why
existenzio: I wondered where you went...
light: I left without Informing U, sorry
existenzio: yes
light: anyhow what are u doing today?
existenzio: thats why I am asking
light: exist
light: are U busy
existenzio: I did not know, thats why
existenzio: how are you today ?
light: thats why i have left
light: exist
existenzio: hello?
light: yes
existenzio: can you wait for a moment?
existenzio: here I am
light: yes
existenzio: ok, I am back
existenzio: I answered my mobile
existenzio: so, how is your friend today?
light: how is ur GF
light: fine
existenzio: Suzanna was on the phone
existenzio: she is fine
existenzio: so, let me ask you something
light: yes please
existenzio: I hope you didn't dissappoint that I didn't accept your friend's invitation
light: No
light: because he is not my friend
existenzio: you have to be very careful
existenzio: don't trust anyone who makes use of your contacts
existenzio: in general, not only in messenger
light: thanks u are very kind
light: actually i trust peoples very easily
existenzio: but I am sure you know him better,
light: I know him
light: I told u that he thinks that U are girl thats why he is intrested in talking with u
existenzio: i think it would be better
existenzio: If I had accepted him.....

esistenzaio: that would be very funny
light: Ha Ha Ha
esistenzaio: So, which are your plans for tonight?
light: No thing special
light: I have to stay at my office up to 8 Pm
esistenzaio: are you staying home?
light: No exist
light: I am in my office
esistenzaio: i mean after the office
esistenzaio: going home, have dinner, ect
light: Yes
esistenzaio: you can see a movie
light: yes
light: yes but at home
esistenzaio: it is very relaxing especially at the end of a tiring week

(further discussion about plans for the weekend, films, dinners etc.)

light: actually there is function at my friend home I have to go there
esistenzaio: I mean are you going out with friends?
esistenzaio: function?
light: on saturday
light: small party type
esistenzaio: nice
light: not exactly party
light: and on sunday
light: I have to go for a seminar
esistenzaio: music, dance etc?
light: yes

Our interactions continued in the same mode. I never asked him again about ‘Andy’, because ‘light’ seemed to have forgotten that someone else had been using his online profile. Our regular interactions continued until 26th October. Throughout this time ‘light’ continued to ask me questions about my girlfriend and my professional life. As I needed to bring the study to an end, I tried to prepare him for my forthcoming disappearance by telling him that I needed to travel for some time and that I was hoping not to lose contact with him:²²

light: Hi
esistenzaio: hello!!
light: How are U today?
esistenzaio: I am fine!
esistenzaio: its raining here
light: Oh its cool here
esistenzaio: lucky you

²² The following dialogue took place on Sunday, 26th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

light: not so
existenzio: is everythink ok?
light: yes
existenzio: did you have a good weekend?
light: yes, very
light: but quite sleepy
existenzio: good for you
existenzio: hello?
existenzio: hello light?
existenzio: busy?
light: no I'm ok, tell me did you find a new job?
existenzio: oh, yes, I have some news
light: tell me markus...
existenzio: well, I'm about to leave, I don't know exactly when. I will do something but I need to travel around Europe for a while....
light: but you come again?
existenzio: certainly
light: don't worry, we have our Ids

I felt uneasy about breaking off my contact with 'light' because I worried that I would disappoint him. I did not find him again online until the beginning of November but to my surprise I received an email from him on 16th November.²³

```
<Hi Markus  
How are you? hoping that u may find this mail in stunning position.
```

```
Markus,  
its so long to see you on net are you busy? or any other problem.  
How is your life going on? how is ur GF? whats going on?  
I dont have much to write but I missed you!  
Anyhow if you are free then mail me back if possible  
Blessing !  
Light  
Hope to C U Soon  
Bye>
```

I responded on the same day and although I asked him to meet up on the Net next day, I did not find him online.²⁴ But he sent me again an email about ten days later promising that he will be online in case that I had time to meet up.²⁵ The months passed without any contact at all between 'existenzio' and 'light'. I did not receive a message regarding my online birthday, and I found myself wondering whether 'existenzio' still mattered for 'light'. But it was on 14th February 2004 that I discovered a message from 'light':

light: Happy Valentine day Markus!!!! Take care friend!

²³ Email from 'light' of 16th November 2003.

²⁴ My email to 'light' of 18th November 2003.

²⁵ Email from 'light' of 26th November 2003.


As time had passed since our last contact I received the above message with great pleasure. 'Existenzio' was still present for 'light', and he became again present for me after I received that message. I responded back asking to meet up but he did not reply until 20th February 2004 again with message:

light: hi pls to C U, I am online daily u can chat with me anytime

I was regularly checking whether 'light' was online and I found him on 16th March 2004. We had a very friendly interaction, talking about jobs. He asked me about my girlfriend and he remembered details about my career. He used this opportunity to tell more about himself, in particular he talked about a family problem that seemed to preoccupy him.²⁶ 'Existenzio' offered his piece of advice, as an old friend, being considerably flattered by the fact that 'light' remembered details of 'existenzio's' persona. This was the last contact with 'light'.

4.2. 'EXISTENZIO' AND 'MARIA'

The first interaction between 'existenzio' and 'maria' took place on September 23, 2003. 'Maria' did not reveal her name from the start of our encounter but was using the pseudonym 'spring' instead.²⁷ We will later see how the transition from pseudonyms to 'real' names took place. When I first met 'maria', I had already spent considerable time in the chatroom before a more structured dialogue unfolded.²⁸ 'Spring' and 'night' were my main contacts during that session:

existenzio:  anybody out there
pankar joined the room.
andreas left the room.
creature joined the room.
colla left the room.
colla joined the room.
bruce is back
monster joined the room.
blood knows that the truth is out there
creature: hi all.... 
existenzio: hi creature
creature: hi exis...
anna left the room.
smokky joined the room.
heart joined the room.
spring joined the room.
existenzio: how are you?
panker left the room.
spring: hi
spring: room

²⁶ For ethical reasons I do not provide extracts of that dialogue.

²⁷ As before, for ethical reasons, both pseudonym and 'real' name have been changed.

²⁸ Tuesday, 23rd September 2003 ('Friends room' - Lobby 1-1st session).

existenzio: hi spring
general joined the room.
creature: I am fine..u ?

spring: hi there
villar joined the room.

spring: how are u
glass joined the room.

glass: hi

spring: hi creature

spring: hi glass

creature: asl pls..?

glass: hi spring

creature: hi spring
hazzy joined the room.

existenzio: fine spring

creature: iam fine..u ?

spring: how are u all
smash left the room.

spring: so where are all of u from

spring: i am from italy

spring: u glass

spring: u creature

creature: iam from Indonesia...have u ever been to jakarta spring ..?

glass: California

spring: u existenzio

monster left the room.

glass: U

existenzio: uk

spring: nope not to jakarta

spring: italy

existenzio: I'm not english though

creature: how old r you all..???

sweety joined the room.

sinn left the room.

spring: then where are u originally from

spring: existenzio

existenzio: german

When 'spring' entered the room, I responded to her greeting immediately, but initially she did not seem to be exclusively interested in 'existenzio'. 'Glass', 'creature', 'spring' and 'existenzio' got engaged in the public conversation, and it seemed to me that 'spring' had the leading role. 'Spring's' questions about place and location were not only addressed to 'existenzio' but to all aforementioned participants. Just after she posed the question 'where are you all from?', she revealed her own location. I took this immediate revelation of her location as a sign of honesty on her behalf. Although, I did not want to respond to her question immediately, she seemed to have a degree of

control as the ‘leader’ of the dialogue, and she addressed the same question to every chatter present in this interaction individually by using our nicknames. There was something systematic and thorough about the way in which she engaged everyone in this conversation. My answer about my location was based upon three factors: firstly, ‘existenzio’s’ self-presentation had already developed – and to some extent ‘publicly’ – in the encounter I described in 4.1. Therefore it was easier for me to present myself in the same way, given that the dialogue with ‘spring’ was taking place in the same chatroom where I had met ‘light’. Secondly, ‘glass’ in this dialogue presented himself as coming from California, an information that – if it was ‘real’— could not make me equally ‘competitive’ in this dialogue in terms of the English language. And thirdly, I felt it was safer and more convenient once more to present partly the truth in case that questions would follow about specific features of my location. In order to skip a few steps of introduction, I made it clear from the start that ‘existenzio’, though living in the UK, was not English. For the time being I did not intend to further elaborate on my origins but ‘spring’s’ question made it necessary to add this detail to ‘existenzio’s’ profile. I had the impression in that initial contact with ‘spring’ that ‘spring’ was very attentive given that she seemed able to control the interactions in the public room by addressing questions to each chatter individually. Therefore, I felt that I needed to be just as spontaneous so that ‘spring’ would not question the information I provided about ‘existenzio’.

night joined the room.

spring: iam 32

night: hi roooommm

eyes left the room.

spring: hi night

existenzio: hi night

azel: yes john you can pm me

creature: iam 31

spring: okay guys how old are u

creature: how about you exis ??

vanty joined the room.

spring: whose male / female

night: hi there

existenzio: 27

night: whats existenzio???

spring: i am a female

sweety left the room.

sweety joined the room.

arak left the room.

spring: that his age night

ran left the room.

existenzio: hi night, I am fine trying to have some chat

night: thnx spring

chilly joined the room.

spring: how abt u where are u from and male/female

night: where r u from ex

spring: u welcome night

blood: off and on

existenzio: german originally, but living in uk

'Spring' continued to ask question about age and gender and in this way 'existenzio's' persona developed. Once more, the immediacy in which 'spring' provided information about herself (e.g. she provided information about her gender before the other chatters responded to her question) made me envision 'spring' as an 'honest' person and thus I did not doubt the information she gave about herself. An additional factor that made me believe that 'spring' was very attentive during dialogue – although it accommodated more than two chatters simultaneously – was the fact that she was very 'quick' not only to pose questions but also to receive the responses and also to fill any gaps on behalf of other chatters. For example, she explained 'night' what I meant by '27'. I was impressed that before I had answered the question about gender she referred indirectly to 'existenzio's' gender by referring to 'his age'. That made my decision to present myself as male much easier because I now knew that it would meet her expectations. I was unsure, however, on what grounds 'spring' perceived 'existenzio' as male. As the conversation continued to unfold, I was reluctant to reveal further details of 'existenzio's' profile before I was asked to do so.

existenzio: what about you night

spring: all of our nice ladies here

ahal: **yes i like it a lot**

spring: hi blood

night: *im from china*

chilly left the room.

spring: hi ahal

night: *im a student*

existenzio: creature, where are you?

big: **hey**

smilla joined the room.

existenzio: where are you from night?

creature left the room.

spring: *asl pls smilla*

night: *im from china*

smilla: **23 male**

spring: from where

netal left the room.

spring: oh oh

naughty: 🤪

spring: existenzio u studying in uk

shal left the room.

smilla: **west virginia but i'm in korea right now**

existenzio: i've met many students in this room

existenzio: no spring no studying

night: *ever been to china*

chris joined the room.

existenzio: are you a student?

spring: then u wrk there

spring: hi barbara

night: *yeah im doing my final year economics*

Just as in the previous encounter, many of ‘existenzio’s’ features developed in response to questions, in this case ‘spring’s’ questions. I tended to build up my online persona based on what was or seemed reasonable to ‘spring’. Since I was not studying in the UK, ‘spring’ seemed to assume that ‘existenzio’ was working there. ‘Existenzio’s’ persona was enriched dialectically through clues given by ‘spring’. At the point in the dialogue above, I left the question about my occupation unanswered but the same question – as we will see further on –comes up again in the private discussions between ‘spring’ and ‘existenzio’. For the time being ‘spring’ seemed to be ‘satisfied’ with the answer that she gave regarding ‘existenzio’s’ occupation; she seemed to have accepted that ‘existenzio’ was working. But the next question by ‘spring’ shed more light on his gender in an interesting way:

spring: male female existenzio

rai joined the room.

existenzio: guess

gianni joined the room.

spring: i think male

spring: well am i right?

existenzio: oh, i have problems with my connection

shilla left the room.

existenzio: yes spring you're right

existenzio: are you male spring?

spring: nope

muler left the room.

existenzio: where from?

new: <is a 100 %>woman

azel: ok only someone who is not rude can message me

spring: italy

gianni left the room.

Matala joined the room.

existenzio: cool, never been there

spring: so where in UK are u

tamy left the room.

existenzio: do you often visit this room spring?

spring: and many others why

existenzio: london

spring: oh really

frogg joined the room.

existenzio: ya

amore left the room.

vandea left the room.

I let ‘spring’ guess my gender, and I was surprised that she assumed ‘existenzio’ was male. It was reassuring for me to find out in this way that ‘existenzio’ could be imagined as male. As I continued to be worried that ‘existenzio’s’ profile could be questioned, this exchange with ‘spring’ improved my confidence significantly. In other words, ‘spring’s’ confirmation of ‘existenzio’s’ gender was important for both ‘spring’ and ‘existenzio’. Up to that stage of the dialogue, I was not certain to what extent ‘spring’ wanted to get to know ‘existenzio’ as she was chatting with an entire group of online personae. But the next exchange seemed to suggest that she was indeed interested in ‘existenzio’:

spring: so tell me existe

new: u coming

existenzio: what spring?

spring: what do u do in yr free time

spring: what is the time there now

natty left the room.

vandy left the room.

existenzio: 10;40

pink joined the room.

existenzio: in the morning

spring: u not at wrk

endless joined the room.

existenzio: no, very lucky

frogg: hey room

matala left the room.

spring: how come

strom joined the room.

spring: hi frogg

existenzio: i didn't tell you that I work

spring: oh i assumed

spring: sorry

existenzio: nope

For the first time in this dialogue 'spring' seemed to be interested in 'existenzio'. She started to ask more specific questions which were different from the general ones at the beginning of the conversation. The question about the exact hour had not crossed my mind as an important one until 'spring' seemed to be puzzled by the 'fact' that 'existenzio' was not at work at that time. I provided the exact time that appeared on my computer screen, but that time did not seem to pose further questions for 'spring'. For a moment I realised that I could have been 'trapped' by 'light' if I had given a 'fictional' time that did not 'make sense'. In response to this 'crisis', I suggested that in fact 'existenzio' did not work. If I had presented 'existenzio' as working, I would have been in a situation where I had to explain why 'existenzio' was not working at 10:40am. I also learned from 'spring's' question that time matters even in synchronous communication although time is in a way compressed by the fact that chatters from all over the world are engaged in synchronous communication but not at same time. Time for every chatter becomes the time that appears on the screen of the computer, which depends on the local time of the real location and the time of the conversation, and which is different for different chatters from different locations. 'Spring's' question encapsulates the two dimensions of time in synchronous communication: time as there (depending on the location of the chatter) and time as now (depending on the synchronous appearance of the dialogues on the screen electronically). 'Spring's' assumption that 'existenzio' should 'normally' work at that time made me understand that 'spring' looked for ways to verify or falsify the information 'existenzio' provided by synthesising information that 'existenzio' had already revealed (e.g. the 'now' time in UK when the conversation took place) and information that 'spring' herself just assumed (e.g. 'existenzio' works since he is not studying). Arguably, for 'spring', 'existenzio's' profile was more complete in her understanding of 'existenzio' than in the actual information that the latter had

provided about himself. Therefore, in this tiny in-between moment, after ‘spring’ made and articulated her assumptions and before ‘existenzio’ confirmed or rejected them, ‘spring’ ‘crystallised’ ‘existenzio’s’ persona.

I was not certain at that time whether ‘spring’ intended to scrutinise ‘existenzio’s’ profile after two different expectations – ‘existenzio’ is working AND someone how is working should work at 10:40am – seemed to conflict. In order to diffuse the ‘problem’, I drew attention to ‘spring’s’ hidden assumptions, for it was her after all who had assumed that ‘existenzio’ was working. As a result, I had to come up with an alternative account of how ‘existenzio’ spends his day. Further contacts with ‘spring’ would offer many opportunities to fill this gap in ‘existenzio’s’ profile.

frogg: hi spring

endless left the room.

spring: hi how are frog

existenzio: hi frogg

pink left the room.

Sonya joined the room.

spring: no one talking here

Gina left the room.

night: im god

spring: except the two of us

super left the room.

shalli joined the room.

mali joined the room.

night: thats it

spring : hi welcome back night

night: i was here

ary left the room.

spring: chatiing in pm

spring: is it

sevina joined the room.

azel: yes i will send you a pic

night: trying to but no luck

spring: ha ha

bruce left the room.

spring: poor u

spring: so tell me existenzio u like london

just a girl joined the room.

spring: what kind of city is it

existenzio: sorry guys, I am back again

aria joined the room.

spring: wcb

cartier god: > 🌐 <

night: hey ex r u in germany now?

existenzio: hi night again

suri left the room.

existenzio: so london is interesting

existenzio: it depends on the areas

spring: u been there long

just left the room.

existenzio: no night i am not in germany at the moment

azel: **did this chatroom die?**

spring: no

spring: its alive

it left the room.

existenzio: yes

spring: so guys I leave now but I see you all soon, ok?

existenzio: take care spring

night: *bye spring*

spring: Bye exist, bye night

Again I chose London as ‘existenzio’s’ location because, although different from my actual offline location, at least I knew enough about London to be able to answer any questions about the city. My attempt to sustain ‘existenzio’s’ story made it inevitable, for me, to bring elements of the ‘real’ – my own experience – into his profile.

