

## **'You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave' – towards an explanation of the holding power of online community**

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### **Introduction**

The notion of virtual, or more specifically *online* community, has been an enduring object of study, in particular since Howard Rheingold's much-quoted 'The Virtual Community' in 1994. However, there is a noticeable scepticism from many researchers as to whether it remains, or perhaps was ever, a phenomenon likely to offer up useful insights. The following is an extract from a review by sociologist David Gauntlett (2000) of a recent book in the 'cyberculture' genre:

*The book includes more of those discussions of whether virtual communities are virtual communities or not... Surely even in 1996 there must have been some level-headed people going "Yes! It's a community! And...?!".*

*But this seemingly well-intentioned volume isn't kind enough to spare us another person telling us -- at some length -- why some newsgroup or multi-user domain is really a community. It has to be admitted, however, that since I fall asleep whenever my eyes fall upon stuff about virtual communities these days, this shouldn't be taken as a very specific critique of these particular parts of this book.*

So what is worth studying here, and why? Virtual community has provided an environment within which to examine theoretical ideas from sociological, philosophical and psychological perspectives of the nature of computer-mediated communications. In particular, as examples of bounded, structured environments, a lot of attention has been focused upon online so-called multi-user domain 'worlds' (often called MUDs, MOOs, MUSHes or just MU\*. I shall use MUD as a generic term, because it's easier to say than MU\*). The aim of this research has been, generally speaking, to examine the nature of the transformations wrought by computer-mediated communication upon how we see ourselves and how we communicate and socialise with others. There are many differences between online and 'real world' communities, not least of all that membership of an online community is by definition voluntary: you choose to join, and you choose to stay (or not). Nguyen and Alexander (1996), while acknowledging the compelling attraction of the possibilities of cyberspace, argue that 'we need to understand the choices people are making de facto everyday in living their wired lives.' (p 99)

Sherry Turkle (1995) uses the expression 'holding power' more than once in her study of virtual worlds. Elsewhere in the research literature, words like 'seduction', 'allure', 'fascination', 'euphoria' and 'sublime' occur with notable frequency when discussing the experience of computer-mediated interaction. All the research on online community, in particular MUDs, carries descriptions of at least one soul who eats, sleeps and lives the MUD, as much 'in' as 'on' the screen, to use Turkle's phrase.

This essay is an attempt to examine the nature of the 'holding power' of the online community. I will argue that any consideration of online community needs to take into account existing theories about community and needs to be located in its cultural and historical context, but not at the expense of ignoring or misunderstanding the unique affordances of the internet as a communications medium and possibly as a transformational force in everyday life. I conclude with the suggestion that micro-analysis of language use within online communities may help us to understand their 'holding power.'

### **Researching MUDs**

One of the repeated criticisms of work in this field has been the lack of empirical evidence to back up the theoretical stances. Although ethnographic work has been done with participants of online communities, MUDs in particular, there is much reliance upon anecdote, methodology remains idiosyncratic and results are often difficult to replicate. The ethical and practical questions of how to conduct research online remain problematical, as does the reliability of respondents' answers. Most of the early MUDs came out of the fantasy gaming world, with the inevitable consequence being that most participants were from a very limited demographic. Nevertheless, ethnographic studies have been usefully applied in investigations of identity, gender, and other examinations of the nature of the individual experience within the online community. The formation of particular communities have been documented, for example the WELL (Rheingold and others), Minitel (Lemos), LambdaMOO (Turkle & others) and Habitat (Ostwald). Some researchers favour immersion and participation, others have created their own communities: sometimes as experiments, and sometimes, as in the case of Amy Bruckman's MediaMOO, as combined topic/comment. Others purely observe. Although I will make repeated reference throughout to MUD research, the majority of what follows will be necessarily theoretical.

### **The transformational power of technology**

The lack of face-to-face communication and physical proximity is often used as an argument for online community not being 'real' community. For example, Andre Lemos (1996) described the French Minitel network as being 'a community of spectres...life online is not the same as propinquitous, face-to-face community.' (p 43). Barry Wellman's research has concentrated on online communities which overlap to some extent with the 'real world', and although he does not go all out in suggesting that face-to-face is the ultimate, or 'richest' form of communication and therefore essential to community, he claims 'it is the relationship that is the important thing, and not the communication medium.' (Wellman & Gulia, 1996, p 182)