This first session with ‘spring’ was long but it was terminated after ‘spring’ left the room. At the end of the first encounter between ‘existenzio’ and ‘spring’ I only knew that ‘spring’ was female, 32 years old, and located in Italy. But, will ‘existenzio’ be able to remember this information in case that a further meeting would take place? After the termination of the first contact I never wondered whether ‘spring’ would remember any details of ‘existenzio’s’ profile. But, I was about to find out very soon. Only 2 days later our next interaction took place.²⁹

gina joined the room.

muli joined the room.

ricky joined the room

spring: u not chatting thats all

spring: lora

spring: hi exist

sandy left the room.

walk: i'm fed up with all these fake chatters

gina left the room.

existenzio: hi spring how are you?

reva: *me too*

helen joined the room.

existenzio: they repeat the same sentences again and again

reva: *yeah*

walk joined the room.

spring: 🤔

walk left the room.

spring: u mean me

net joined the room.

revat *c'mon*

existenzio: you too, spring?

existenzio: oh, no spring

existenzio: you misunderstood me

existenzio: sorry

²⁹ Thursday, 25th September 2003 (‘Friends room’ - Lobby 1-1st session).

existenzio: no, I mean these websites, you know
vana joined the room.

existenzio: don't cry please

spring: okay that way

spring grabs **existenzio** and dances around the room

I was impressed that 'spring' recognised 'existenzio' and paid attention to me soon after I entered the room. I was unsure whether she 'only' remembered the name of whether she remembered other details of 'existenzio's' online persona. 'Spring' once more showed how familiar she was with the chatrooms environment. In chatrooms, by clicking on the name of another chatter present in the room, you are not only given the chatter's profile but also a menu of 'virtual actions' such as e.g. dancing or hugging. It is a further 'expression tool' that the software provides. This was used by 'spring' above, and she also taught other chatters including 'existenzio' how to use it.

chaim joined the room.

spring: now u dance with me

kuma: hi

kuma: ya

charm: What's up people??

a_guy joined the room.

spring: hi kuma

hey left the room.

a_guy: hi all

vanesa joined the room.

kuma: hai

spring: hi charm

net: HELLO ROOM

charm: hey spring! how arw ya'?

spring: fine tks

existenzio: spring,

spring: yes

charm: where are you from?

a_guy left the room.

spring: existenzio

existenzio: do I dance with you?

spring: i am here

spring: yes

spring: pls

kuma: madras

existenzio: how?

spring grabs **existenzio** and dances around the room

kuma: where r u

spring: like this

someone joined the room.

charm: boy/girl?

spring: 😊

spring: girl

kuma: boy boy

spring: got it

existenzio: how did you do it spring?

existenzio: tell me

someone: >🌐<

spring: okay

banana joined the room.

face joined the room.

spring: lora also asked me this

spring: lora are u looking

existenzio: hi charm

existenzio: spring are you still with us?

charm: Hey girls!

chris joined the room.

spring: yes

spring: ia m here

friend joined the room.

spring: okay i am pm u

spring: lora

spring: u got it

spring: how abt u existenzio

spring grabs **existenzio** and dances around the room

spring gives **existenzio** a big hug

sako joined the room.

spring grabs **lora** and dances around the room

existenzio: nothing spring

spring: hey guys

spring: what

existenzio: didn't get anything

lora busts a move

lora grabs **spring** and dances around the room

spring: okay do u see a red exclamation mark next to the font size

lora: 🌐

existenzio: lora, you got it,

spring: WOW

spring: u got it lora

existenzio: just a min

angel joined the room.

existenzio: don't see anything

friendly left the room.

sarah left the room.

lora screams at **spring**

spring: existenzio click the emotion with the person name and send

existenzio: lora i'm very jelous

salo joined the room.

lora gives **spring** a big hug

spring: got it

existenzio: i click your name, ok?

angel left the room.

big joined the room.

existenzio grabs **spring** and dances around the room.

spring: first u click the emotion then u click my name and press send

existenzio: thank god

rania left the room.

spring: WOWOWOWOW

spring: u got it

fish joined the room.

esistenza: i feel stupid

spring: 😊

sabia left the room.

spring: no its okay

esistenza: hihi thanx

spring: u welcome

spring: > 🌐 <

esistenza: spring, have you been visiting chatrooms for a long time , I suppose

esistenza: what about you lora?

spring: nope i learnt this from a friend of mine

spring: so i know the feeling when u dont know how to use it

esistenza: so, are you quite new in chatting?

spring: 😊

sheip joined the room.

spring: on and off

esistenza: yes, it happens with everything, but you have to spend time

esistenza: oh, god, spring did you see what I did?

ha how are you

nigi joined the room.

channel joined the room.

spring u dancing with someone else

spring i did

esistenza: I wanted to click your name.....

spring: 🙄

esistenza: hahaha

ris left the room.

sunny left the room.

esistenza: don't cry ...just wait

spring: u broke my heart

pully joined the room.

esistenza grabs **spring** and dances around the room.

spring: okay try one more time

cooly: howcome

spring okay u are a good dancer i must say

babe left the room.

spring: after a while but a good one

coolly left the room.

spring 🌐

esistenza: it's funny

aner joined the room.

spring: yes but good fun

‘Spring’ seemed to lead the discussion again by ‘teaching’ the chatters how to improve their chatting techniques. Dancing with each other takes place virtually, but when I managed to make use of the opportunity and ‘dance’ with ‘spring’, ‘spring’ told me that I was a good dancer! Although ‘real’ dancing was impossible, the chatters could imagine themselves dancing together. I was flattered by ‘spring’s’ compliment and I understood that she considered the interactions in chatrooms as associated with play and imagination. She could imagine that she was dancing with

me and after her compliment I could also regard myself as a good dancer or at least as someone who can learn how to dance virtually in the chatroom. It seemed to me that this process of teaching and learning using additional expressive tools in chatrooms brought 'existenzio' and 'spring' closer. It was also a step forward to more regular contacts between 'spring' and 'existenzio':

spring: so tell me existenzio u chat often

silk: why is that?

spring: since we cant see

shark left the room.

existenzio: not very often, spring

chris left the room.

karen left the room.

spring: okay

civila joined the room.

polla joined the room.

silk: how do i turn it on i just git it?

existenzio: you know i visit some rooms, some of them are very boring

spring: oh tell me abt them

someone) joined the room.

spring: boring and sick

spring: silk

existenzio: exactly

spring: u need to download yr software

silk: what

spring: first for the webcam to wrk

existenzio: spring do you have to suggest any interesting rooms?

civila left the room.

someone) left the room.

spring: check the instruction

spring: hobbies

existenzio: or all are the same more or less?

spring: and crafts

fcukitisay left the room.

silk: ok it ise to work thanks

spring: u welcome

spring: try

spring: parenting if u have kids

silk: ok

ha : hello

existenzio: spring, you are really very helpful

neo joined the room.

silk left the room.

amby joined the room.

spring: you mean it, or are u being rude to me lora?

existenzio: parenting? is there such a room?

spring: oh yes

spring: there is

spring: ok

spring: what is it lora

spring: why do u say that

existenzio: I saw that you helped the guy with the cam

spring: okay that way

existenzio: that's why

spring: if i know i will try and help
someone joined the room.

rita: any gal wanna chat

spring gives **existenzio** a big hug

spring: i like u exist

spring: u seem nice to chat with

spring: god its been a while since i found someone to chat with

night: 😊

spring: u too lora

ola joined the room.

amby left the room.

existenzio: ya, i know what you mean, it's very nice to meet you too.

Anna left the room.

existenzio: I 've come across many rude people

spring: i am gonna add u to my friends list if u dont mind

This was the first time that 'spring' expressed her feelings towards 'existenzio'. I did not expect 'spring' to like 'existenzio' so soon, but I understood that probably what mattered for the time being was the fact that 'existenzio' was a friendly guy to chat with. I did not make an extra effort to present 'existenzio' as a friendly chatter, but I expressed my own feelings partly because of gratitude. After all, 'spring' had taught me new chatting techniques. Given 'spring's' response, I felt that a closer contact was about to begin. The decisive moment for our further encounter was the decision by 'spring' to add 'existenzio' in her Friends list enabling us to have private discussions. As is indicated in the following extract, 'existenzio' also added 'spring' in his Friends List. I was wondering though why 'spring' decided at that moment to add 'existenzio' to her Friends List, given that I had not provided any additional information about 'existenzio' in our second meeting. I had to wait until later to find out whether 'spring' was able to recall any information about 'existenzio'.

ola left the room.

spring : same here i hate the chat rooms then

dark left the room.

spring: is that okay with u

spring: guys

existenzio: yes, spring?

someone left the room.

existenzio: absolutely ok, with me spring

sunny joined the room.

vinor joined the room.

thought left the room.

Marr joined the room.

existenzio: spring, can I ask you something?

mala left the room.

ffree left the room.

I joined the room.

spring: yes go ahead

kola joined the room.
[adamas](#) left the room.

spring: u there

spring: dam these message i cant see u

[neo20_cute](#) left the room.
[kimmy906](#) left the room.
[expertly_novice](#) joined the room.

existenzio: spring, here I am

existenzio: tell me something,

spring: SAW U

spring: yes

[baddy](#) joined the room.

existenzio: the friends list helps you to find if the friends are online, or what?

spring: yes they do

[novel](#) left the room.

spring: each time i log on you will be able to see me on yr list

[sammy](#) joined the room.

existenzio: oh, I see....can I add you too??? I will try to find the way

[jipsy_gal2002](#) joined the room.

spring: yes do that

[naughty](#) left the room.

existenzio: hi spring, i will try now,

existenzio: sorry for that

[big](#) left the room.

[aha](#) left the room.

[lopa](#) left the room.

[anna](#) joined the room.

anna: hi hi room

existenzio: spring ok, i think i added you in friends list

existenzio: spring, can you see me??

existenzio: hello !!!!!

I was unsure as to whether ‘spring’ would use the Messenger to contact me later on or whether this was our last meeting since the connection terminated suddenly, and when I logged in again I could no longer find ‘spring’ in the public room. It was some days later when I found ‘spring’ online and I took the initiative to start a private discussion with her:³⁰

existenzio: hi spring! how are you?

spring: hi there

spring: how are you

spring: i am fine tks

existenzio: fine thank you,

spring: today was a good day at wrk

spring: so doing fine

existenzio: unfortunately i have problems today with the connection

spring: whats happening at yr end

existenzio: did you work today?

spring: yes

³⁰ Wednesday, 1st October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

spring: why i wrk everyday
existenzio: even in the weekends?
spring: today is a wednesday
spring: no not on the weekends
existenzio: yes, I know.....
existenzio: during the weekend the weather here was so nice...
spring: really existenzio: but i know it won't last for long
existenzio: can you remind me again of your location?
spring: lucky u
spring: u dont remember
existenzio: sorryyyyyyyyyyy
existenzio: i feel awful spring: spain?
spring: u are from germany see i remember
existenzio: thanks, but i feel more embarrassed now
existenzio: oh, yes, italy....
existenzio: now i remember and i won't forget, promise
spring: never mind

In this first private discussion with ‘spring’, we started a routine talk about ‘spring’s’ job, but I felt that I needed to start from somewhere, and I did not have a clear picture of ‘spring’ in my mind. In essence, I was not able to recall information about ‘spring’ probably because in our last conversation we did repeat or add information about ourselves. I asked ‘spring’ to remind me of her location in case that this information could produce further information about herself. I was certain that ‘spring’ needed such information about ‘existenzio’ as well and that is why I was impressed by the fact that she remembered the place of my origins. I think that ‘existenzio’s’ profile was stabilised for me at that time given that I was communicating as ‘existenzio’ with the same profile with other chatters as well. I had not completely forgotten ‘spring’s’ location and very soon I was able to recall it.

spring: so tell me more abt yourself
spring: what do u do,
existenzio: ok, about myself

The question that ‘spring’ asked ‘existenzio’ was exactly the question I wanted to ask ‘spring’. So far, ‘spring’ had not asked ‘existenzio’ about his ‘real’ name but she was interested in his job. Since I was reluctant to reveal more information about ‘existenzio’, I started talking about things that I actually like, enriching in that way my online persona. Talking about cinema or sports was not something that I had intended to do as ‘existenzio’ but it was a routine discussion on things I enjoy and I could talk about.

existenzio: i like cinema
spring: which movie have u watched

(discussion on particular movies and actors follows)

spring: nope not seen it
spring: kind of
spring: i think

esistenzaio: it's a story between dream and reality
spring: ah ok
esistenzaio: ok, at the end you wonder about the whole meaning of the film
esistenzaio: but if you come across it , try to see it
esistenzaio: which is your favourite one?
spring: chicago
esistenzaio: i haven't seen it
spring: good one
esistenzaio: it won the oscar
spring: i loved katherine
esistenzaio: as far as I remember
spring: in it
spring: she is awesome

When 'spring' expressed her preference for a female actor I began to question her gender. I could recall that she was female according to her self-presentation in our first meeting, but when she characterised the above actress I started thinking whether 'spring' could be female. However, I did not pursue this question but decided to pay close attention to her self-presentation and identity patterns in the future.

(more discussion about films)

spring: what else do u like
esistenzaio: I play tennis.....
spring: ok
esistenzaio: i am not good though
spring: are u a tall guy
spring: then u must be good at the game
esistenzaio: no, i am not very tall,
esistenzaio: but, i haven't been trained for a long time,
spring: ok

This was the first time that 'spring' asked 'esistenzaio' to describe himself physically. First of all, 'spring' by posing such a question seemed to take for granted that 'esistenzaio' was male. She probably remembered 'esistenzaio's' gender from our first encounter. The fact that she asked further questions about 'esistenzaio' made me realise that she had already started building up 'esistenzaio's' profile based upon the initial information that 'esistenzaio' had provided. Through her questioning she tried to further elaborate 'esistenzaio's' persona and in parallel with her effort I also started elaborating 'esistenzaio's' persona every time I answered her questions. Given that I was not always 'prepared' for her questions, by responding to her questions and by talking about sports, hobbies etc., I had to continue to explicate my online persona both to 'spring' and myself.

Secondly, 'spring's' question about 'esistenzaio's' physical appearance was taken by me as an effort to fill in the gaps created by the disembodied communication in chatrooms. 'Spring's' question suggested that she needed to have an image of 'esistenzaio' regardless of how close that image was to 'esistenzaio's' offline reality. I could have presented 'esistenzaio' as very attractive since clearly such information

could not be verified, but I preferred to give a fairly abstract answer.

(discussion on sports)

esistenzaio: i have studied economics

spring: are u working now

esistenzaio: I realised, from the first year that this profession didn't fit me

esistenzaio: if you know what I mean

spring: yes

esistenzaio: I am not working at the moment

spring: i think i know the feeling

esistenzaio: I was working until 6 months ago

spring: taking a break good

esistenzaio: I am doing something at the moment, but on my own

spring: ok

esistenzaio: I have been given an intermission from the company I was working for, and I may return in 3 months

The fact that I had to answer 'spring's' questions about my occupation made me invent a story about 'esistenzaio's' studies and profession that was invented in all aspects but one: 'esistenzaio's' possible return to his job after three months was meant to accommodate the possibility of my future disappearance from online life. I felt that I could not disappoint 'spring' in case that our meetings would become more regular, and thus I tried to construct the possibility of a meaningful 'exit'.

esistenzaio: I don't know if i want it....

esistenzaio: what about you? are you happy with your job?

spring: yes very much at the moment

spring: not looking for a change

esistenzaio: this is very good.

esistenzaio: analystor?

esistenzaio: do I remember correctly?

spring: yes

esistenzaio: and what are you doing exactly?

esistenzaio: technical work, research work....

spring: not exactly i am in sales

esistenzaio: i see, do you promote particular brands?

spring: one sec i am on the phone cld u pls wait

esistenzaio: are you based in a particular shop?

esistenzaio: ok

esistenzaio: sure

spring: no not really

esistenzaio: does your job require you to travel?

esistenzaio: spring, i suppose you are still on phone.....take your time

'Spring' suddenly disappeared without a greeting after that meeting. Although we had just started exchanging information about ourselves, I felt disappointed that the dialogue did not close with a promise for a future meeting. But next day I found the

following instant message from 'spring':³¹

spring: sorry got logged out of the server last evening

It was only one day later that 'spring' found me online and initiated a private discussion with 'existenzio':³²

spring: hi

existenzio: hi spring!

existenzio: I just logged in!

existenzio: how are you?

spring: i am fine

existenzio: I am well too, I was out with friends yesterday, had good time

existenzio: the weather here is still marvellous, I can't believe it!

existenzio: I just got your message.....you left apparently on Wednesday

existenzio: Is everything ok?

spring: yes

spring: hi

spring: my comp

spring: would not wrk

existenzio: ah, I see

spring: logged off

existenzio: at the beginning I worried, because you had just received a call

existenzio: and I thought that something went wrong and you had to go

spring: tks fr the concern

existenzio: just a moment spring

spring: yes

existenzio: ok, I am back

existenzio: I just had a call

existenzio: I have problems with the connection, the system is very slow sometimes...

spring: the same

spring: here

existenzio: spring, what time is in Spain now?

spring: spain

spain: hello

existenzio: aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

spring: where

existenzio: not againnnnnnnnnn

existenzio: sorryyyyyyyyyyyyyyy

existenzio: portugal?

spring: bye

spring: bye

existenzio: spring

spring: u dont remember

existenzio: i am awful

³¹ Thursday, 2nd October 2003 (Messenger-instant message).

³² Friday, 3rd October 2003 (1st session, Messenger)

existenzio: spring, I know this is very embarrassing for me
spring: u r frm germany

Not only had I forgotten that 'spring' came from Italy but the fact that she still remembered that 'existenzio' was German made me feel even more embarrassed. I was afraid after my second mistake that 'spring' would not take me seriously. I felt that this moment was critical for our further exchanges because I felt that I had not met her expectations.

existenzio: give me some time,
existenzio: please
existenzio: trying to remember.
existenzio: ok?
existenzio: italy!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
existenzio: right?
spring: yes
spring: at last
existenzio: sorry spring
existenzio: let me explain,
existenzio: i have problem either with my memory
existenzio: or with geography
existenzio: spring, did i disappoint you?
spring: yes
existenzio: will you accept my apologies?
existenzio: please?
spring: maybe
spring: u have done this the sec time
existenzio: give me one more chance,
existenzio: I think spring, I am very serious
spring: for 27 u have a bad memory

I did not want to disappoint 'spring' and my apologies expressed my actual feelings. I knew by then that I had 'disappointed' her. I felt even more embarrassed when 'spring' remembered 'existenzio's' age as well, putting 'existenzio's' age in a humoristic context regarding age and memory skills. I admit that I was impressed by the fact that 'spring' remembered so far every information about 'existenzio', whose bad memory at that moment appeared to jeopardise the communication with 'spring'.

existenzio: that
existenzio: yes, I know
existenzio: and this is very bad
existenzio: sorry once more
existenzio: now i know that i will never forget it
existenzio: spring?
spring: yes
spring: i am still here
existenzio: ok, probably you didn't receive my apologies

esistenzaio: was that the connection?
spring: gt logged off
spring: bad connection
spring: so where are my apologies
esistenzaio: i told you, probably you were off
esistenzaio: to accept my apologies once more
spring: ok forgiven tell me yr real name

I considered the moment when ‘spring’ asked me to give her my real name as a step forwards, as a moment when at least symbolically masks were left behind (or replaced with other masks) and an effort was made to get to know each other better. To be honest, I was expecting this question earlier given my experience from encounters with other chatters. As I had already presented ‘esistenzaio’ as Markus, it was not difficult to give the answer instantly. Additionally, it was a chance to find out what ‘spring’s’ real name was. From now on, ‘spring’ was Maria from Italy and I was sure that I would not forget her name or her location even though it had been established that ‘esistenzaio’ had a ‘bad memory’:

esistenzaio: sorry again, and I promise I will never forget
esistenzaio: markus
esistenzaio: what is your real name?
spring: maria
esistenzaio: maria? it's very nice
spring: thank u
esistenzaio: would you like me to call you maria?
spring: yes i wld markus
spring: i am sure that way u will not forget my name the next time u log on
esistenzaio: no, no, i will not forget your name , promise

I found it interesting that according to ‘spring’, her ‘real’ name would help me to not forget her in my next visit to the chatroom. It was as if she provided me with an additional memory tool, her ‘real’ name, that would assist my bad memory. She also seemed to use the name ‘Markus’ from now on in this dialogue, although I was curious whether she would be able to recall it again next time.

(discussion on computers and technology)

spring: markus
esistenzaio: yes
spring: do u have family with u in London
spring: or u stay alone
esistenzaio: staying alone, why?
spring: just asking

[...]

esistenzaio: so, maria, do you live alone?
spring: yes
esistenzaio: tell me about yourself

spring: what do u want to know
existenzio: how many years have you been living alone
spring: 2yrs
existenzio: you were living with your family until 2 years ago?
spring: yes
existenzio: how old are you?
spring: again u forgot
existenzio: 32?

‘spring’ did not seem to easily forget my poor memory. I felt proud of myself when I remembered her age and I took the initiative to ask her some further questions about her personal life and her family. My earlier mistakes ensured that I paid attention to the details she told me about herself, and with this information as a basis I started enriching ‘spring’s’ profile by asking her further questions.

spring: yes correct
existenzio: ok, you see ??? I remember
existenzio: do you have brothers, sisters?
spring: o do
spring: i do
existenzio: how many?
spring: two sisters
existenzio: younger, older?
spring: and u
existenzio: one sister, older than me,
spring: one younger one older
spring: i have cousins who are half germans too
spring: they live in london
existenzio: really?
existenzio: do they like london?
spring: yes they do now have been there for over 6yrs
existenzio: I see
existenzio: so, you are 3 sisters in the family
spring: yes
existenzio: do you have good relations?
spring: u mean between my sisters
existenzio: i know that you must love each other, but are you close enough?
existenzio: yes
spring: yes ver close cant do wthout each other
existenzio: very nice
spring: i must say that for a german yr english is good
existenzio: thanks
existenzio: but most germans speak better than me...
spring: ok
spring: say good morning in german
existenzio: guten Morgen!!

Flattered by ‘spring’s’ compliment about my language skills I started feeling more comfortable and confident about myself as ‘existenzio’. However, at the same time

the compliment could be a question. Did 'Maria' have doubts about 'existenzio's' profile? Did she really believe that 'Markus' was German? Why did she ask me to write a greeting in German? This situation reminded me of 'light's' similar request in 4.1. And how could she so confidently express her views about my English given that she too was not a native English-speaker? Was she really from Italy? These questions were soon resolved:

existenzio: in your language?

spring: i am half english half mexican

spring: so its english that we speak

existenzio: oh!

existenzio: I don't know you at all!

spring: i am not complaining

existenzio: what does it mean?

spring: means that it is okay

existenzio: the fact that I don't know you?

spring: no prblm we will get to know each other, we just meet

spring: yes

existenzio: yes, I agree, it takes time

spring: yup

I was completely honest when I said that I did not know 'spring' at all. Soon after 'spring' had assumed a stable form in my mind as 'Maria' from Italy, it was revealed that 'Maria' was not coming from Italy! The more the dialogue continued the more I as 'existenzio' came to realise that I did not know 'spring'. The dialectical revelation of information by 'spring' was full of surprises to me. But of course I could never be sure how 'honest' 'spring' was in her self-presentation.

(discussion on Maria's job, and general comments on chatrooms)

spring: so tell me abt your self

existenzio: ask me maria

spring: ha ha my line

spring: not fair

spring: okay

existenzio: you know i have a sister

spring: elder one

existenzio: you know i am looking for a proper job

existenzio: yes, an elder one

existenzio: she is very nice,

existenzio: we are quite close each other

spring: how old is she

existenzio: she is very busy

existenzio: she 34

spring: married

existenzio: no, she is not married

spring: u are married

existenzio: me?

spring: yes

existenzio: no, maria, I am engaged

spring: okay
spring: good congrats so when is the D' day

(discussion about 'existenzio's' plans)

spring: she is english
existenzio: half english half spanish
existenzio: but she has brought up in england
spring: ok
spring: as old as u
existenzio: yes, same age

As 'spring' insisted on asking more about 'existenzio' I continuously produced a story that was largely based on her expectations as they were expressed in her questions. For example, she imagined 'existenzio's' partner as of the same age and I followed her lead. But 'spring' also revealed more about herself.

spring: tell something abt LONDON SCHOOL
existenzio: london bussiness school?
spring: yes
existenzio: as far as I know it is considered as very good
existenzio: why are you asking?
spring: my fiancée is studying there
existenzio: really?
spring: yes joined this aug
existenzio: postgrad?
spring: yes
existenzio: so, you may come to visit him!
spring: yes
existenzio: i am very glad!

(discussion on UK higher education and her fiancé's studies)

existenzio: do you mind you are in distance at the moment?
spring: i hate it
existenzio: mm, but you have to be very patient and supportive, because he may need your support you know
existenzio: and you may understand that the distance may bring you much closer
spring: yes i do tks
spring: yes i do
spring: markus
existenzio: yes?
spring: existenzio, I am afraid I need to go now,
existenzio: me too, Maria, I have to do something in cerntal ondon and I must leave before 12.30 to avoid the traffic
spring: okay
spring: markus
spring: have a nice day

spring: bye
existenzio: I will log on when I come back, if we dont meet I will see you tomorrow, ok?
existenzio: thanks very much maria.
existenzio: have a nice day....
spring: u too
existenzio: bye maria , see you very soon
spring: yes markus
spring: see u soon

This was the first time that ‘existenzio’ and ‘spring’ promised each other to meet again. Up to that moment I had a picture of ‘Maria’ in my mind but I did not know what surprise would come next. It was only four days later that I found ‘Maria’ online and initiated a private discussion with her.³³

existenzio: hello!!!
spring: hi
spring: how are you today?
existenzio: I am fine, trying to work a bit
existenzio: how are you?
spring: oh fine, working
existenzio: oh, don't worry, I have to work as well
spring: u are at wrk
spring: today
spring: what is the time there
spring: now
existenzio: no, not at work, I don't work at office
existenzio: 11.08 morning
existenzio: I am cooperating with a firm, so I have to work at home
existenzio: I used to work in an office,...many hours per day
existenzio: so, did you speak with your boyfriend? how is he? has he settled down?

‘Spring’ continued to ask questions about my local time and I regarded this habit as an effort by her to check the truthfulness of my location although I did not have an obvious reason to interpret her behaviour in this way. Of course, as said previously, I provided the exact time that appeared on my computer screen not worrying at all since it perfectly matched both my offline and online location.

spring: yes we did, yesterday was the welcome dinner at school
spring: yes he has settled in
spring: tks for asking
existenzio: today it's a bit windy, the weather has changed...
spring: cold is iy

³³ Tuesday, 7th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

spring: does it snow there

existenzio: you mean in the winter?

spring: yes

existenzio: look, in London very rarely, it does not last for a long, you can only see very thinwhite balls, but it's not real snow

spring: okay

The discussion continued with 'spring' providing details about her country of residence. But the information she gave me about the location of her family made me wonder about her exact location. In fact, as I was trying to focus 'Maria's' picture, I felt confused:

existenzio: have you been brought up in italy or?

spring: no brought up in mexico

spring: dad was a businessman

existenzio: and you moved in italy for job purposes...?

spring: yes

existenzio: so, and your family is in mexico now?

spring: not really

spring: parents are in netherlands

spring: sisters in the states

existenzio: in netherlands?

spring: yes

existenzio: in the states?

existenzio: you are a real global family

spring: ha ha

spring: u cld say that

spring: so its good fun when we meet up

existenzio: and....where is your meeting place?

spring: non stop chatter and noise

existenzio: just wonder....

existenzio: I see, very very interesting...

spring: yes

But, it was next suggestion by Maria or 'spring' that made me feel somewhat uncomfortable:

spring: in fact if i do vst london we should meet

existenzio: sure, we will meet up definitely

existenzio: no question

spring: that will be great

existenzio: you have to come to visit your boyfriend

existenzio: yes, maria london is very nice during christmas period

Did 'spring' really want to meet 'existenzio'? Did 'existenzio' want to meet 'spring'? I knew at that moment that I could never meet 'Maria' because even if 'spring' was 'Maria', certainly 'existenzio' was not 'Markus' and a meeting could only remain a plan. I did not want to disappoint 'spring' and for that reason I did not exclude the

possibility of an offline meeting. But I was unsure whether 'spring' wanted to meet 'existenzio' or whether 'maria' wanted to meet 'markus'. Reflecting on the many different locations of her various family members, I started wondering whether 'spring' could actually be in London. Was 'Maria' actually located in London? She then talked about her marriage plans.

existenzio: and I suppose, maria, that the wedding will take place where?????

existenzio: I am confused with so many places...

spring: we have not decided

spring: where

spring: yes

spring: too places

spring: too many places

existenzio: yes!!!

spring: how abt u

existenzio: oh, no we haven't arranged further details

existenzio: sometimes, we are thinking of going to a remote island and getting married by ourselves

existenzio: you know, to avoid all these stories.....

existenzio: parents, relatives....who to be invited.....

existenzio: silly things that piss me off

spring: once in a life time , bear with these small details

existenzio: oh, god, my girlfriend insists on telling the same again and again!!!

spring: all women are the same i guess

existenzio: but in depth I don't have any problem.

existenzio: I have to think about my job,

existenzio: as I have told you, I was working but now I am more or less more independent

spring: yes i guess that is the most important

existenzio: yes, and it's not wise to make plans for your life without having sorted out all these serious 'details'

spring: i must say for a 27yr old u are very mature in yr thinking

spring: i am impressed

I found myself using the story about my 'girlfriend' as a device to raise gender issues and to make 'existenzio's' male existence more persuasive. Very unexpectedly, I was perceived as 'mature' by 'spring', something that also made *me* perceive 'existenzio' as serious and mature for his age. In essence, the 'spring's' characterisation of 'existenzio' enriched 'existenzio's' qualities and personality. More personal details were exchanged before the discussion terminated:

spring: what is yr zodiac sign

spring: markus

existenzio: acqarius

spring: ok

existenzio: yours?

spring: scorpion

esistenzaio: so you may have your birthday very soon
spring: yes
esistenzaio: or, am I wrong? I don't know about these things..
esistenzaio: when?
spring: in nov
esistenzaio: when exactly?
spring: 16th
esistenzaio: ah, ok, I will remember
spring: yours
esistenzaio: 26 January
spring: ok
spring: i will remember
spring: that too
spring: okay i have to go will chat with u later on
spring: u take care
spring: and be good
esistenzaio: ok, maria, take care
esistenzaio: so see you tomorrow!!
spring: bye bye

Next day again I started a private discussion with 'spring' using her 'real' name:³⁴

esistenzaio: hi maria!
spring: hello
spring: how are you

(general discussion about the weather and her family and friends)

spring: markus u there
esistenzaio: yes maria, here!!!
spring: i am here
spring: finished chatting with my sis
esistenzaio: this is a very good idea, to chat with your family without spend a lot of money on the phone
spring: that is the most effective way and if u have a webcam u can see each other also
spring: describe yr self
spring: how do u look
esistenzaio: ok, let me try....although I am not so good in descriptions
spring: no harm in trying
spring: i am a good listener

It was the second time since 'esistenzaio' met 'spring' that 'spring' asked 'esistenzaio' about his physical appearance. The first time my description was very general, probably because I did not have a clear physical image of 'esistenzaio' in mind. I understood that I had to be more specific this time. Unfortunately the connection

³⁴ Wednesday, 8th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

problems did not allow the description to go much further. After logging off I tried to find 'spring' but she was not online. Five days passed until our next meeting.³⁵

esistenzaio: maria?

spring: hi

esistenzaio: hello maria, how are you?

spring: fine tks

spring: and u

esistenzaio: I am fine, busy today, a lot

spring: good that u are back to wrk

spring: am here

esistenzaio: sorry, are you busy?

spring: talking to my boyfriend

esistenzaio: take your time

spring: after a long time

esistenzaio: really ?

spring: tks

esistenzaio: take your time, i ll be here

spring: had an argument with him so making up

esistenzaio: oh, no, be careful, don't become angry with hi

esistenzaio: him

spring: why do say that

esistenzaio: his life may be a bit difficult distant from you. try your best to show that you are next to him!!!

esistenzaio: just a simple advice

spring: tks

(discussion continues on how we spent the weekend etc.)

spring: bye now Markus, take care

esistenzaio: maria?

spring: yes

esistenzaio: think positive, and take care

spring: i will tks u are turning out to be a good friend even though i know very little abt u

esistenzaio: i have the same suspicion and I am very glad I met you, honestly

This was the first time that I felt a kind of unity emerging between 'esistenzaio' and 'spring'. What I found interesting was that 'spring' admitted that she knew only a few things about 'esistenzaio'. This was exactly what I felt at that moment about both 'spring' and 'esistenzaio'. I did not know 'spring' and in addition I did not know 'esistenzaio'. For example, I did not even know what 'esistenzaio' looked like as I was not given a further opportunity to describe him. But when I admitted that I had the same feeling I did not choose the right word to express it:

³⁵ Monday, 13th October 2003 (2nd session, Messenger).

spring: you never say suspicion, you can conclusion
spring: suspicion is when u dont trust someone
existenzio: yes, you are right, you are very smart
spring: english better than u
existenzio: but sometimes you say suspicion for positive thinks
existenzio: sorry, things
spring: okay
existenzio: e.g. I suspect that I am in love with someone
existenzio: when you say that
spring: aa okay
spring: that way
existenzio: you are not in the position to admit it yet,
existenzio: yes, yes

Looking back in the dialogue I find that I could have chosen the word ‘feeling’ instead of ‘suspicion’. Interestingly, ‘spring’ was very attentive and she did not hesitate to correct my language, implying that by choosing the word ‘suspicion’ I seemed to suggest that I was not trusting her. In addition her point made me realise that in the process of communication in chatrooms misunderstandings and confusions are likely to arise since the choice of words affects the way the participants perceive feelings and desires of the chatters they communicate with. This is true especially when trust and honesty cannot be taken for granted, which is always the case in online communication. ‘Spring’s’ reaction made me realise that in the context of disembodied communication in chatrooms language matters. The choice of words can easily create misunderstandings, especially as so many non-native English speakers use English to communicate. Given the circumstances of writing these messages – the time pressure, their shortness, the waiting in-between sending and receiving – suggests that chatters are almost constantly in an in-between stage where the further differentiation of their online personae depends on the choices they make and how these are provoked and received.

According to the above example, ‘existenzio’ unintentionally challenged the impression that ‘spring’ had of him seconds ago when she characterised ‘existenzio’ as a chatter about to become a friend. But the word ‘suspicion’ used by ‘existenzio’ struck ‘spring’ as she realised the negative meaning that the word might have conveyed. ‘Spring’ seemed to have created an image of ‘existenzio’ that did not correspond to a suspicious ‘existenzio’, but she decided to react to this conflict of images and thereby offered ‘existenzio’ the opportunity to correct himself and elaborate on the intended meaning of his statement.

existenzio: I am very glad to meet you maria, i am sure that we are knowing each other better step by step
spring: yes markus
spring: hope to meet u also someone day
spring: that will be better
existenzio: yes, definitely , we will meet one day
existenzio: can you make friends on the net maria?
existenzio: maria?
existenzio: maria can you see me?

After 'spring' repeated her desire to meet 'existenzio' offline she disappeared. I then realised that I had problems with the Internet connection that made it impossible for 'spring' to continue the communication with 'existenzio'. The following day, it was 'spring' who sent me a message to open a private discussion.³⁶ After talking very generally about problems that she faced at work she suddenly disappeared and I could not find her online for the whole day. Although I was spending time online almost every day I could not find her. Eventually I sent the following message to 'spring':³⁷

existenzio: Hi Maria! How are you ? I haven't seen you for days. I hope that everything is going well. Kind regards, Markus

I also sent two more quite similar messages to 'spring' at the end of October and in mid November, but 'spring' never responded. I lost 'spring' very suddenly and I started wondering if I ever had found 'Maria'. I never found out what happened and for a while I was worrying about her.

4.3. 'EXISTENZIO' AND 'KAREN'

The very short story between 'existenzio' and 'karen' started on 27th September 2003 when I met 'karen' in a public chatroom. The pseudonym she used before she revealed her 'real' name was 'luna'; therefore, in the extracts below 'luna' refers to 'karen'. Generally, the meetings between 'existenzio' and 'luna' never became regular although I – as 'existenzio' – had the impression and perhaps the expectation that more meetings would follow after our first private meeting. In this encounter, I was the first who was interested in 'luna' and initiated private discussions. In retrospect, it seems that 'existenzio' was probably not sufficiently interesting for 'luna'. In the following, I will give an overview of our short encounter and then discuss possible reasons why this 'relation' never became stabilised at least for a short period as in the previous two cases. The following extract is from the first meeting between 'existenzio' and 'luna':³⁸

existenzio: bye toy

toy left the room.

Maddona left the room.

Neo joined the room.

Royal joined the room.

moon joined the room.

dizzy: **hey everyone**

aris joined the room.

luna: hello

Joshua joined the room.

existenzio: barbie, how is sydney?

³⁶ Tuesday, 14th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

³⁷ Saturday, 25th October 2003 (Instant message)

³⁸ Saturday, 27th September 2003 ('Friends room', Lobby 1-1st session).

dizzy: see if anyone is talkin in here..had to get out

existenzio: luna, hellooo

shame: hie to all

ras left the room.

Joshua: *anyone from States around?*

kefi joined the room.

luna: what's MRR?

ras joined the room.

Joshua: *hmm MRR?*

lover left the room.

leo left the room.

dizzy left the room.

friend left the room.

existenzio: luna, I had the same question....

Joshua left the room.

luna: ok

killy joined the room.

existenzio: luna, how old are you?