Nevertheless, since the sixteenth century, the invention of the printing press, the consequent spread of literacy, the rise of the mass media and the advent of every subsequent new communications technology, the ties of immediate, face-to-face community have been gradually eroded. Newspapers may have weakened such ties, but strengthened those with the wider community, leading to the notion of the 'placeless', or, as argued by Benedict Anderson, 'imagined' community. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985/99) has argued that TV heightened this effect, bringing world affairs into the living room and thereby essentially altering the way we see the world and communicate with one another: 'evolution in media has changed the logic of the social order by restructuring the relationship between physical place and social place and by altering the ways in which we transmit and receive social information.' (p 100)

Although the existence of online communities is due in part to the changes in technology that have brought internet access to the homes and workplaces of more and more people, an explanation of them that fails to take into account factors other than the nature of the medium itself would be as misguided as the belief that they are evidence of the universality of the net, or that we have arrived at McLuhan's 'global village'. The crime of technological determinism, of which McLuhan has been accused, is one that others in the 'cybervisionary' camp have found guilty. Stevenson (1995) summarises the concerns of Raymond Williams thus:

*because McLuhan renders certain questions irrelevant, because he abstracts the medium of communication from the broader social and cultural contexts...this in effect desocialises media analysis in that he renders invisible the ways in which dominant authority relations structure cultural production, content and reception. (p 125)*

Meyrowitz defends his own analysis by explaining that despite the huge changes wrought by the electronic media, they form only one part of a complete theory – one that would necessarily take into consideration what he calls the 'obvious individual and group freedoms' (p. 116) that exist alongside the affordances and constraints of the technology. As he states, 'media affect us by

shaping the type of interactions that take place through them. We cannot play certain *roles* unless the *stages* for those roles exist.' (Meyrowitz p 117, my emphases). I will return to this idea of roles and stages below.

Technological determinism is not the only criticism that has been levelled against those who would study online community. There has been criticism from some sociologists that such studies have been less than rigorously academic, too inclined to see it as a new phenomenon that sprang up with the advent of the internet, unwilling or unable to draw upon the existing body of work on community already done in the fields of sociology, social history and philosophy. Wellman and Gulia (1996) call the debate 'unscholarly' (p167). As Kevin Robins (2000) puts it, 'it is time to relocate virtual culture in the real world' (p 92).

### **Utopians vs dystopians**

The early utopian stance of the 'cybervisionaries' such as Rheingold (1994) was one that saw the opportunity for a return to some long-lost civility, co-operation and community feeling. Although Rheingold himself has since warned of over-romanticising, there are still those that see the opportunities offered by new technology as an exhilarating, liberating force. The tendency among cyber-communitarians is to take a prescriptive stance, as evidenced in a recent chat conference on the subject of 'Developing Online Communities' (BOL, 2000)

Pitted against the celebrants of online community are those who see it as less than empowering, even a threat to democracy. Nguyen and Alexander, for example, claim that 'people form virtual communities on the basis of the functional representation of narrow interests, not the geographical representation of whole living persons...' (p 120) This of course is one of the basic paradoxes of the internet – that while it may offer (in theory) transparency, freedom of information and of speech, freedom from real-world prejudice, egalitarianism, etc, it also enables, even encourages the filtering out of information that the user does not want to confront, and the consequent fragmentation of society into narrow interest groups. There are many examples of this, from the 'personalisation' of online news services, to the flourishing on the internet of anti-social groups outside of any 'real world' legislation. As Foster (1996) notes: 'This, then, is a particular danger with computer-mediated communication. Solipsism, or the extreme preoccupation with and indulgence of one's own inclinations, is potentially engendered in the technology.' (p 26). Related to this is the issue of the confusion of information with knowledge: 'the trading of knowledge for information brings with it an end to human action itself. It aborts political action.' (Nguyen and Alexander, p 118) Robins (2000) reiterates this when he claims that 'techno-community' is basically an anti-political ideal. He asserts that 'we must begin from the real

world...which is the world in which virtual communities are now imagined. We must recognise that difference, asymmetry and conflict are constitutive features of that world. Not community.' (p 91)

So, while 'cybervisionaries' extol the idea of virtual community as reinvigorating, even reinventing public life on the net, others see it as a retreat from society, even subversive to it. Although this is a simplification of the situation, a more detailed examination of virtual community and the 'public sphere' is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I do wish to take a few steps back at this moment, to examine a little more closely the idea of 'community'.