'Existenzio' was the one who initiated a dialogue with 'luna' by asking her the common question about age. What made me address 'luna' was the fact that on that specific day, despite my efforts, none of the chatters seemed interested in a continuing conversation with 'existenzio'. Based on the fact that there was at least one feature that 'existenzio' shared with 'luna' – that we both did not know what 'MMR' was – I decided to make an approach.

nandia left the room.

aris left the room.

baba joined the room.

lora joined the room.

barbie left the room.

luna: 26

noti joined the room.

existenzio: where from?

konstan joined the room.

luna: australia

luna: and u?

existenzio: ok

kili left the room.

arevil joined the room.

existenzio: german, living in uk

luna: existenzio, asl?

aha joined the room.

dill left the room.

existenzio: 27/m

bable left the room.

royal left the room.

annie joined the room.

luna: from?

existenzio: german living in uk

luna: ok

siddy left the room.

luna: nice country

caker left the room.

alfie left the room.

I had already presented the same age, location, origin and gender in other encounters and continued with the same profile. In this story again I firstly waited for 'luna's' response to my question about her location, and then presented myself as German. From the very beginning of the dialogue, the basic information about 'existenzio' was out in the open. I also knew from the start of our interaction that 'luna' was female, 26 years old, located in Australia. I was curious to see whether 'existenzio's' profile and my readiness to provide this information would trigger 'luna's' interest to continue this exploration of 'existenzio' and perhaps to have private meetings with him.

existenzio: I want to visit your country, never been there

anna joined the room.

irish joined the room.

roka joined the room.

irish: e

existenzio: luna, m or f?

luna: it's also nice here...there's a lot of beautiful beaches

luna: f

helen left the room.

luna: and nice people too

existenzio: I know , I know,

irish left the room.

luna: ok

bios left the room.

existenzio: which is the best period luna?

anna left the room.

existenzio: to visit australia?

yourself joined the room.

luna: summer...between march-may

karra left the room.

girly joined the room.

existenzio: i see. ...do you work, study or?

hairi joined the room.

mama left the room.

luna: work

existenzio: satisfied with your job luna?

ommo left the room.

moody left the room.

novel: hi folks.

luna: no

novel: novel here.

novel: what is the job?

no1 joined the room.

luna: im planning to find another job

existenzio: I wish you good luck luna

luna: how about u? what is your line of work?

hairi joined the room.

existenzio: hi novel

novel: hi xten

puup joined the room.

luna: ok, thanks

novel left the room.

existenzio: I am not working for the last months,

rain left the room.

annie joined the room.

dora left the room.

luna: why is that?

sharlie joined the room.

indiana joined the room.

pella left the room.

existenzio: I used to work for a company, now I am trying to set up my own office,

annie left the room.

existenzio: I work from home, keeping contact with the company

existenzio: anyway, I want to take a year off to travel around the world

luna: i see...good luck to you too

existenzio: thanks luna

luna: wow! that's nice...travelling

existenzio: what does actually luna mean?

sallie joined the room.

joke joined the room.

luna: i mean...travelling around the world is nice...

indiana left the room.

sallie left the room.

sallie joined the room.

existenzio: yes, I agree with you, I just asked you if your name has a special meaning

sonny left the room.

joke left the room.

raul joined the room.

luna: no...it just struck me to have that nick

The question about the meaning of 'luna's' nickname reveals the reason behind the choice of the pseudonym: 'luna' or 'karen' as she identifies herself further chose this specific nickname not for a particular reason but spontaneously; this is in contrast to 'light's' choice in 4.1., who had chosen his nickname because of its hidden meaning, which became part of the encounter between 'existenzio' and 'light'.³⁹

errick left the room.

yash1232 joined the room.

existenzio: nice!

luna: thanks

existenzio: I found it extremely difficult to find a nickname

luna: yes i strongly agree! Most of the nice names are already taken by others

jikky joined the room.

existenzio: how long have you been using this name luna?

similar joined the room.

rita joined the room.

luna: this year

existenzio: i see, but it's very nice and not odd.

existenzio: i like it

batter left the room.

luna: ya, i like it too

vina joined the room.

luna: 🌐

existenzio: luna, do you mind if I add you in my friends list?

³⁹ 'Luna' was not the nickname of that particular chatter. For ethical reasons I have changed the nicknames of the chatters I interacted with. Therefore, 'existenzio's' questions refer to the original nickname that was replaced by 'luna'.

In this story ‘existenzio’ was the first to propose to add the other chatter – ‘luna’ – in his Friends list. As soon as I took the initiative to add ‘luna’ to my Friends list, thereby enabling a more regular and closer communication, I made it very clear that I was interested in ‘luna’ and I did not let ‘luna’ express a similar interest on her part.

rita: HI ROOM

rita: ANY GAL WANNA CHAT

queen left the room.

existenzio: 😊

rita: 29 MALE

rita: FRM Australia

war joined the room

existenzio: luna?

summary joined the room.

luna: yes

existenzio: can i add you in my friends list?

sahi left the room.

descent joined the room.

war left the room.

luna: sure

existenzio: ok, just a moment

luna: ok

existenzio: I am with you in a min luna

existenzio: ok, here I am

existenzio: luna, i can see your name in my list now

existenzio: 😊

john left the room.

existenzio: luna?

lovealways joined the room.

kitty left the room.

snow joined the room.

antiglobal left the room.

existenzio: luna are you there?

poor: hi serious

luna left the room.

rock joined the room.

The first meeting between ‘existenzio’ and ‘luna’ terminated very suddenly due to connection problems on my side. I had managed though to add ‘luna’ to my Friends list without evidence of a similar interest by ‘luna’ in ‘existenzio’. Having presented ‘existenzio’ to ‘luna’ and having made a first introduction I decided to go further and attempt to meet ‘luna’ again. For the time being I only knew that ‘luna’ was a female of 26 years located in Australia. I expected that our next meeting would possibly reveal more information about ‘luna’, who until that moment was signified by only three characteristics (age, gender, location). Although I did not know more about the chatter I had the feeling that ‘luna’ was friendly and open in communication. I was curious to see whether further contacts would confirm this impression. Because the first communication terminated very suddenly I did not want ‘luna’ to believe that I had left the chatroom deliberately. For that reason I did not hesitate to talk to her again later on the same day when I found her online:

esistenzaio: hi luna, sorry i didn't say goodbye properly but I had problems with the connection.....see you very soon. have a nice day!

luna: ok, have a nice day...until next time

luna: bye bye

esistenzaio: buy luna, take care!

luna: see ya soon...take care too!

Although I was confident at the beginning that I would soon find 'luna' again and be able to continue the exchange, it took more than one week before I found her online and initiated a private discussion:⁴⁰

esistenzaio: hi luna!

luna:: how are you

esistenzaio: I am fine thank you,

esistenzaio: what about you?

esistenzaio: I havent seen you for several days

luna: yeah, i was busy doing other stuff...fixing my pc

esistenzaio: did you have problem with your pc?

luna: ya, im drive c crashed...and i have to reformat and install all the softwares

esistenzaio: mmm, it may be a bit expensive

esistenzaio: don't worry

luna: ya

esistenzaio: I have problems with the connection, its very very slow

luna: how about u? what have you been doing lately?

esistenzaio: I am a bit busy with the work, although I have to work from home during the last days,

luna: the weather here is not so good, so I stay home, watching tv and wake up early....

esistenzaio: you are in australia, right?

luna: yes

luna: its raining here almost every afternoon...

esistenzaio: its not raining here, at least for the time, but I dont want to go out, its a bit cold

esistenzaio: luna what is your real name?

luna: karen

esistenzaio: karen?

esistenzaio: nice to meet you karen

luna: yours?

esistenzaio: markus

luna: hello markus

esistenzaio: karen, do you work? study? or?

luna: i think so

luna: work

luna: i run a business here

esistenzaio: really? what kind of business?

⁴⁰ Wednesday, 8th October 2003 (1st session, Messenger).

luna: restaurant
existenzio: really? so interesting
existenzio: you mean you have your own restaurant?
existenzio: or you work there?
existenzio: karen?
existenzio: karen , are you still here? or my connection has a problem again.....?

It was again 'existenzio' who started talking to 'luna' that day. I remembered her exact location and although I was hoping that 'luna' would be impressed that I remembered the details of her self-presentation, 'luna' did not ask any questions about 'existenzio' at all. I decided to ask her about her 'real' name and she responded quickly. She posed the same question to 'existenzio' in turn. What I found interesting is my reaction when 'luna' provided her 'real' name. I said that it was nice that I met her, but actually I had met 'karen' more than a week prior to this exchange. Why did I not react the same way when I first met her? It seems that for 'existenzio', the 'real' meeting takes place only when 'real' names are revealed. As soon as 'luna' revealed her name I thought that she had made a step forward, that a further attribute of herself was just unfolding for 'existenzio'. Without any further about 'luna', the moment when she introduced herself as 'karen' made me feel that an additional characteristic of her online persona had become available to 'existenzio'. Moreover, when 'existenzio' revealed his name – no matter whether it represented the offline name of 'existenzio' – 'luna' sent a greeting to him ('hello markus'). That moment again signified for both 'Markus' and 'karen' a further step in the process of getting to know each other. The provision of the 'real' names – though unverifiable – underlined in a way the enrichment of the online personae for both chatters. Interestingly, both chatters in that case accepted the provision of 'real' names as a new or enriched introduction despite the fact that they had already exchanged more information about location, gender and so on in the last meeting. Unfortunately, the meeting terminated once more very suddenly, but I found 'karen' again later online and I did not miss the chance to open a private discussion with her:

existenzio: karen?
luna: yes, there's a problem with the connection
existenzio: are you in the restaurant now?
luna: yes

(discussion on the nature of the her job)

existenzio: you must be very busy there,
existenzio: ready to offer service and solve the problems as soon as possible
existenzio: is the restaurant yours karen?
existenzio: does it belong to your family
luna: it's mine...my parents lent me the money
existenzio: thats very nice, i wish you all the best
luna: thanks
existenzio: so, luna have you been in chatrooms for a long time?
luna: no
existenzio: ..because I am quite new

esistenzaio: do you spend hours in chatting?

esistenzaio: I am asking because I have met another guy,

luna: not so...only when I have time....i wish I had time to come here more often

esistenzaio: who is in chatrooms everyday, and he has told me that he has made a lot of friends there!

luna: but it is nice when you meet interesting people

‘Luna’ admitted that she was not spending considerable time in chatrooms and as far as I could understand she did not seem very experienced in chatting on a regular basis. Other chatters I had already met did not hesitate to express their enthusiasm about chatting. Our discussion continued with general topics mostly related to her job. Although she tended to answer my questions she seemed reserved and was not forthcoming with details about her personal and professional life.

esistenzaio: I see, and until time is the cafe open?

luna: 10pm

esistenzaio: and you are there since morning?

luna: yes

esistenzaio: mmmm, it must be a bit tiring,

luna: ya, sometimes life seems so boring

luna: yes

luna: thanks to my friends, they visit me here and talk about anything

esistenzaio: aaa , I see, yes I can imagine

luna: just so, to make some updates

esistenzaio: your friends pop in , and you have company

esistenzaio: so, your restarant must be the meeting point of your friends...that's nice

luna: something like that

(more discussion on her job)

luna: what time is it there?

esistenzaio: it is interesting job

luna: yes

esistenzaio: here is 13.31

esistenzaio: it is still lunch time

luna: ok

luna: have eaten you lunch?

luna: have u eaten you lunch?

esistenzaio: my friend asked me to join him for dinner at an italian restaurant

esistenzaio: not yet

luna: wow! that's hummy

luna: yeah, its still lunch

luna: what do you do markus?

This was the very first question asked ‘luna’ about ‘esistenzaio’; the first time, as it were, that she seemed interested in knowing more about ‘Markus’. Given that up to now her answers to ‘esistenzaio’s’ questions were very brief, I used this opportunity to

tell her about 'Markus'. The story I created left some gaps which, if 'karen' was interested, would require further contacts to be filled. But would 'luna' be interested in filling those gaps?

existenzio: aaaaa, good question, I have to talk about my self as well
existenzio: I will tell you more tomorrow, if you are in, please dont disappear again
existenzio: I work at the company at the moment
existenzio: but not full time
existenzio: and this is my problem
luna: ok
existenzio: I dont enjoy my job
luna: yeah, big problem!
existenzio: it is, believe me,
existenzio: I cooperate with this company, but it is not what i like
existenzio: anyway, I will tell you more tomorrow, I need to talk to someone,
luna: ok..
luna: see ya tomorrow then ...
existenzio: ok, karen, see you tomorrow,
existenzio: thanks a lot for the chat
luna: ok sure
existenzio: try to get a rest when you go home ok?
luna: til next time
luna: thanks to you too
luna: bye
existenzio: bye!!!
luna: bye

It was obvious that 'luna's' answers to my questions were brief. I had the feeling at that meeting that she was not very interested in getting to know 'existenzio'. Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to find out more about 'luna', as this was our first and last meeting. I sent her an instant message a few days later as I could not find her online.⁴¹

existenzio: hi Karen! Hope you are very well. I haven't met you for days and wonder how you are doing....

To my surprise I found 'luna's' instant message reply on the following day:⁴²

luna: I hope your doing fine there. As usual, i'm busy here. there's this virus which spread thru email. thank god it was removed by my virus cleaner here.

And, I answered by expressing my hope for a future meeting:

existenzio: Hi! Everything is fine, I hope your PC is not still infected by the virus. Hope you are very well!. Hope to see you very soon!!!!

⁴¹ Saturday, 11th October 2003 (instant message).

⁴² Sunday, 12th October 2003 (instant message).

I never found 'luna' online again but I got another instant message from her:⁴³

luna: Hello there! How are you? I was busy lately. I'm doing fine. I hope your doing fine there...

and I responded immediately⁴⁴:

existenzio: Hello! I am fine, how are you? I hope you are on-line tomorrow...hope to see you very soon. Take care!

I was disappointed that 'luna' did not make an appearance online again, and this is the reason why I was again surprised to receive a message from her two days later. At least I thought that 'karen' still remembered 'Markus':⁴⁵

luna : hi . I hope your fine and well there. I'm fine here, very busy. It's been awhile since we last chat...hope to see u soon.

I responded to her message and made it clear that 'existenzio' was available for an online meeting:⁴⁶

existenzio: Hello!! Yes, I am fine, I just received your message but you are offline. Hope to see you very soon. I will be here tomorrow as well!

And I sent her a further message some weeks later since I did not have any news from her. But 'luna' never responded. I was wondering what happened because although 'existenzio' and 'luna' did not develop any kind of communication on a regular basis, 'luna's' messages seemed to suggest that she had not forgotten about 'existenzio'. I did not manage to become more familiar with this online persona and the messages I received from 'luna' remained only sporadic signs of her existence. As a result, 'luna's' messages remained simple textual representations of 'luna', who therefore never became 'karen' in my mind. Each time I received 'luna's' messages I was surprised since I could not understand why she had disappeared in the first place. She could have simply stopped sending 'existenzio' messages if she was not interested at all. In none of her last messages did she refer to 'existenzio' as 'markus', something that would make sense if, as I believe, 'luna' could not form a picture of 'Markus' just as I failed to create a picture of 'karen' given the absence of more regular communication.

'Luna's' absence did not correspond for me to 'karen's' presence, as it was the case in my encounters with 'light' and 'maria'. For that reason I could not say that I missed 'karen', but I could argue that I missed 'luna's' online existence because it was only 'luna's' online existence that could reveal more of 'karen's' presence. I tried to understand why 'luna' did not have more regular contacts with 'existenzio'. Various

⁴³ Friday, 24th October 2003 (instant message).

⁴⁴ Friday, 24th October 2003 (instant message).

⁴⁵ Sunday, 26th October 2003 (instant message).

⁴⁶ Sunday, 26th October 2003 (instant message).

reasons can be suggested: problems with connection, problems with her PC, the nature of her job preventing her from spending longer periods online etc. But I also think that I, as 'existenzio', perhaps was not 'mysterious' enough; perhaps in this encounter I was too forthcoming with information about 'existenzio's' profile. 'Existenzio' was the one who initiated the discussion with 'luna', 'existenzio' was the one who first asked her about her 'real' name. 'Luna' on the other hand provided only very short answers and comments that failed to guide 'existenzio' in his attempts to explore 'luna' and himself. Although I could think of many other reasons why 'existenzio' did not manage to share his online experience with 'luna', I would like to believe that what accounted for 'luna's' disappearance was not her lack of interest in 'existenzio' but 'karen's' lack of time. As she wrote in our private meeting: 'I wish I had time to come here more often'.

4.4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The three stories of encounters between 'existenzio' and other chatters share some common characteristics but are also different from each other. What remains the same in the three stories is 'existenzio's' presence but what remains unknown is the way in which the three chatters perceived 'existenzio' and experienced the encounter and its dimensions. Clearly, I could only present the stories from the perspective of my own experience as participant observer. In these concluding reflection I will summarise some of the key elements of these three stories in order to prepare a more general and abstract analysis, which will follow in Chapter 5.

I chose my pseudonym before I entered the public chatrooms as an active participant. Therefore, the materialisation of my choice to represent myself online was reflected in the selection of the pseudonym 'existenzio'. But my self-presentation or representation eventually evolved through further choices that materialised through the selection of additional features of 'existenzio's' profile, such as gender, age, location and 'real' name. Those further choices were not pre-decided but appeared as responses to questions that I received from the chatters as they asked me to describe myself and illuminate my faceless online persona. Similarly, as the communication went on, further choices were made at times when I had to create stories about myself in order to present 'existenzio' as the representation of an offline persona. In addition to the pseudonym, I more or less retained 'existenzio's' identity for the three encounters presented in this chapter. Sustaining 'existenzio's' online existence was challenging, and even when I decided to depart from my offline existence I still ended up describing 'existenzio' in terms that reflected elements of my offline experience. The reasons for this was that I was concerned that in the completely open chatrooms there was always the possibility that someone would contact me who could easily 'test' aspects of my online profile by knowing more about a city, a language, an occupation etc.. Playing with identities, therefore, was not an 'unlimited process'. The other participants in chatrooms are very attentive; they remember the information a chatter provided about herself, they check its consistency and accuracy, and the possibility of an 'identity check' by someone who knows 'better' is a constant feature and concern of online being. Accordingly, as long as my chosen self-attributes could be verified or falsified (e.g. my knowledge of the German language), I chose to partly represent my offline status.

As a result I came to experience ‘existenzio’ not simply as a ‘free’ choice of a pseudonym for an invented offline persona (Markus), but in a way as an extension of myself in the sense that I partly represented attributes of myself or simple characteristics which I could present reasonably and convincingly. This point will be developed in more general terms in Chapter 5, where I will argue that the experience of reality in chatrooms does not generate a vision of a totally new reality based on mere signs of chatters whose identity is assumed; rather, the experience can be described as an ‘echo of reality’ based on constant representation of signs that are not totally detached from the reality they signify. During my observation of chatrooms as described in Chapter 2, I observed signs of offline personae as materialised choices (e.g. pseudonyms); in other words what I observed were mere signs of a reality that I was detached from to the extent that I was an inactive participant. During my participation in chatrooms as described in Chapter 4, I observed more closely the process in which simple signs become online representations of offline personae – no matter whether they ‘match’ the respective offline personae – but I also experienced the process by which I perceived and conceptualised the representation of online personae by signs and most importantly the relations between these online personae.

The communication and interaction between me and the other chatters enriched my understanding of the process in which chatters are represented by signs, which accumulate into a series of materialised choices such as pseudonyms. They ‘materialise’ to the extent that they become texts in public spaces; they are ‘shared’ by more than one user. They become ‘indices’ of unfolding encounters. As such they form reference points for any further communication between their users. If I forgot any such indices, my partners in the conversation were clearly irritated as the conversation seemed threatened by a lack of common history. Moreover, I learned to understand the dialectical process in which online personae unfold in chatroom and in the interactions – sometimes in private rooms – with other chatters. In my encounters I always explored both the other chatter as well as ‘existenzio’. In developing ‘existenzio’s’ profile, I followed the cues provided by those who interacted with him. The synthesis of information that is revealed through questions and answers contributed to a dialectical representation of what appeared initially as a sign (pseudonym). As a result, I did not feel that I was ‘in control’ of ‘existenzio’s’ profile. In some sense, the profile itself was left as a trace of the interaction that had taken place.

Therefore, the more ‘existenzio’ interacted with other chatters, the more ‘alive’ ‘existenzio’ became. The pseudonym became more than a mere sign – it became a ‘trace’ of an online history and an ‘echo’ of an offline reality. Therefore, what I experienced as ‘real’ in those encounters was what was consistently represented through dialectical choices, what I could make sense of, and not what I could verify as matching offline reality.

Interestingly though, in spite of the fact that I was always aware of the possibility that others could play with their online identities, I realised that what I believed in was what I perceived as ‘real’. During our encounter, it never crossed my mind that ‘light’ could be a woman. It was usually only after the encounter, when I subjected these stories to an analysis, that I began to consider other possibilities. For example, I now wonder about ‘Maria’s’ ‘true’ gender.

In the following and concluding chapter, I will analyse these experiences in greater detail and in a more abstract language. 'Echo' and 're-entry' of the real are only two of the concepts that I will use to describe 'existenzio's' peculiar 'in-between' existence and history. Much attention will be paid to the peculiar language that is spoken in chatrooms, and we will discuss how it resembles both written and spoken language. Our key argument will revolve around the possibility of a true 'in-between' state – of liminality – resulting from the interlocking of liminoid phenomena, and it is through this in-between that reality re-enters cyberspace.

5. RELATIONALITY AND THE REAL

In this concluding chapter, we aim to offer an analysis of the empirical observations from chapters 2 and especially 4. Much of what follows is therefore based on my direct experience of ‘living in’ cyberspace. We proceed in two steps. In 5.1. we focus on the language ‘spoken’ in cyberspace. While we are clearly not the first to pay special attention to the peculiar features of cyberlanguage,¹ we consider our emphasis on the liminal features of this language to be original. The analysis of language in 5.1. provides the background for a more detailed analysis of ‘community’ formation and the re-entry of the real in cyberspace. As already indicated earlier in this study, we will consider these two phenomena – ‘community’ formation and the re-entry of the real – to be one and the same. Our argument will be presented in form of ten sequential and logical steps, which summarise processes which we experienced during our covert participation in chatrooms as reported in chapter 4.

5.1. LANGUAGE AND LIMINALITY

There are several reasons why we need to pay attention to the special features of the language ‘spoken’ in cyberspace. First, since the communication in chatrooms is text-based, the typed texts are not only the tool of communication among the participants, but they are also becoming vehicles for the self-representation of the chatters. The participants in chatrooms are mirrored through the texts they produce, through the exchange of messages and the subsequent adoptions and reproductions of textual artefacts. As a result, the typed texts in chatrooms, i.e. the messages that are produced, sent and received, appear on the screen as representations of the non-visible participants. Given the fact that the communication in chatrooms is faceless and disembodied, the text messages become ‘signs’ of the participants whose feelings, wonders, and desires are textually reflected in the electronic environment. Emotions, feelings, behaviours and attitudes are expressed through the ‘typed text’ that is produced and reproduced electronically by the synchronous mode of communication. The participants’ emotions and feelings can become apparent, if at all, only through textual expressions.

Text messages do not only signify the chatters who are not visible but they also ‘materialise’ the participants’ choices. Whether I decide to say the ‘truth’ or whether I

¹ Brenda Danet is one of the pioneers of the study of cyberlanguage. See Brenda Danet, *Cyberpl@y*, also Danet, “‘Hmmm... Where’s that smoke coming from?’ Writing, Play and Performance on Internet Relay Chat”, in F. Sudweeks, M. McLaughlin and S. Rafaeli (eds), *Network and Netplay: Virtual Groups on the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: AAAI/MIT Press, 1998), pp. 47-85. This chapter is also available as an article in *JCMC* (Journal for Computer Mediated Communication), Vol. 2, No. 4 (March 1997), electronically available at: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue4/danet.html>. For other, more general works on communication and language in chatrooms see Christopher C. Werry, ‘Linguistic and Interactional Features of Internet Relay Chat’, in Susan C. Herring (ed.), *Computer-mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-cultural Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Jon Benjamins, 1996), pp. 47-63. Also Martin Lea (ed.), *Contexts of Computer-mediated Communication* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

decide to 'play' with my identity, choices such as these are made 'public' through the messages that we sent as we communicate in chatrooms. And once these choices have become public in this way, we can never exclude the possibility that others will remind us of what we have said about ourselves. Any message that we sent is open to scrutiny. This process already begins with the choice of the nickname or pseudonym; in other words, the pseudonym is already the materialisation of a choice. The same is true for any other message that we sent because any such message may evoke a response and to the extent that our message provokes a response, it becomes a 'fact' – a common 'past' – in the unfolding exchange of messages. The online beings that emerge from such exchanges – e.g. *esistenza* – with their features and qualities are 'traces' of such materialised choices. The 'choices' not only concern the features of these online beings – such as e.g. *esistenza*'s age, his gender, the place where he lives etc. – but also the choice of individual words, linguistic gestures, and indeed the choice to not respond to a message or aspects of its contents.

Of course, the distinction between the 'real' and the 'non-real' – in the sense of the 'authentic' as opposed to the merely 'apparent' – cannot always be verified in face-to-face interaction and communication; but, clearly, in the on-line communication the construction of the 'real' is more frequently and consistently challenged because it is accompanied by the absence of physical appearance. As Alan Sondheim noted:

On the net [...] one *begins* with the text of the other, which is directly coupled *only* to text and exchange of texts – and out of this, one *constructs* a real, constructs a world which is projected onto the other.²

Therefore, the language in chatrooms, as presented through the typed texts, becomes not only an instrument or medium of communication, not only a vehicle for the representation of the participants themselves, but also a vehicle of meaning in the sense that any perception of the 'real' is constituted through the participation and interaction that takes place as an exchange of typed messages. Whatever 'reality' we can find in chatrooms, it originates in language.

Second, it is my dual role as observer and participant in chatrooms that necessitates the examination of language. My role as observer required me to keep a close interpretive eye on the texts themselves and to make an effort to understand and reveal the possible meanings implied by coding and decoding messages exchanged among various participants. However, as participant I had to effectively use these textual tools in order to become an 'active' participant, i.e. in order to be able to act, to react, to interact with others. Additionally, throughout my participation I did not only have to treat the texts observed as 'plain' words but I needed to create meaning, to present the self, to make '*esistenza*' apparent, though not physically present. I needed moreover to invent modes of self-representation and make '*esistenza*' able to be assumed and imagined and thus to 'relate' him to other participants and to allow others to relate to him. Throughout my participation it was language that enabled the accommodation and representation of '*esistenza*' in textual messages; '*esistenza*' was present in dialogues only through the exchange of messages with other participants. Most importantly, it was language – as reflected in the exchange of

² Alan Sondheim, *Being Online, Net Subjectivity* (New York: Lusitania, 1996), p. 9.

messages – that made it possible for me not only to observe ‘signs’ – mere representations of participants through pseudonyms – but also to relate with what had been initially observed as ‘signs’.

On the Nature of Cyberlanguage

Generally, technological innovations can change the way we understand ‘communication’ and use ‘language’, especially if the new developments affect the way we transmit and receive messages.³ Computer technology is no exception because it is based on a new kind of language, which requires programming and expertise in order to code and decode messages. Eric Havelock notes:

[...] that one of the impulses to our enterprise today lay in the facts of what we call the computer age, and that lurking behind this event is the idea that the computer is inventing for us a new language.⁴

Havelock also points out that computers make us re-consider the very nature of language:

The computer has raised the issue of the behavior of language. What is language? What are its forms?⁵

Havelock seems unsure as to whether computers have introduced a language that is totally new or whether they have transformed the attitudes towards language in general, but he calls for a re-examination of ‘language behaviour’ in the electronic era.⁶

In the chatrooms with synchronous communication that are examined here the idiomorphic character of the language reflects the twofold nature of the messages produced. On the one hand, the messages are written messages and thus belong to the genre of written communication. On the other hand, simultaneous chat in real time through typing makes this form of communication look more like verbal communication because the exchange of messages appears as a kind of conversation.⁷

³ The literature on this subject is huge and cannot be reviewed here. Starting point for my reflections is my experience as participant in chatroom and thus as user of the language ‘spoken’ in chatrooms. More generally, Eric Havelock and Jack Goody among others have contributed to the debate on oral and written language and McLuhan has dealt with the language in the context of electronic media. See indicatively E. A. Havelock, ‘Orality and Literacy, an Overview’, in *Language & Communication*, Vol. 9, No. 2/3 (1989), pp. 87-98; Havelock, *The Muse learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); J. Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2001). See also Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London: Methuen, 1982).

⁴ E.A. Havelock, ‘Orality and Literacy, an Overview’, pp. 87-88.

⁵ Havelock, ‘Orality and Literacy, an Overview’, p. 88.

⁶ For a discussion on the ‘digital’ language see: M. Lea (ed.), *Contexts of Computer-mediated Communication*.

⁷ For works on the ethnography of writing and speaking see e.g. K. Basso, ‘The Ethnography of Writing’, in R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds), *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge:

Accordingly, Danet argues that this form of communication is neither speech nor writing but something new and 'in-between':

Digital text is clearly a form of writing. [...] At the same time, online linguistic communication can also be viewed as attenuated speech. Because it is dynamic, interactive and ephemeral, it is like conversation: we can receive instant feedback to our message, and many messages can be exchanged in rapid-fire fashion. [...] typed online communication lies between speech and writing, yet is neither: in short, it is something new.⁸

Therefore although the typed and exchanged messages are written, the speed of the exchange itself makes the online communication seem 'speech-like'; messages are sent and received in chatrooms at great speed, in short amounts of time and synchronically. In my own experience, the pressure to respond quickly and to type messages quickly often made me feel as if I was talking with the other chatters – even if I did not hear a voice. The immediacy of the conversations reminded me of face-to-face talking. Moreover, the same chatroom can accommodate various different dialogues by numerous participants at the same time, and the texts produced in this manner are not archived. Accordingly, the dialogues are produced synchronically and interactively in 'real' time as unique phenomena that cannot be reproduced in the same way.

Especially when the chatrooms are busy with many participants being 'present' and the whole communication process seems chaotic, the speed in which someone responds to the messages may affect the continuation of the communication. In fact, our observations confirmed that many chatters leave the chatrooms not long after they logged in either because they were not interested in the ongoing exchanges or because they were not prepared to wait for more than a few seconds for responses to their greetings. However, although speed is clearly important, Jacobson noted that the exchange of messages in computer mediated communication takes about five times longer than in face-to-face communication.⁹

Our experience clearly emphasises the interactive, almost instant nature of online communication. We therefore agree with Norman Denzin, who wrote:

Yet like everyday talk, cybertext discourse is contextual, immediate, and grounded in the concrete specifics of the interactional situation. It joins people

Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 425-432; N. Besnier, *Literacy, Emotion and Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); T. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse and Literature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1985).

⁸ Brenda Danet, *Cyberpl@y* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 12.

⁹ David Jacobson, 'Impression Formation in Cyberspace: Online Expectations and Offline Experiences in Text-based Virtual Communities', in *JCMC*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (September 1999), electronically available at: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue1/jacobson.html>, p. 23. Jacobson quotes J.B. Walther, 'Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal and hyperpersonal interaction', in *Communication Research*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1996), pp. 3-43.

in tiny little worlds of concrete experience.¹⁰

Such immediacy did not give us sufficient time to properly filter our responses in our chatrooms encounters. However, at first glance, the chatters do enjoy the luxury of being able to check and, if necessary, ‘censor’ the messages before sending them. They can retype messages, rearrange contents or meaning and add further text. Practically, however, such a luxury does not really exist because any such ‘delay’ interrupts the flow of the communication. In the chaotic and amorphous environment of chatrooms, the time-consuming ‘polishing’ and revising of messages rarely contributes to an effective, easy, or even pleasant communication between participants who may just have initiated a contact. The examples indicate that the more time I spent to respond to messages the more the possibilities for other chatters to alter the topic already under discussion or to just interrupt an ongoing conversation by adding irrelevant comments. Moreover, as we saw in chapter 4, our partners in the exchanges reacted with suspicion whenever we seemed to take too long to respond. They took any delay as evidence that we were in fact chatting with others, not paying exclusive attention to them. And yet, clearly, online chatting is not the same as verbal communication. It shares attributes of both writing and speaking.

Further Particularities of Cyberlanguage

This synthetic nature of ‘cyberlanguage’, as both spoken and written, conditions communication in chatrooms in two important ways. First, in that it is ‘speech-like’, cyberlanguage makes messages appear as ‘glimpses’, and the interactions take place in a frantic manner, as the chatters have to promptly respond to messages in order to keep the communication alive. Second, as written language, cyberlanguage requires users to be both creators and readers of messages at the same time. In other words, the participants become receivers and readers of the messages exchanged, and in some way they treat the messages as reading material in order to understand and interpret the messages, and in order to be able to decide whether or not the communication should continue.

The understanding and interpretation of the messages play an important role in how the participants perceive the messages and construct meaning from them. In disembodied communication, the text is inevitably a vehicle for the representation of the chatters and thus its interpretation is crucial for the perception of the other chatters. Reading and interpreting messages is required for the ‘reading’ and ‘interpreting’ of the Other in this type of communication. Thus, the messages sent and received direct the continuation of the online interaction, which always remains contingent upon the interpretation of the messages. However, due to the immediacy and ‘verbal-like’ nature of the communication, the chatters have only tiny amounts of time available to read and interpret the messages and to decide whether and how to continue.

The presence of text in chat dialogues implies that the relationship between the reader and the text is pivotal for the interpretation of the text and the understanding of its

¹⁰ Norman K. Denzin, ‘Cybertalk and the Method of Instances’, in Steve Jones (ed.), *Doing Internet Research*, pp. 107-125 (112). It is important to stress that Norman’s findings apply to newsgroups, not to chatrooms. Still, our experience mirrors his.

contents. The text's meaning is contingent upon the engagement of the reader, who in this particular case is both creator and interpreter of messages. Iser describes this contingency by emphasizing the importance of the relation between the reader and the text. He states that reading is different from other social interactions in that it is based on the absence of face-to-face interaction:

An obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction is the fact that with reading there is no *face-to-face-situation*. A text cannot adapt itself to each reader with whom it comes in contact. The partners in dyadic interaction can ask each other questions in order to ascertain how far their views have controlled contingency, or their images have bridged the gap of inexperienceability of one another's experiences. The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it.¹¹

In the process of communication in chatrooms the text-reader relation is therefore crucial. The messages sent and received may be full of meaning, but they remain meaningless without the engagement of the reader, i.e. without the other participants. Cyberlanguage as a speech-like but written language requires that it is read and interpreted by someone receiving the text and yet the conditions are such that the language is experienced as oral. As a result, cyberlanguage – here understood more narrowly as the language used in synchronous chatroom communication – does not leave the text's reader and interpreter isolated from the text's creator. In chatroom communication, the chatters interact synchronically, thereby allowing for the dyadic relation between the text's creator and the reader-interpreter even though there is no 'face-to-face situation'. While much depends on the interpretation of the texts, the reader-interpreter can always turn to the text's creator and ask for further clarifications.

The electronic environment of chatrooms becomes an anarchical and amorphous environment because it accommodates many chatters. The messages are sent in great numbers and the flow of communication is not continuous as 'irrelevant' messages frequently interrupt the flow. Accordingly it becomes very difficult to sustain the dyadic relation outlined above. Messages have to be exchanged quickly in order to keep up with a constantly changing screen; information has to be selected and filtered in order to decide what contact to continue, what contact to initiate, and what contact to discontinue. In this environment it is a challenge to constitute and find meaning in the Other. Richard Rorty's questions spring to mind:

Does the medium between the self and reality get them together or keep them apart? [...] Should we see the medium primarily as a medium of expression – of articulating what lies deep within the self? Or should we see it as primarily a medium of representation – showing the self what lies outside it?¹²

But Rorty's question, addressed to language in general, becomes even more pertinent when applied to cyberlanguage, where it combines with Havelock's 'orality problem':

¹¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 166.

¹² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 11.

What happens to the structure of a spoken language when it becomes a written artifact? [...] From this, one can proceed to the philosophical (or psychological) level and ask: Is oral communication the instrument of an oral state of mind, a type of consciousness quite different from the literate state of mind?¹³

This question is closely related to the truth-content and reality-content of the messages. The more our mode of communication resembles verbal communication, Derrida suggests, the closer we get to our 'real' thoughts:

Phone, in effect, is the signifying substance *given to consciousness* as that which is most intimately tied to the thought of the signified concept. From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself. When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious also of keeping as close as possible to my thought [...].¹⁴

But just how is the 'real' constituted and perceived in chatrooms in which language – though written – entails 'phone' in a verbal way? Our experience tells us that the 'reality' of the Other in these encounters was not exclusively constructed from the explicit information given in the messages. 'Maria' felt that 'existenzio' was male long before he disclosed information about his online gender. Especially when we consider the messages as written texts that can be 'deciphered', we can appreciate how meaning can be assumed creatively by the recipients of the texts. Generally, in the process of performing and interpreting a text, meanings are presupposed. The process of creating meaning from the messages takes place regardless of whether the messages convey an offline 'truth'. Once 'existenzio' was recognized as male, he *was* male for the purpose of the unfolding dialogue.