### **Social networks**

C.J. Calhoun (1980) claimed that our current notion of community is one that came directly out of the Industrial Revolution, when dramatic socio-economic changes led Victorians to lament the disappearance of social morality. Blame was laid on the modern city which came to be identified with the forces of moral breakdown, and with which the pre-modern, rural, community was contrasted – its meaning at once frozen and idealised. Calhoun argues that instead of holding on to this restrictive view, what is now called for is a redefinition: 'we need to develop a conceptualisation of community which allows us to penetrate beneath such simple categories as city, town, village, country, to see a variable of social relations.' (p. 107)

Ferdinand Tönnies' (1957) classic distinction of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* has been much quoted in discussions of online community (eg Rheingold 1994, Calhoun 1980, Foster 1996, Wellman & Gulia 1996). The distinction usually made is that *gemeinschaft* is 'community' in the traditional, idealised sense of collective consciousness, bound together by 'we-feeling', the subjective experience, whereas *gesellschaft* is a rational, impersonal association ..'the utilitarian sentiment that underpins modern, industrial, urban life.' (Foster, p. 25) *Gemeinschaft* is the standard against which online communities are often measured, and found wanting. However, Calhoun claims that 'such an emphasis on the inner qualities of community life tends to discount the importance of the social bonds and political mechanisms which hold communities together and make them work.' (p 108) In other words, to hold up *gemeinschaft* as the ideal community is to misunderstand 'community' as it is lived. For example, regarding the not uncommon view that community is about producing collective goods – 'the goal of any community is to produce something together that individuals can't produce alone' (Rheingold, BOL 2000) – Calhoun claims that individuals may still act in their own interests, yet produce collective goods at the same time. Additionally, 'a community may act as the source of the selective inducements to participate in

collective action – quite without depending upon the individual's sense of belonging.' (Calhoun, p.109)

Calhoun's proposal, then, is that community entails a complex system in which the needs of the individual and of the group are held in a tension, and that the key to community lies in the 'social relationships among social actors' (p 110). He claims that the community regulates itself through such relationships, creating and maintaining constraints and obligations via the relative strengths and weaknesses of its network of relationships.

In a similar vein, Barry Wellman (Wellman and Gulia, 1996) has suggested that we can avoid the issue of the idealised, 'village pump community' altogether if we talk instead about 'social networks'. Like Calhoun he claims that social relations rather than geographical location define community. Social network theory rests on the idea that people form social ties with others, and that these may be relatively strong or weak. (For example, there would be strong ties between co-habiting members of immediate family, and relatively weak ties between neighbours who live in the same street but who may have no other social contact.) Wellman's research in the 'real world' supports the claim that *gemeinschaft* is pure nostalgia: 'most community ties are specialised and do not form densely-knit clusters of relationships. For example, our Toronto research has found that except for kin and small clusters of friends, most members of a person's community network do not know each other.' (p 171) Wellman notes that online, information is an important element in the formation of strong ties. In a text-based environment, strangers become friends often on the strength of exchange of information and the discovery of shared interests. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same for online community. 'The limited evidence available suggests that the relationships people develop and maintain in cyberspace are much like most of the ones they develop in their 'real life' communities: intermittent, specialised and varying in strength.' (p 186)

Although there are similarities in what they propose, whereas Wellman and Gulia claim that both strong AND weak ties are crucial to the success of the network, Calhoun's view is that it is the strong ties that are important. For Wellman and Gulia, not only do people tend to participate in 'multiple, partial communities', which includes both online and offline, but it is often via the *weaker* ties that new information gets dispersed. This is quite different to Calhoun's definition of community, which is far more of a contained world.

*Where people are only loosely connected to each other, they may choose to prolong a conflict or abandon the community which proposes a solution they do not like – unless*

*prevented by material power. The self-regulation of community is dependent on dense, multiplex bonds. (Calhoun, p 115)*

Calhoun goes on to define three types of 'bonds' between the members of a community: multiplex, density and systematicity (p 118). **Density** refers to the number of actual links between members as opposed to the number of possible links. For example, in a five person group there are ten possible relationships which would represent maximum density. **Systematicity** refers to the 'linkage of individuals to social (sub) groups, and the ordering of groups in some unifying system of incorporation.' (p 119) One effect of this is to provide ready-made roles for individuals within those groups (eg 'daughter', 'manager') and a sense of expectation and obligation for everybody involved. Finally, **multiplexity** refers to how many multiple ties there are between people, for example, if people live together, work together, babysit for one another, know each others' secrets... 'each kind of bond implies another social context in which the same parties are co-actors.' (p 119) For Calhoun, then, these three factors together define community.