Iser emphasizes the importance of 'filling the blanks with projections', of imaginatively creating meaning from dialogues that are always 'incomplete':

What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes, the gaps arising out of the dialogue – this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What *is* said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning.¹⁵

Iser's statement concerns the 'act of reading', but in the context of chatroom behaviour it assumes additional significance because the chatters interact through reading and writing. The projections therefore obtain their own online reality as they 'materialise' in further exchanges and leave a 'trace'.

¹³ E. A. Havelock, *The Muse learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 24.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, (trans. Alan Bass), (London: The Athlone Press, 1972), p. 22. For a discussion of 'conscious' and 'unconscious' texts see also Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 210-211.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 168.

Language and Liminality

The interaction between participants through texts enables the interplay between participants as readers of texts and participants as producers of text. Since the producers of texts are signified by texts – by textual choices and representations in the faceless environment of chatrooms – the interplay between participants becomes an interplay between participants as readers and participants as ‘texts’. In that sense, when readers interpret and create meaning from the texts received, they become ‘readers’ of participants. Thus, when ‘existenzio’ was reading and interpreting messages he received from ‘light’, in essence he was attempting to read ‘light’ by creating meaning from the texts sent by ‘light’. But, as we noted, in chatrooms meaning is constituted not only from the given information but also from gaps – called ‘negations’ by Iser – which require projections in order to be filled. These gaps have the potential to open connections in the text which in turn enable the reader to shift from one perspective to another and thus to end up with different interpretations:

The process of negation therefore situates the reader halfway between a ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet’.¹⁶

Iser recognises the interaction between the text and the reader through ‘negations’ as constituting a ‘history which is actually produced in the act of reading. This is the history of changing standpoints, and as history it is a condition for the production of new codes’.¹⁷

The conditions that prevail in chatrooms increase the significance of these gaps or ‘negations’ even further. Because of the chaos that prevails in the public rooms and because all interaction takes place under time pressure, there is an even greater need to imaginatively fill the gaps with projections. Generally, chatrooms users share the feeling that any communication that emerges is fragile: it is bound to be interrupted by irrelevant messages; it is subject to connection problems, and vulnerable to misunderstandings. It is this fragility that requires users to ‘deal with’ gaps as quickly as possible. The gaps are ‘mysteries’ that inevitably appeal to the imagination. For example, when ‘maria’ suddenly disappeared, ‘existenzio’ was left with gaps that triggered further speculation about ‘maria’s’ online and indeed offline existence.

These ‘gaps’ in meaning also result from the ‘ephemerality’ of the messages posted in the chatroom. We need to remember that these messages are visible only to the extent that they fit onto the screen. As new messages are posted, the screen scrolls down while older messages seem to disappear. Retrieving these messages requires that users stop paying attention to new incoming messages, thereby risking to lose touch with the ongoing exchanges. Moreover, the users can only see the messages that were posted since the time they logged on. To some extent, therefore, users do not know the context they enter as they log into the room. They find themselves in the ‘middle’ of something though it is not clear what this is a ‘middle’ of. It was not clear to ‘existenzio’, for example, how much ‘light’ was able to see of the earlier exchange

¹⁶ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 213.

¹⁷ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 212.

between 'existenzio', 'charles' and 'clue'. This uncertainty partly dictated how 'existenzio' presented himself to 'light'.

Creating, sending, reading, and interpreting messages in chatrooms with synchronous communication causes gaps in meaning and ambiguities, and yet these gaps are crucial when it comes to the constitution of meaning. The meaning is gradually constructed and becomes more stable as time passes and further regular contacts are being established. However, at the beginning of the communication the self-representation may not be totally formed, and the certainty of uncertainty prevails regarding the Other who sends or receives the messages. The reader of the message is likely to presuppose meanings – especially during the time one is waiting for a response – or to consider the given information as metaphoric or symbolic due to the lack of certainty about the Other. The faceless, disembodied communication in chatrooms gives way to the certainty of the uncertainty because the interpretation of texts and accordingly the understanding of the Other takes place in an environment where the 'imaginary' can replace the 'actual' or fill gaps in the 'actual'. Such a 'replacement' or 'projection' of course should not be taken for granted at every stage in the encounter, but instead it appears as a choice. It is not only the choice of the creator of the messages to properly present an offline reality but it is also the choice of the receiver and thus interpreter to perceive and understand it in certain ways.

The certainty of uncertainty thus prevails as a permanent condition of any encounter in chatrooms. Nevertheless, as we will see in 5.2. below, there is a 'building-up' process in which such an encounter, if sustained for longer, can build up a common history which leaves the online personae involved in this history as its 'traces'. The experience of this encounter has its own 'reality' for two reasons. First, there are the 'materialised choices' of the participants involved as they are reflected in the history of the encounter and the features of the interacting online personae. The encounter between 'existenzio' and 'light' found its future direction from its own past. Second, as we shall see in 5.2., these encounters, if they are to be sustained, attract and absorb elements of offline reality. Even where 'existenzio' departed from our offline reality he still needed to reflect a reality that at least he could know and would thus be able to talk about. This 're-entry of the real' is produced collectively through the play of questions and answers – questions that could come from anywhere, especially from those who know more – and therefore connects reality and relationality.

For the moment, however, we will continue to pursue our discussion of language as it provides the background for the analysis in 5.2. The certainty of uncertainty turns the communicative terrain of chatrooms into a terrain of transformative meaning, given that 'what is not said' may be only assumed. In other words 'what is not said' may be full of potentiality dependent upon the interpretation by the reader (who is always also the creator of texts) and thus 'what is not said' may trigger imaginary and symbolic interpretations.

Textual messages as representation of the Self in the process of communication pass through different stages where the information they evoke is 'there' as long as it is written, sent and received. But, under the conditions of the certainty of uncertainty, the information ceases to play a pivotal role unless it is 'accepted' and thereby 'verified' by the next textual message. 'Existenzio' can send out a message declaring that he is male, but that message 'takes effect' only when others respond and in their

response assume that ‘existenzio’ is male. The ‘distance’ between sending and receiving a message therefore creates a place where the meaning is, in Iser’s terms, half way between a ‘no longer’ and a ‘not yet’. And that distance, we suggest, is what transforms the electronic environment into a stage of performance. Mechanisms of imagination and fantasy can be triggered in an environment where meaning is constructed through the interplay between the sender and the receiver, between the text and the reader. That is why the role of the participant as reader plays a decisive role in the process of communication and in creating a space of playful activities: because it is the engagement of the reader-participant which supports play and performance in chatrooms through the process of reading and interpreting texts, of reading and interpreting and thereby ‘accepting’ expressions and representations of the Other. According to Barbatsis,

‘cyberspace’ is an ideational object constituted by the reader. Its ‘reality’ or object of contemplation is the ‘reader’s’ own ideational activity.¹⁸

Similarly, Iser explains:

Authors play games with readers, and the text is the playground. [...] the text is made up of a world that is yet to be identified and is adumbrated in such a way as to invite picturing and eventual interpretation by the reader.¹⁹

The electronic environment of communication as a textual environment creates opportunities for play and performance. Images of presentation and self-representation are produced and reproduced by the participant-receiver who at the same time acts as interpreter of texts, which are representations of other participants. The presence of ambiguities as possibilities of symbolic presentation and representation enables the sequence of imaginary conceptualisations of the ‘real’.

As we noted above, the construction of meaning in chatrooms is partly inspired by ‘filling’ the gaps in the representation of the Self and the ‘real’, and as such it involves imagination. This process reminds us of what Lakoff and Johnson call ‘negotiation of meaning’ between people who find themselves in a situation where they have to interact without sharing a common background of knowledge, values or culture. Lakoff and Johnson define ‘negotiation of meaning’ as follows:

When people who are talking don’t share the same culture, knowledge, values, and assumptions, mutual understanding can be especially difficult. Such understanding *is* possible through the negotiation of meaning. To negotiate meaning with someone, you have to become aware of and respect both the differences in your backgrounds and when these differences are important. [...] Metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and in communicating the nature of unshared experience. This skill consists, in large

¹⁸ Gretchen Barbatsis, Michael Fegan and Kenneth Hansen, ‘The Performance of Cyberspace: An Exploration Into Computer-Mediated Reality’, in *JCMC*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (September 1999), p. 31. Electronically available at: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol5/issue1/barbatsis.html>.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Iser, ‘The Play of the Text’, in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds), *Languages of the Unsayable* (Stanford: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 325-339 (327). See also Peter Hutchinson, *Games, Authors, Play* (London: Methuen, 1983).

measure, of the ability to bend your world view and adjust the way you categorize your experience.²⁰

We understand the ‘negotiation of meaning’ as the process of understanding, which has to be enriched by projections and presumptions in order for the communication to continue. In this sense ‘negotiating meaning’ gains a pivotal role in the chatroom environment given that multiple users, with indefinable and initially unverifiable origins, backgrounds, cultures, enter the chatrooms aiming to initiate contacts.

Therefore, the dialogues produce (at least at the beginning) disembodied meaning, in the sense that it needs negotiation to become more certain and as such to direct the participants in establishing and sustaining their contacts in more regular interactions. This meaning is negotiated by the engagement of the participants, who act as creators and readers of the textual messages at the same time. Metaphors and symbols appear in the process of communication since the lack of physical presence triggers mechanisms of play and performance. Yet the play works as play only when it is taken seriously – that is, when it is given its own reality in the responses that it evokes. ‘Existenzio’ can play with the features of his identity to the extent that others are prepared to presuppose the reality of these features in their responses. The ‘reality’ of a message sent, therefore, depends on the future response that it evokes. And between the sending and receiving of the messages, therefore, we find ourselves in an in-between. This in-between is reflected in the language spoken in cyberspace, in its ephemerality, its hybrid nature between written and oral communication, its immediacy. In this sense language in chatrooms can be examined from a liminal perspective as being able to create transient meaning.

In other words, since the communication takes place as the ‘momental occurrence’ of messages – due to the immediacy of exchanges and its ‘speech-like’ nature – and since the continuation of communication requires the engagement of participants as readers, chatrooms have the potential of becoming a liminal space. This liminality, at least as a potential, is ‘built’ into the language ‘spoken’ in cyberspace; it is built into the play of questions and answers, and into the messages which always already expect a response. And precisely because the reality-status of the message depends on a future response, it is in the very moments between messages that liminality is felt most clearly. For these are the moments when participants are ‘invited’ to join conversations, to start contacts, to respond to questions; these are the moments when the chatters are given the opportunity to imagine, to play, to perform, to create metaphors, to pretend. These are moments when the participants can create labels for themselves, when they can ‘stand-out’ from their fixed offline status and defined structures, and when they can wear symbolic ‘costumes’ hidden behind the anonymity and invisibility that the electronic environment creates for them. These are the moments when the participants place their online personae onto the stage, expecting a reaction from an unknown audience. And these are the moments when participants as receivers and readers of messages are given the opportunity to accept or reject the above-mentioned possibilities, to accept or reject the possibility of pretence and disguise.

²⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), p. 231.

These moments when the participants are about to pose or answer questions, to comment and respond, are dynamically transformative because on the one hand, they underline the potentiality of self-presentation in unpredicted and thus authentic ways, and on the other hand, they contribute to the perception of what is and what is not 'real'. Even if the participants decide to present their offline persona – and thus to not use opportunities for play and disguise – the 'reality' of the messages makes initially no difference for those who receive them. They still have to make their own choice whether or not and how to respond to the message. And they have to make that choice under the condition of the certainty of uncertainty.

According to Victor Turner, in the liminal period of the rite of passage the ritual subjects have ambiguous characteristics as they are situated 'in-between' the two states of separation and re-aggregation. As neophyte individuals, the ritual subjects do not possess definite attributes but instead show 'few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state'.²¹ Such beings according to Turner are in-between and, in his words, 'neither here nor there', but rather 'betwixt and between'.²²

[...] liminal entities are stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and levelled to a homogenous social state through discipline and ordeal. [...] In this no-place and no-time that resists classification, the major classifications and categories of culture emerge within the instruments of myth, symbol and ritual.²³

We thus have to understand the very moments between sending and receiving messages as critical in the sense that during them the participants appear as stripped from definite structures and attributes, as they are offered the opportunity to choose further textual representations – regardless of whether they reflect offline reality – and to 'accept' the Other's textual representation. These are the moments which offer opportunities for a kind of 'ecstasis', a temporary 'standing-out' from offline reality.

5.2. THE RE-ENTRY OF THE 'REAL'

Yet, this 'liminal potential' that we find in the very language spoken in chatrooms does not become actual in each and every encounter. In particular, we must remember that according to Turner, liminal phenomena are collective phenomena – they involve a community, in fact the very special kind of community that he calls 'communitas'. All we can say at this stage in our analysis is therefore that the condition in chatrooms are such that transient meaning could emerge, that an 'in-between existence' could be experienced, and that the play of questions and answers that could induce such experiences involves more than one participant, i.e. it involves relationality. In order to be able to see in more detail how exactly these notions are linked, we need to theorise some of the encounters we reported in chapter 4. Our 'theory' will take the form of a series of steps or stages, which are both chronological and logical, and we will argue that these encounters as processes went through these stages. Our analysis

²¹ Victor Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94-130 (94).

²² Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', in *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

²³ Turner and Turner, 'Appendix A: Notes on Processual Symbolic Analysis' in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 243-255 (249).

will show how relationality and the real emerge together from the in-between moments in the process.

Step 1: Entering cyberspace—liminal or liminoid?

Although entering chatrooms involves a moment of ‘separation’ in which participants step back from their offline lives and decide how to present themselves online, it is clear that this separation does not turn chatrooms into a liminal space *per se*. This is because both entering chatrooms and the initial choice of one’s online features are based on individual choices. Initially at least, the participants decide for themselves to what extent they are prepared to leave their online existence. But for Turner, liminality is always a collective phenomenon; it is not a matter of individual choice. The neophytes in tribal societies undergo rites of passage not because they have chosen to do so but because the cycles of social life that prevails in society requires them to move on to a different ‘status’, e.g. to move from boyhood to manhood. There is a sense, therefore, in which the liminal phase in rites of passage is clearly not the result of an individual choice. Thus, the liminality that Turner talks about is in a sense ‘communal’ from the outset even though a new type of community – *communitas* – emerges in the middle phase of the ritual. But the visitors of chatrooms do what they do as individuals, mostly in the privacy of their homes. There is no social pressure compelling them to enter chatrooms that would be comparable to the social pressure that normally accompanies rites of passage. In fact, for the phenomenon under investigation, entering the chatroom is probably the one and only purely individualistic and voluntary action to be considered. Once in the chatroom, the encounters are the result of the interaction with others and, as we shall discuss below, even the individual choices assume an ‘interactive’ if not ‘collective’ nature.

For these phenomena, where individuals seem to undergo phases of separation, limen and re-aggregation as the result of their own individual choices, Turner coined the term ‘liminoid’. Modern societies, he argued, have increasingly replaced the liminal with the liminoid. Let us briefly reconsider the distinction between ‘liminal’ and ‘liminoid’. According to Turner, ‘liminoid’ or ‘quasi-liminal’ are:

terms describing the many genres found in modern industrial leisure that have features resembling those of liminality. These genres are akin to the ritually liminal, *but not identical with it*. They often represent the dismembering of the liminal, for various components that are joined in liminal situations split off to pursue separate destinies as specialized genres. [...] They are plural, fragmentary (from the point of view of the total inventory of liminoid thoughts, words, and deeds), experimental, idiosyncratic, quirky, subversive, utopian, and characteristically produced and consumed by identifiable individuals, in contrast to liminal phenomena [...] which are often anonymous or divine in origin.²⁴

In the same work, Turner uses a pilgrimage as an example of a ‘liminoid phenomenon’:

²⁴ Turner and Turner, ‘Appendix A: Notes on Processual Symbolic Analysis’ in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 243-255 (253). My emphasis.

Pilgrimage, then, has some of the attributes of liminality in passage rites: release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behavior; *communitas*; [...] emergence of the integral person from multiple personae; movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, [...] movement itself, a symbol of *communitas*, which changes with time, as against stasis, which represents structure; individuality posed against the institutionalised milieu; and so forth. But since it is voluntary, not an obligatory social mechanism to mark the transition of an individual or group from one state or status to another within the mundane sphere, pilgrimage is perhaps best thought of as 'liminoid' or 'quasi-liminal' rather than 'liminal' in van Gennep's full sense.²⁵

The liminoid is akin but not identical to the liminal:

I have called the latter 'liminoid' by analogy to 'ovoid' and 'asteroid'. I wish to convey by it something that is akin to the ritually liminal, or like it, but not identical to it.²⁶

Turner also characterises the 'liminoid' as a dismembering of the 'liminal', as a 'sparagmos' of the 'liminal':

The 'liminoid' represents, in a sense, the dismembering, the *sparagmos*, of the liminal; for various things that 'hang together' in liminal situations split off to pursue separate destinies as specialized arts and sports and so on, as liminoid genres.²⁷

The term 'liminoid' indicates that the 'liminoid' and the 'liminal' are similar. The meaning of words such as 'ovoid' and 'asteroid' implies the 'something-like'.²⁸ 'Liminoid' therefore means 'liminal-like' but the difference between the two is just as important as their similarity.²⁹ Turner's use of the terms 'dismembering' and 'sparagmos' help us illuminate the difference between 'liminoid' and 'liminal'. Both 'dismembering' and 'sparagmos' refer to a kind of separation. More particularly, 'dismembering' refers to separation and division.³⁰ 'Sparagmos', a word of Greek origin, refers to 'tearing to pieces'.³¹ 'Liminoid' phenomena therefore are produced by specific individuals or particular groups as the result of individualistic and voluntary

²⁵ Turner, 'Introduction: Pilgrimage as a Liminoid Phenomenon', in Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 1-39 (34-35).

²⁶ Victor Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', in *Blaizing the Trail*, pp. 48-65 (56).

²⁷ Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', p. 56. My emphasis.

²⁸ E.g. ovoid as an adjective stands for 'shaped like an egg' according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

²⁹ Turner explains: '[...] the "-oid" here derives from Greek *-eidos*, a form, shape, and means 'like, resembling'; "liminoid" resembles the "liminal" without being identical with it'. See: Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre. The seriousness of human play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), p. 32.

³⁰ It is described as cutting or tearing off the limbs of a person or animal. In other context it may refer to the division of a country into parts by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.

³¹ Or, 'heartbreak' in other context. See: *Oxford Greek-English Learner's Dictionary*. Also see meaning of 'sparagmos' in H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Great Dictionary of the Greek Language* (Athens: Ioannis Sideris, 1907), Vol. 4 (ρ-ω), p. 98.

actions while 'liminal' phenomena are produced collectively.