Both Wellman and Calhoun emphasise the social ties between members of a community: what binds them together. This implies *something in common*. How do members recognise this in others? How is it signalled to others?

### **Similarities and differences**

Robins argues that 'existence in cyberspace – a space in which real worlds and situations are in suspension – encourages the sense of identification and symmetry among individuals...virtual community is driven by the compulsion to neutralise.' (p 90-91). He claims the point of them is to provide controlled and secure environments, that the attraction of joining an online community is the pleasing sensation of being surrounded with those just like us, and moreover, belonging to the community has the effect of flattening out alternative viewpoints. This is borne out by the 'prescriptive' cyber-communitarians who assert that 'true community on the web' should be 'an ongoing exchange between members of commonly valued things' (Figallo, 1998 p.15) and 'everyone agrees on the fundamentals or they don't join..' (BOL, 2000)

However, taking the views of Anthony Cohen (1985), *similarity* is only one part of it. Just as key to community is the idea of *difference*. What members of a community crucially have in common is their difference from those who are not in the community. Cohen claims that 'the consciousness of a community is encapsulated in the perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction.' (p. 13) He therefore suggests that the commonality which is found in community need not be the same as uniformity. Cohen claims that

these 'boundaries' are created by people 'putting down social markers symbolically.' (p 27). The role of symbols is central to Cohen's ideas: 'symbols...do more than merely stand for or represent something else....they also allow those who employ them to supply part of their meaning'. He claims that the meanings given to symbols and symbolic constructions are 'mediated by the idiosyncratic experience of the individual.' (p.14). Symbolic markers or symbolic practices (or rituals) may be such things as mode of address, use of terminology, titles, where you (or your persona) lives....Cohen claims that symbolic markers are carefully employed to mark individual roles, and that even in a face-to-face environment people act out numerous roles, consciously or otherwise – and that this itself he claims is evidence that it should not be taken for granted that 'face-to-face' is necessarily the richest or best form of communication.

Boundaries, for Cohen, are 'mental constructs' – 'difficult, if not impossible, for the outsider to recognise' (p 37). As well as the boundaries between community members and non-community members, and between roles, the location of power is also symbolically marked, often invisibly. As an example of this, and arguing against the notion that community implies egalitarianism, Cohen remarks that to think this is to 'mistake the absence of structures of differentiation – say, class, or formal hierarchies of power and authority – for the apparent absence of differentiation as such.' (p 33)

### **Just act yourself**

Cohen's idea of roles being understood and signalled symbolically brings us back to Meyrowitz and his assertion that in order to play out roles characters need a stage. Although the theatrical metaphor is common one, it is worth spelling out some of the notions it entails: there being an audience, for example. In an online community such as a MUD, communication is typically a mixture of private (messages between individual members, private chat rooms) and public (public chat, posts to bulletin boards, the presentation of one's 'home' and one's chosen avatar, etc). Due to the nature of the medium, nothing is of course actually private – administrators (and sometimes members with some programming knowledge) have access to view all (public or private) communication, web space, coding details, etcetera, so in a way, everything that is said and done in a MUD is a performance. Also inherent in the theatrical metaphor is the idea of the actor playing a role, or roles.

Online communities are a fertile ground for analysing identity and role play. Much of the literature documenting activity on MUDs focuses on identity play – gender switching, deception, stereotyping, disinhibition, experimentation – and the nature of the boundaries between 'real life' agents and their personae. I will not attempt to evaluate this body of work here. There is no doubt

that the nature of the medium affords experimentation with behaviour that would not be possible in 'real world' community. It is not clear, however, whether this experimentation is detrimental to or essential to online community, or perhaps neither. Nevertheless, there exist many advocates of online community who favour rules such as 'complete honesty' (for example, no aliases). This expectation may be unrealistic, however. Healy (1996) documents evidence for what he calls the simultaneous cultures of 'separation' and 'coherence' – 'the contradictory human impulses for both separation and connectedness' (p 66). A similar claim is expressed by R. Sennett (1976) thus: 'people need to have some distance from intimate observation by others in order to feel sociable' (cited in Nguyen and Alexander, p 104). Nguyen and Alexander see one of the appeals of online communities as being the possibility to control the presentation of oneself, which echoes Robins' argument about it being a secure, controlled environment.

Cohen claims (p 9) that communities founded only on structure, 'designed as a palliative to anomie and alienation', are doomed to fail because they do not take into account that community is symbolically constructed. In examining online community, could it be that in trying to re-create, define and analyse in terms of 'real world' community, we are doomed to fail because we are not acknowledging and embracing the unique possibilities of the medium?