The 'liminoid' as 'sparagmos of the liminal' may represent a breaking up of the 'liminal', a split from the 'liminal', a separation from the 'liminal' in the sense that liminoid phenomena are produced by individuals and their individual choices in a between-between situation. The use of 'sparagmos' could refer here to moments where the ritual subject – 'the passenger' or 'liminar' – leaves the liminal phenomena by taking an individual choice. But Turner also allows for the possibility that especially in modern societies the 'liminoid' has effectively replaced the 'liminal'.

In some rare passages, Turner also reflected on how the 'liminoid' and 'liminal' can co-exist or work together:

[...] when a group of liminoid artists constitutes itself as a coterie, it tends to generate its own admission rites, providing a liminal portal to its liminoid precinct [...]. [...] Despite the coexistence of liminal and liminoid phenomena in all societies, it remains true that in complex societies, today's liminoid is yesterday's liminal.³²

Our empirical work confirms that at least initially the liminoid and the liminal can be clearly distinguished. The decision to enter a chatroom is a matter of individual choice and thus an example of the 'liminoid'. The choice is made for various reasons from 'searching for friends' to 'having fun'. When we say that this decision is based on individual choices, we mean that the individuals as they enter the chatrooms are not part of a group or community that imposes on them the obligation to detach themselves from their present status by entering cyberspace. In other words, the participants enter the chatrooms voluntarily; their movement from the offline to the online world is not part of a collectivised and ritualised movement towards online interaction. If there is a community involved in the process – and we will have to return to this question below – it will have to emerge *after* the initial decision to enter the chatroom. Therefore, liminality, if it is to emerge at all, will have to emerge on the basis of the liminoid, suggesting that the liminal may appear as a sparagmos of the liminoid and not, as Turner suggested, the other way around.

Step 2: 'Separation' and the certainty of uncertainty

Entering a chatroom requires users to choose a pseudonym. In other words, each user has to choose an online persona with a name and certain features as required by the software and it is only through this online persona that users can interact with other users in chatrooms. There is a sense, therefore, in which chatroom interaction is interaction between online personae. What is important for the users is that the choice of their online persona offers them an opportunity to take a step back from their offline reality. In other words, they have to decide to what extent their online persona should reflect their offline reality. The features of their offline existence become contingent: features such as sex, age, location etc. suddenly become matters of choice. What is given in our offline reality suddenly assumes the character of an accessory or ornament that we choose as a conscious decision about 'style'. The users are therefore

³² Victor Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', in *Blaizing the Trail*, p. 58.

in a position to reflect on and 'juggle' with what are otherwise constant features of their offline existence. And this step implies a 'separation', a 'stepping back' from their offline reality. This holds true even if users decide to choose an online persona that mirrors their offline reality. What is decisive is not the choice they make but the fact that they have to make a choice, for it is during that moment of choice that they can contemplate the suspension of their offline reality. Even those interested only in 'lurking' have to undergo this moment of choice. This 'separation' recalls the 'separation' and 'detachment' phase of rites of passage.

Of course, for the unfolding encounters in chatrooms it is initially quite irrelevant whether the interacting online personae are 'authentic' or 'truthful' representations of their offline creators. Our empirical work has shown that the profile of our online persona was seriously scrutinised in the ensuing game of questions and answers of the online encounters, and we found ourselves under constant pressure to sustain 'existenzio's' story in a manner that was consistent and 'persuasive'. However, in the early interactions, the very vague profile that we designed for 'existenzio' was simply not subject to verification. For there to be any interaction at all, 'existenzio's' profile had to be accepted at 'face value'. It was only afterwards, in the unfolding encounter, in the game of questioning and answering, that 'existenzio's' profile became susceptible to questioning and even 'testing', e.g. when 'existenzio' was asked to write a greeting in German.

And yet even in the encounters that continued for a considerable amount of time, in which inevitably 'existenzio's' profile became more and more refined in response to the questions he was asked and in which his 'friends' got to know him better and better, the certainty of uncertainty remained a constant feature of the interaction. Even now, 'light's' true gender and his true age remain mere hypotheses, and the same applies to 'Maria's' profile. Unless a clear mistake allows us to strictly 'falsify' an online persona as inconsistent or simply 'wrong', the extent to which online persona reflects an offline reality remains unverifiable. It is therefore not only our online profile that is driven by 'choice'; in fact, the extent to which we accept other profiles as 'facts' or the extent to which we simply suspend judgement are matters of choice. The experience is therefore strangely individualising in that the online reality we are offered in our encounters is 'real' to the extent that we accept it as such and then increasingly presuppose its reality in our interactions.

Step 3: Online personae coming into being

At the very moment 'existenzio' appears in a chatroom, s/he is indeed only a word, a sign, pure 'form'. For anything to happen – for example, for communication between 'existenzio' and others to take place – the form 'existenzio' has to be filled with contents. 'Light', 'Maria' and the others begin to ask the typical questions – a/s/l: age, sex, location? The interaction inevitably draws 'existenzio' into the game of questions and answers. As a result of this process, 'existenzio's' profile becomes increasingly refined as we have to 'imagine' more and more details about 'existenzio' as he responds to the questions. This process is just as much driven by our choices to envision 'existenzio' in a certain manner as it is driven by the questions that 'existenzio' has to confront. His online profile develops in certain directions rather than others because his online 'friends' chose to explore certain features of his reality. 'Existenzio's' increasingly refined profile is the 'trace' left by this interactive and

dialectical, creative exploration of an emerging reality.

We already emphasised the important creative function of ‘imagination’ in this process. The disembodied communication in chatrooms always leaves ‘gaps’ which need to be filled with projections if communication is to continue. These gaps and the need to fill them play a crucial role in the dynamics of online interaction. Initially, as explained, the online personae are pure forms, names without contents. Any communication that involves them inevitably adds contents to their names – at the very least the online personae accumulate ‘history’ by interacting with others and thereby refine their profiles. For example, as a result of his online history, ‘existenzio’ developed a reputation for being a ‘polite chatter’, an attribute that became important in some of his longer encounters. Still, as frequently noted, the certainty of uncertainty prevails. With each gap filled, new gaps emerge. With each question answered, new questions suggest themselves. Moreover, much of what takes place in the public rooms is chaotic as large numbers of chatters enter, leave or send messages to the room. The typical, short encounter with other chatters therefore tends to be faceless, transient and anonymous. In fact, the dynamics of the more stable interactions is largely driven by the desire to overcome this anonymity, for example by asking chatters for their ‘real name’. But the ‘real name’, once revealed, only intensifies the question: is it ‘really’ real? The certainty of uncertainty therefore operates as the underlying dynamics of the questions and answers – as the hermeneutics of online interaction, sometimes resembling a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. The search for ‘facts’ reveals ‘information’, but the information thus revealed only re-poses the question of its reality. Our empirical work certainly confirms the impression that chatroom environment is intrinsically ‘critical’. ‘Existenzio’ was frequently ‘tested’, and the pressure to ‘keep him alive’ by passing these tests largely determined his ‘character development’.

Already at this stage in the analysis it is important to appreciate how ‘existenzio’ came into being – how he ‘was being revealed’ – in a process that involved not only his offline creators but also the online personae who responded to his appearance. Given the nature of cyberlanguage and the conditions of online interaction – time-pressure – ‘existenzio’s’ development was not planned or predetermined. In fact, given that the chatrooms we selected for our work were thematically open, it was impossible to predict what questions ‘existenzio’ would have to answer in his encounters. There is a sense, therefore, in which online personae cannot be designed prior to their online existence. Rather, they take shape as a result of their online encounters. ‘Existenzio’s’ formation often came as a surprise to us as we very quickly had to respond to questions we had not anticipated and as we tried to ‘manage’ the sometimes unintended consequences of our answers.

Step 4: ‘Consistency’ as a precondition of sustained interaction

As ‘existenzio’ came into being and as his online persona accumulated the history of his interactions with others, great attention had to be paid to the consistency of his narrative self-presentation. We already noted that the atmosphere in chatrooms is ‘critical’ in the sense that the information provided is not simply accepted but is subjected to intense scrutiny. Precisely because the facticity of the information can rarely be directly verified, chatters appear to focus their attention on the internal consistency of the narrated stories. They constantly look out for ‘mistakes’, and

accordingly they appear to remember even the smallest details of the unfolding interactions. Every small lapse in concentration, every small detail that 'existenzio' forgot, was brought back to his attention by his online 'friends'.

There are several reasons why a consistent story is a precondition for sustained interaction in chatrooms. In particular, we must notice that consistency is not a moral value as such. Rather, there are practical reasons related to the circumstances of the interaction that make consistency a crucial factor in the unfolding encounters. First, as we noted in 5.1., online communication has nothing to rely on but the texts and in particular the contents of the texts as they are exchanged between the chatters. This is very different to offline communication, where we can tell any story about ourselves without losing oneself as an embodied person as constant reference point of 'who we are'. No such constant reference point exists in disembodied online communication. As a result any such constant reference points have to be created. In fact, for there to be any sustained interaction and continuity, the involved online personae must have fairly stable 'coordinates'. A stable, unchanging pseudonym is just one of such stable coordinates. In addition, the online personae must have fairly stable features that do not change randomly because otherwise the chatters will not know to whom they are sending messages and from whom they receive messages. The online profile of each chatter functions like an 'address' consisting of a pseudonym and any further information such as age, sex, location and so on. If this address changes randomly, the chatters will not be able to build up a shared history of interaction in which they learn something about themselves and each other. They will be unable to build up 'expectations' which are crucial for navigating future interactions. With each random change of an 'address', the chatters would have to re-initiate their interaction and start again from scratch.

A further reason why consistency is important in online communication is that there is an offline expectation that persons have certain stable features, especially once they reach a certain age. Such stable features include not only age, sex and location but also profession, hobbies, and generally a person's past, which includes travel experiences, relationships etc. The profile of an online persona must be consistent to the extent that such consistency would also be expected from an offline person. In other words, the random fluctuation of certain key personal features simply does not reflect the offline reality of a human being. Online communication is 'serious play' in the sense that, even if you play, your play is expected to be 'convincing'. Chatrooms invite participants to play with their identities and yet the critical environment provided only accepts 'serious play' in which the suggested identities, whether illusory or real, must at least be sufficiently plausible.

Finally, precisely because much of the information provided in online communication cannot be verified, the chatters tend to focus on those 'facts' that they have 'witnessed': the materialised choices of the online personae. 'Existenzio' may be 'lying' in the sense that his online profile does not reflect the offline reality of his creators, but at least he cannot lie about things he said, information he provided, during his online interactions. Or at least, he cannot lie about the history he shares with the other chatters without contradicting himself – and these contradictions would be noted by his 'friends'. It seems that chatters pay great attention to the shared histories of their encounters because this is the only 'reality' over which they have some control. They may not know whether 'existenzio' is 'really' male, but they

know that 'existenzio' 'said' he was male, and they remember the other 'data' he 'revealed' about himself. Similarly, they expect 'existenzio' to remember what they 'said' about themselves. In the absence of any physical presence, and due to the certainty of uncertainty, 'getting the story right' and remembering the details of the ongoing encounters and their pasts is crucial for the building up of 'trust'. Again, just like 'consistency', trust is not necessarily a moral value in online communication. Rather, trust refers to the 'stability' of addresses in faceless, disembodied interaction, which finds re-assurance in its own history.

Step 5: bios and logos

We already noted how the 'critical atmosphere' in chatrooms can sometimes resemble a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. The dynamics of the interaction was often driven by a search for 'the real' as all participants are aware that the surface-level information could conceal as much as reveal offline reality. The resulting game of questions and answers therefore appears to have a philosophical purpose. Socrates questioned his listeners about their lives and their discourses and self-representations. His purpose was to discover whether there was a connection – a 'match' – between bios and logos. The game of questions and answers in chatroom is not entirely unrelated to the Socratic questioning although the online personae have no bios. Of course, 'existenzio' can be asked about his appearance and his life, about what he does, but his answers remain pure discourse, logos. Online communication does not allow the questioners to compare the online discourse with the 'real life' of a person – as for example Socrates is able to 'see' that Cephalus's logos so clearly contradicts his bios at the beginning of the *Republic*. In fact, Socrates remarks that he is 'delighted' with what Cephalus says about himself, and yet it is obvious that Cephalus is a 'caricature' with an all-too visible rift between bios and logos.

Online communication cannot establish such rifts with the same degree of accuracy. However, the game of questions and answers sometimes appears to search for the bios underlying the logos. The questions always reach beyond what has already been said, aiming to disclose further information. As a result, the profiles of the online personae become more refined and richer, but in that they remain 'text', their internal consistency as well as the extent to which they 'remember' the histories of their online encounters form the key 'touchstones' of their reality.

Step 6: The collective construction of the online personae

'Existenzio's' profile gains in depths and details through the collective game of questions and answers in his encounters with 'light', 'Maria' and others. It is under the pressure of the questions posed by his contacts that 'existenzio' comes into being. The pure form that is his name is filled with contents in response to the questions he is asked. Moreover, 'existenzio' not only has to respond to questions; he is also confronted with suggestions as to what his life could be like. He is a German living in London – is he working there? The questions turn into suggestion in that they anticipate the range of possible answers based on offline expectations. His online contacts thereby determine the directions of his future character development. This is true especially under the conditions of communicating in cyberlanguage, which, as we noted, shares features with both written and spoken language. These conditions require a direct and spontaneous response to questions, making 'existenzio's'

development unpredictable. We did not feel in control, therefore, of 'existenzio's' online existence. In fact, his existence was a collective phenomenon; in other words, the 'illusion' of his existence was sustained collectively by all the chatters who were in contact with him. They contributed to his existence, his character, his features etc.. 'Existenzio' emerged from his online interaction with other online personae.

Step 7: The re-entry of the real

It is correct that the chatters, as they enter the chatroom, are 'free' to choose any online identity. They can be whoever they want to be. However, the dynamics of online communication in chatrooms very quickly 'limits' this 'absolute freedom'. The 'critical' environment in chatrooms, the game of questions and answers, as well as the requirement of consistency imply that the 'play' with identities has to remain a 'serious play'. The online personae may be 'illusions' but at least they should be convincing as 'illusions'; their illusory nature should not be obvious. This pressure of online interaction implied that 'existenzio's' online profile had to be carefully constructed so that the illusion of his existence could be sustained. For example, 'existenzio' could not have been Chinese because Kalliopi does not speak or write Chinese; and 'existenzio' could not have lived in Harare because Kalliopi has never been to Harare. And yet 'existenzio' was unveiled in a public chatroom in front of an unknown audience. Presenting him as Chinese would inevitably invite question from Chinese chatters; and locating him in Harare would have invited questions from chatters who live or have visited the city. Moreover, 'existenzio' could not be English either because his imperfect mastery of the language would quite easily destroy this illusion.

The irony of the play with identities in chatrooms is that precisely in order to sustain the illusion – precisely in order to make it more convincing – the illusion has to be grounded in reality. Kalliopi has to invest much of her offline reality into 'existenzio' and 'Markus' in order to be able to sustain his online existence. Precisely because the illusion wants to survive, it has to give in to reality. As 'existenzio's' profile becomes increasingly refined, as his form is filled with contents and as he accumulates history, the illusion of his existence has to go deeper and deeper into the real. We call this process 'the re-entry of the real in the name of the illusion'.

There is a sense, therefore, in which these online encounters, if they are sustained over longer periods of time and if they involve frequent and regular exchanges, are 'self-authenticating'. As a result of this re-entry of the real, 'existenzio/Markus' is not void of reality. And the reality he increasingly reflects is a collective achievement in that it results from his interactions with other online personae.

Step 8: The liminal as a sparagmos of the liminoid

The fact that 'existenzio/Markus' becomes a 'collective' project in which several chatters help each other sustain and develop a shared illusion that increasingly absorbs elements of the real should make us reflect on the original starting point of the project. As we noted above, entering a chatroom is a matter of individual choice, or to use Turner's term, it is a liminoid phenomenon. This element of choice is never entirely removed from the situation as 'existenzio's' profile is enriched and refined through interaction. However, as we noted, gradually 'existenzio' development becomes a

collective achievement. 'Existenzio's' profile can no longer be described as the immediate result of his creator's choices; his profile became a communal project involving 'light', 'Maria' and others. Thus, 'working on existenzio' is a process that involves a group and therefore potentially transcends the mere 'liminoid'.

According to Turner, 'liminality is not only "transition" but also "potentiality", not only "going to be" but also "what may be"'.³³ In order to be able to appreciate the liminal potential of online communication it is important to realise that 'existenzio/Markus' eventually absorbs elements of the real thereby turning him into a 'real possibility, into a 'what may be'. Kalliopi confronts 'existenzio/Markus' as an alter ego, another version of herself – an illusion at first that gradually absorbs 'real' features of herself based on Kalliopi's real experiences. 'Markus' is not a complete stranger, a complete 'lie' that could never be sustained under the conditions of the online game of questions and answers. To the extent that this process is a collective process involving 'existenzio', 'light', 'Maria' and others, and to the extent that it makes them 'juggle' with the very real factors of their real experience, we can consider this process as a process that potentially leads to a liminal situation for everyone involved. In other words, the process potentially turns from a liminoid into a liminal phenomenon. It is not, as Turner suggested, that the liminoid emerges as a 'breaking away' or a 'breaking apart' of the liminal. Rather, our experience tells us that the liminal emerges from the dialectical interaction of the liminoid; it emerges from the multiplicity of liminoid choices that begin to affect each other. To some extent, the 'choice' is taken out of the hands of the individual, and this is what opens the situation to transient and transformative meaning. As we noted, the peculiar features of cyberlanguage facilitate this process. The liminal may emerge, therefore, as a sparagmos of the liminoid.

Step 9: Relationality and the Real

The re-entry of the real, of course, does not remove the certainty of uncertainty. In fact, the offline 'real' does not re-enter in a literal sense or 'as it is'. It re-enters in a slightly distorted form; it may appear out of its usual context. After all, Kalliopi is not German and she does not live in London. However, she knows the German language and she has lived in London in the past. The real, we could say, does not re-enter as 'truth'; rather, the real re-appears as in a 'cubist' painting, with its elements re-arranged and possibly out of proportion, presented from a different, incongruent perspective. We will call this phenomenon the 'echo of the real'. The online personae are not, as it were, 'accurate' reflections of an offline reality, but they entail an 'echo of the real' so as to sustain their online existence.