### **Interface culture**

The transition from the idealised, rural pre-modern village to that of the city with its isolated, impersonal urban living existed for the Chicago School, according to Cohen, as a continuum. The further along this line, the greater the loss of community.

*The processes of segregation establish moral distances which make the city a mosaic of little worlds, which touch but do not interpenetrate. This makes it possible for individuals to pass quickly and easily from one moral milieu to another, and encourages the fascinating but dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different contiguous, but otherwise widely separated worlds. (Robert Park, 'The City', 1925, cited in Cohen, p 26)*

Cohen criticises this viewpoint since he claims that to see the line between community and non-community as a historical transition is deterministic – 'making the nature of human association entirely a product of the dominant features of its structural context, such as size and scale.' (p 27) It is not my intention to argue for a similarly deterministic view of online community, nevertheless the above description of 'the experiment of living at the same time in several...different worlds' brings to mind one of its defining features: the computer interface.

Sherry Turkle in 'Life on the Screen' (1995) vividly describes the experience of the first Macintosh 'desktop' interface and how it radically different it seemed to be, compared with what computers had previously been like to interact with: 'the user was presented with a scintillating surface on which to float, skim and play. There was nowhere visible to dive.' (p 34) With the desktop came a whole other mediating layer between what the user 'did' and what the computer 'did'. The comprehensiveness of the metaphor and the excitement which it generated, and the way in which it became accepted as a standard, mean that it could now be claimed to be no longer a metaphor for the desktop, it is simply the (computer) desktop. The Windows interface, with its invitation to do several things at once, gives people the opportunity to live 'parallel lives' in a MUD, hopping from one interaction to another, much as Park described the city in 1925 – 'passing quickly from one moral milieu to another' - or, 'real life is just one more window', as one participant observes (Turkle, p 13).

As a way of understanding the 'seduction of the interface', Turkle invokes postmodernism:

*The meaning of the computer presence in people's lives is very different from what most expected in the late 1970s. One way to describe what has happened is to say that we are moving from a modernist culture of calculation to a postmodernist culture of simulation. (p 20).*

Postmodernism, according to Fredric Jameson (1991), should be 'grasped not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the co-existence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features.' (p 3) It is to some of these features which I now turn.

### **Space-time compression**

In 'The Condition of Postmodernity' (1990), David Harvey argued that western capitalist society is undergoing a shift from Fordism, or traditional modern patterns of production and consumption, to what he calls 'flexible accumulation': the speeding-up of production through organisational and technological changes which has brought about corresponding changes in consumption. 'Space-time compression', as he terms this phenomenon, is 'disorienting and disruptive....affecting political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as...cultural and social life.' (p 284) In a need to find consumables with shorter and shorter lifecycles, he claims capitalists have shifted production from goods to services – that the population finds itself being driven through manipulative marketing and an ever-increasing bombardment of images and brands towards the ever-escalating consumption of 'lifestyle', fashion and entertainment. Harvey argues that in this

environment the values of *instantaneity* and *disposability* are continuously reinforced (p 286) – not just in relation to consumables, but more generally; attachments to people, places, values, ways of doing things – all these, too, are disposable and replaceable. In the context of space-time compression, the past is replicable, alterable, and consequently endlessly recycled – for example, in architecture. Jameson's account of architecture's development from 'modernist styles... to postmodernist codes' illustrates what he claims are two characteristics of postmodernism – *historicism* and *pastiche*. By historicism, he refers to 'the random cannibalisation of all the styles of the past' (p 19); pastiche he describes as 'blank parody....a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satirical impulse.' (p 17)

In terms of space, Harvey describes how the contradictory forces of globalisation and localisation are bringing about a new, global urban hierarchy:

*'as spatial barriers diminish so we become much more sensitised to what the world's spaces contain...for example, geographical differentiations in the mode and strengths of labour control together with variations in the quality as well as the quantity of labour power assume a much greater significance in corporate locational strategies.'* (p 294)

Morley and Robins (1999) examine the implications of this process, quoting Castells when they assert that 'there is a new space of collective alienation...one in which there is a disconnection between people and spatial form.' (p 341) Jameson makes the same argument, suggesting that because we have faulty mental representations of 'some immense communicational and computer network' we are, in fact, unable to know where we are.... that 'a model of political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organizing concern.' (p 51) What he actually calls for is an 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping' – since our capacity to act and struggle, to be political beings, is 'neutralised by our spatial as well as our social confusion.' (p 54)