Moreover, for the others involved in the unfolding encounters, the re-entry of the real is not visible as such. As noted, the certainty of uncertainty prevails throughout. 'Light' does not know that 'existenzio' nationality (German) reveals elements of Kalliopi's offline reality. For 'light', 'existenzio's' nationality is simply one more piece of information about 'existenzio' and 'light' has to decide whether or not he 'accepts' it as a basis for future exchanges. But to the extent that 'existenzio' echoes

³³ Turner, 'Introduction: Pilgrimage as a Liminoid Phenomenon', in Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 1-39 (3).

the real, he will be able to ‘pass’ whatever test he is being subjected to. Yes, ‘existenzio’ can send a German greeting to ‘light’. For the others, therefore, the re-entry of the real simply means that ‘existenzio’s’ story can continue. His online profile can develop further, becomes richer and gains more depth – all these are preconditions for further exchanges, for a continuation and deepening of the unfolding encounters. For those communicating with ‘existenzio’, the re-entry of the real thus offers the promise of a ‘more’, the promise that at least for the moment, online life can continue. And it can continue because it promises to disclose a ‘could be’ that is sufficiently close to the ‘real’.

This promise is especially felt during those in-between moments between the sending and the receiving of a message when the reality of what has been sent depends on how it will be received. In their interaction the chatters struggle to fill the gaps in the information they provide and to ‘make up’ for the lack of physical presence. They also struggle to bridge those in-between moments when everyone is waiting and listening for the echo of the real. These in-between moments are full of potentiality in the sense that there is always the potential for the real to emerge – even if the real appears in surprising, ‘cubist’ shapes and contexts.

No online communication can survive in chatroom conditions without an echo of the real. This echo of the real, however, is produced collectively in the game of questions and answers that is so typical of chatroom interaction. The re-entry of the real and the emergence and continuation of online relationships are therefore symbiotic processes. One relies on the other and vice versa; one enables the other and vice versa.

Let us now investigate these relationships more closely. When the chatters join a chatroom for the first time, they do so as individuals. Moreover, in the ‘friends’ chatroom we observed, no common interests or themes could be presupposed. This is very different from thematic chatrooms – e.g. those devoted to particular football teams – where a common interest brings the chatters together. But in our room, whatever the chatters end up having in common must be the result of their interaction. Initially, they have no common memories, but they construct shared memories by interacting. In fact, more generally the chatrooms have no structure; there appears to be no ‘authority’ and there are no visible ‘power relationships’. If such structures do emerge, they emerge visibly from the interaction of the online personae and thus are not external to the process, giving the unfolding encounters their internal authenticity. Online interaction in ‘open’ chatrooms always starts from scratch, and whatever reassurance the participants find must be produced by the interaction itself. The certainty of uncertainty becomes bearable and manageable if the unfolding encounter has its own consistency, its own history and if the participating online personae are capable of remembering this history.

Although initial contacts and exchanges took place in the public room, it is true that the private rooms moved these contacts to a new level. The private rooms give the exchanges greater stability and regularity in that they allow the participants to focus on the messages they are sending each other as they are no longer distracted by the myriad of incoming public messages. The resulting relationships are therefore primarily ‘dyadic’ and in some sense ‘exclusive’, involving no more than two online personae. And yet, assuming that we interact with only one pseudonym, all these ‘dyadic’ relations leave their mark on ‘existenzio’. What our contacts and we had in

common and ‘shared’ was precisely ‘existenzio’s’ profile as the ‘trace’ of our encounters. And although our empirical work focused on ‘existenzio’s’ dyadic encounters, future work could well explore the possibility of turning these interactions into a ‘group’ of people who know of each other as a ‘group’. ‘Existenzio’ could have introduced, for example, ‘light’ to ‘Maria’ – introducing friends to friends is a common offline practice. Moreover, we drew attention to the familiarity between groups of chatters in the public room.

We suggest that the group of contacts reflected in our ‘friends list’ neither forms a ‘community’ nor a ‘communitas’ as defined by Turner. There is not enough ‘structure’ for the group to form a community, and even though there is a potential for liminal experiences, these remain based on the liminoid choices made by each individual chatter. The liminal can appear as a sparagmos of the liminoid but only if the individuals involved surrender to the collective game of questions and answers and let their online personae take shape under the pressure of this ‘play’. The conditions of cyberlanguage may turn this surrender into an ‘event’ that happens to the chatter involuntarily, but there is always the choice to switch off the computer. However, if the surrender takes place, we witness a ‘loss of ego’, followed by the appearance of an ‘alter ego’ as Kalliopi has to confront Markus.

The ‘loss of ego’, if it occurs, brings the liminoid and the liminal together and marks a collective achievement which is reflected in ‘existenzio’s’ online presence. On the grounds that those who interacted with ‘existenzio’ took part in one and same process, we feel justified in treating them as a collectivity. Yet in order to distinguish their interrelationships from ‘communities’, ‘societies’ and Turner’s ‘communitas’ we propose to introduce a new term: koinotita, from the Greek koinon. ‘Koinotita’ refers to ‘a sharing in common, community, partnership’³⁴ and derives from the word ‘koinon’ which means ‘common, shared in common’.³⁵ And what the members of our koinotita have in common, of course, is that they all take part in the collective construction of online personae, in a collective ‘filling of the gaps’ – gaps which are dramatised by the conditions of disembodied, online communication.

It might be instructive to think of our koinotita as an exilic community, as a community of exiles. The exile of its members, however, is not a collective detachment from some homeland or a displacement based on compulsion. Instead we are dealing with a form of voluntary exile. Some scholars have used the term ‘diaspora’ in the context of cyberspace discourse.³⁶ We find that this term assumes too much: to the extent that we assume a process of dispersion from a homeland, we also assume the existence of a community prior to the dispersion. Furthermore, our empirical work suggests that the more interesting online encounters involve a double-exile, which in some ways resembles a double negation. The members of our koinotita ‘leave’ their offline realities for the public chatroom, and they leave the chaos of the public room for the serenity of the private rooms. And in the process they may

³⁴ For the meaning of ‘koinotis’ see H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Great Dictionary of the Greek Language*, Vol. 4, p. 823.

³⁵ *Great Dictionary of the Greek Language*, p. 822.

³⁶ For this discussion see John Durham Peters, ‘Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora’, in Hamid Naficy (ed.), *Home, Exile, Homeland* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 17-41. See also Ella Shohat, ‘By the bitstream of Babylon. Cyberfrontiers and diasporic vistas’, in the same volume pp. 213-231.

rediscover, from a different perspective, elements of the real, elements of themselves and elements of community.

Step 10: 'Signs' waiting to become representations

Throughout this chapter we have emphasised the importance of the 'gaps' in the stories of the online personae that the members of our koinotita interactively try to fill in a game of questions and answers. These gaps are filled and others opened as the profiles of the online personae are refined and enriched with additional details. Each message sent adds to the profile of the relevant persona – but only if the contents of the message are 'accepted' by the recipient in that it becomes taken for granted in future exchanges. The choices 'materialise' through recognition. Therefore, it is in the short in-between moments that meaning appear most transient, when neither participant knows how the story will continue. Online interactions generate and are driven by a certain restlessness that always makes the ongoing interaction move beyond itself, eclipse itself. We have argued in this chapter that this eclipse amounts to an opening to the real.

We have also argued that the dialectical interaction of liminoid choices in chatrooms potentially constitutes a liminal realm in which the participants have the opportunity to 'juggle with the factors of existence' in a 'serious play' involving every member of a koinotita. The liminoid and liminal 'in-between' of this interaction is the interstice through which an echo of the real re-enters the disembodied anonymity of communication in chatrooms. It was important for us to realise that these gaps as well as the in-between should properly be understood as the 'essence' of online communication. The texts and symbols that appear on the computer screen as we observed the public room are indeed only signs – self-referential forms without contents. But in-between these signs 'are waiting' to become representations of something; the forms 'are waiting' to be filled with contents. The significance of the in-between cannot be observed; it can only be experienced. We thus had to move from passive observation to active (covert) participation.

It is obvious that our findings, informed by our empirical work, stand in marked contrast to the theories of Baudrillard, which we used as an introduction to this study. As a conclusion, it may be appropriate to highlight this contrast. Some scholars have argued that Baudrillard's notion of simulacra offers the perfect description of the online self.³⁷ Indeed, the pseudonym 'existenzio' could easily be understood as a mere sign, as a total, self-referential representation 'in an uninterrupted circuit without reference of circumference'.³⁸ Is 'existenzio' a simulacrum, a pure sign, which in a system of signs has absorbed reality?

Our work suggests, in contrast, that 'existenzio' as a form is 'total' only in the sense that it is initially more or less completely void of contents. From the start of online communication, 'existenzio' is understood by the chatters not as 'complete' but on the contrary as an empty form 'waiting' to be filled with contents. Moreover, as we have

³⁷ For example Fisher comments: 'Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum aptly characterizes the online self'. Jeffrey Fisher, 'The Postmodern Paradiso. Dante, Cyberpunk, and the Technosophy of Cyberspace', in David Porter (ed.), *Internet Culture*, pp. 111-128 (120).

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 10.

argued, the content is not arbitrary but echoes the real in spite of the certainty of uncertainty. There is no closure of a 'system' as long as the encounters continue to unfold. As we noted above, these encounters – if sustained – are self-authenticating. 'Existenzio' is not a simulacrum, a 'copy without original'. 'Existenzio' is neither a copy nor does he lack an original. The least we can say at this point is that the 'reality' of online personae such as 'existenzio' is far more complex than Baudrillard's theory could suggest.

Of course, as long as we 'only' observe the exchanges between chatters in public rooms, we see only signs, and it is easy to misunderstand them as terminal, self-referential entities especially when the referents cannot be verified. But the signs are only the visible manifestations of an underlying process which includes not only the materialisation of choices as signs but also the frequent 'in-betweens' in which the meaning of the signs is transient. Within the context of this process – as experienced in our empirical work – the signs are potential representations, waiting to absorb echoes of the real.

APPENDIX

The chronology of the empirical work

The substantial part of our empirical work took place between August and October 2003. The month of August was primarily devoted to the observation of chatrooms while we spent September and October actively participating in online communication in chatrooms. There were some sporadic observations prior to August, and irregular email communication and private chatting continued for some time after October 2003.

The following dates and times refer to both observation and participation in public and private rooms. All times are local times in Canterbury.

August 2003

Friday, 1st August 2003:

Morning session: 09:11-11:37

Afternoon session: 12:20-14:53

Saturday, 2nd August 2003:

Morning session: 09:22-12:11

Afternoon session: 13:21-15:36

Sunday, 3rd August 2003:

Morning session: 08:53-11:18

Afternoon session: 13:00-15:09

Monday, 4th August 2003:

Morning session: 08:59-11:16

Afternoon session: 12:10-14:15

Tuesday, 5th August 2003:

Morning session: 09:12-11:18

Afternoon session: 12:45-14:50

Wednesday, 6th August 2003:

Morning session: 08:46-11:49

Afternoon session: 12:35-15:45

Thursday, 7th August 2003:

Morning session: 08:45-11:03

Afternoon session: 11:56-14:37

Friday, 8th August 2003:

Morning session: 09:01-11:09

Afternoon session: 11:43-14:00

Saturday, 9th August 2003:
Morning session: 09:07-11:30
Afternoon session: 11:46-13:50

Sunday, 10th August 2003:
Morning session: 08:53-11:00
Afternoon session: 12:00-14:02

Monday, 11th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:45-16:12
Evening session: 16:15-18:27

Tuesday, 12th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:22-16:12
Evening session: 16:52-18:40

Wednesday, 13th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:36-15:59
Evening session: 16:02-18:14

Thursday, 14th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:50-16:15
Evening session: 16:18-18:30

Friday, 15th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:25-16:10
Evening session: 16:47-17:52

Saturday, 16th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 13:58-15:56
Evening session: 15:58-17:53

Sunday, 17th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:10-15:45
Evening session: 16:15-18:20

Monday, 18th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:16-16:19
Evening session: 16:52-18:35

Tuesday, 19th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 14:30-16:23
Evening session: 16:50-18:10

Wednesday, 20th August 2003:
Afternoon session: 15:02-16:03
Evening session: 16:08-18:15

Thursday, 21st August 2003:
 Evening session: 22:55-01:03
 Night session: 01:05-03:11

Friday, 22nd August 2003:
 Evening session: 22:45-00:58
 Night session: 01:15-03:20

Saturday, 23rd August 2003:
 Evening session: 22:30-00:35
 Night session: 01:05-03:24

Sunday, 24th August 2003:
 Evening session: 23:05-00:50
 Night session: 01:15-03:35

Monday, 25th August 2003:
 Evening session: 23:08-01:24
 Night session: 01:26-03:37

Tuesday, 26th August 2003:
 Evening session: 22:54-00:58
 Night session: 01:01-03:06

Wednesday, 27th August 2003:
 Evening session: 22:45-00:50
 Night session: 01:06-02:26

Thursday, 28th August 2003:
 Evening session: 23:13-00:54
 Night session: 01:20-03:18

Friday, 29th August 2003:
 Evening session: 23:14-01:18
 Night session: 01:22-03:19

Saturday, 30th August 2003:
 Evening session: 23:00-00:55
 Night session: 01:20-03:15

Sunday, 31st August 2003:
 Evening session: 22:42-00:35
 Night session: 00:56-02:44

Monday, 1st September 2003:
 Evening session: 22:45-00:28
 Night session: 00:37-02:37

September 2003 (including private chats using the messenger software)

Tuesday, 2nd September 2003:

1st session: 09:10-11:35
2nd session: 12:15-02:55

Wednesday, 3rd September 2003:

1st session: 09:00-10:50
2nd session: 11:45-14:35

Thursday, 4th September 2003:

1st session: 09:30-12:00
2nd session: 13:05-15:03

Friday, 5th September 2003:

1st session: 08:50-11:20
2nd session: 12:05-15:08

Saturday, 6th September 2003:

1st session: 09:30-11:00
2nd session: 11:20-14:10

Sunday, 7th September 2003:

1st session: 09:16-12:20
2nd session: 13:10-15:40

Monday, 8th September 2003:

1st session: 10:15-12:35
2nd session: 13:00-15:10

Tuesday, 9th September 2003:

1st session: 09:03-10:58
2nd session: 12:04-15:10

Wednesday, 10th September 2003:

1st session: 09:15-11:30
2nd session: 12:09-14:30

Thursday, 11th September 2003:

1st session: 09:19-11:30
2nd session: 12:11-13:52

Friday, 12th September 2003:

1st session: 09:24-11:34
2nd session: 12:40-14:20

Saturday, 13th September 2003:
1st session: 09:40-12:18
2nd session: 13:09-15:45

Sunday, 14th September 2003:
1st session: 09:40-12:48
2nd session: 13:16-15:40

Monday, 15th September 2003:
1st session: 09:30-11:50
2nd session: 12:00-14:12

Tuesday, 16th September 2003:
1st session: 10:05-13:02
2nd session: 13:50-14:04

Wednesday, 17th September 2003:
1st session: 10:00-12:16
2nd session: 13:01-14:56

Thursday, 18th September 2003:
1st session: 09:20-10:30
2nd session: 11:03-12:41

Friday, 19th September 2003:
1st session: 10:15-13:10
2nd session: 13:30-14:36

Saturday, 20th September 2003:
1st session: 10:16-14:25

Sunday, 21st September 2003:
1st session: 09:42- 13:16

Monday, 22nd September 2003:
1st session: 10:10-14:30

Tuesday, 23rd September 2003:
1st session: 09:29-12:15
2nd session: 13:10-15:00

Wednesday, 24th September 2003:
1st session: 09:50-13:25

Thursday, 25th September 2003:
1st session: 09:30-12:25

Friday, 26th September 2003:
1st session: 10:00-12:50
2nd session: 13:38-14:25

Saturday, 27th September 2003:
1st session: 10:03-14:20

Sunday, 28th September 2003:
1st session: 09:30-12:05
2nd session: 13:15-14:00

Monday, 29th September 2003:
1st session: 10:17-13:25

Tuesday, 30th September 2003:
1st session: 09:30-11:00
2nd session: 11:40-14:25

October 2003

Wednesday, 1st October 2003:
1st session: 09:15-12:45
2nd session: 13:20-14:40

Thursday, 2nd October 2003:
1st session: 09:20-14:00

Friday, 3rd October 2003:
1st session: 10:10-14:00

Saturday, 4th October 2003:
1st session: 09:45-11:10
2nd session: 12:03-13:30

Sunday, 5th October 2003:
1st session: 09:10-11:15
2nd session: 11:30-12:55

Monday, 6th October 2003:
1st session: 09:55-12:15
2nd session: 13:15-13:10

Tuesday, 7th October 2003:
1st session: 10:10-13:40
2nd session: 14:10-16:30

Wednesday, 8th October 2003:
1st session: 11:05-14:00

Thursday, 9th October 2003:
 1st session: 10:12-12:15
 2nd session: 13:10-15:00

Friday, 10th October 2003:
 1st session: 11:15-12:30
 2nd session: 13:35-16:02

Saturday, 11th October 2003:
 1st session: 10:30-13:15

Sunday, 12th October 2003:
 1st session: 11:02-14:25

Monday, 13th October 2003:
 1st session: 11:57-12:20
 2nd session: 12:30-16:20

Tuesday, 14th October 2003:
 1st session: 11:00-13:57
 2nd session: 14:30-15:50

Wednesday, 15th October 2003:
 1st session: 10:45-13:02
 2nd session: 13:30-14:42

Thursday, 16th October 2003:
 1st session: 11:20-13:47
 2nd session: 14:10-15:00

Friday, 17th October 2003:
 1st session: 10:00-14:00

Saturday, 18th October 2003:
 1st session: 10:05-12:15

Sunday, 19th October 2003:
 1st session: 09:40-11:20
 2nd session: 12:22-14:12

Monday, 20th October 2003:
 1st session: 09:30-12:40
 2nd session: 14:00-15:09

Tuesday, 21st October 2003:
 1st session: 11:00-14:05

Wednesday, 22nd October 2003:
 1st session: 10:02-12:16
 2nd session: 13:00-14:18

Thursday, 23rd October 2003:
1st session: 10:09-13:18

Friday, 24th October 2003:
1st session: 09:56-12:06
2nd session: 12:45-13:30

Saturday, 25th October 2003:
1st session: 10:00-12:35

Sunday, 26th October 2003:
1st session: 09:30-11:45
2nd session: 12:30-13:50

Monday, 27th October 2003:
1st session: 10:12-13:20

Tuesday, 28th October 2003:
1st session: 09:25-12:05
2nd session: 13:13-14:02

Wednesday, 29th October 2003:
1st session: 11:10-14:25

Thursday, 30th October 2003:
1st session: 10:28-14:04

Friday, 31st October 2003:
1st session: 11:10-13:35

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