### **Lost in the mysts of time**

The postmodern tendencies towards historicism, pastiche, instantaneity and disposability are all evident in online communities (as are a number of other claimed attributes of postmodernism, but I do not wish to carry out a full postmodern critique of online community, merely to use these as examples). The ease with which one may throw away personas and create new ones, the ability to enjoy the benefits of community apparently instantly, but without any binding commitment or responsibilities, the speed with which one can make apparently close friends in the online community has been often cited. If one looks at the content of not just adventure MUDs but also

social MUDs, people may be found role-playing and interacting in a variety of artificially created fora: fantasy, everyday, historical, literary. Within the same community one can be a Roman nobleman shopping in a slave market one minute, a New York bookseller the next, then (or at the same time) taking part in a 'real world' discussion about current affairs. There's a sort of 'Xena Warrior Princess' feel to the fantasy-history of online communities; even real history gets re-written and replayed, often in some pseudo-historical language ("Greetings, my lady! "). Here, surely, is pastiche and historicism in its full glory: what may have started as parody now passes for authenticity: or what Robins describes as the 'fag-end of a Romantic sensibility.' (p 80). As Stephen Jones (1998) notes: 'it is difficult to imagine what new online communities may be like, and it is far easier to use our memories and myths as we construct them.' (p 29). If community is established, as Cohen claims, by the laying down of symbolic markers, it is not hard to imagine how the combination of memory, myth, symbolic meaning and creativity lead to the kinds of communities described by Heather Bromberg (1996), who calls for 'more detailed study of the importance of language and the prevalence of mythic themes and symbolism in virtual worlds.' (p 150) However, not all MUDs involve fantasy-historical role play, and perhaps to still be concentrating on those that do is preventing us from reaching a better understanding of the general principles of how online communities function.

Bromberg claims it is ironic that people should seek an 'escape' from the 'postmodern condition' through technology, since it is itself inherently postmodern, and in fact one of the four social functions that she claims online communities perform is to provide 'interaction as solace' for those who feel isolated in 'real' life. That online community is some sort of panacea for 'real world' troubles has not always been upheld in other studies. Turkle's take on the appeal on online community is not that it provides an escape, but quite the opposite – it mirrors, or models in some way, features of the postmodern experience, in a controlled way; in a way that people can understand, can feel mastery over. Perhaps online communities constitute babysteps towards the 'cognitive maps' that Jameson called for. They help people to locate themselves in relation to others, in relation to their everyday life which is no longer stable and predictable, in relation to new technology and cyberspace. As Lemos claims in his study of the Minitel system, 'contemporary technology is embraced, diverted and reappropriated by everyday life...through micro-deviations such as the *messengeries*, technology appears to have been *re-enchanted*.'

### **Conclusion: towards an explanation of 'holding power'?**

Just about every account of an online community includes mention of its addictive qualities. Unfortunately statements such as 'in cyberspace time one can live out any fantasy' and 'cyberspace MUDs are captivating because people get an intense thrill from the shock of

networked communication' (Nguyen and Alexander p 103) are unenlightening and serve only to perpetuate the stereotypes beloved of the popular press.

Most of the research has concentrated on questions such as what motivates people to join online communities, comparisons with 'real world' community, and the possibilities of the medium for experimentation. Many studies have been made of MUD environments, particularly those of several years ago which came out of a gaming culture. The notion of 'community' has been re-analysed and re-evaluated. However, since, as Turkle puts it, 'in text-based virtual worlds like MUDs, words are deeds' there appears to have been relatively little research done of language use in online communities. Agreement may or may not be reached on the macro-level about whether online community is best understood as a symbolic or mental construct, or a network of social relations, or both. We can discuss at length the ways in which life in the online community is both constrained and enabled by the general and particular features of the medium (the internet, the interface, the architectural software of the community)...we can examine its functions and document the experiences of its 'inhabitants'. We can suggest, as Turkle does, that 'the holding power.. of experiences in virtual communities derives from their ability to help us think through postmodernism' and we could take that a stage further and suggest that online communities may somehow be a part of Jameson's 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping' (p.47) that but at a micro-level, the question may still be asked, yes, but *how?*

Bromberg (1996) makes the link between verbal skills and mastery, and although the linguistic nature of text-based virtual worlds is often referred to in the research literature, it rarely gets deconstructed in any systematic way. Could it be that the importance of language use is purely a factor of a still-emerging technology, a throw-back to print culture; that it will lose its significance as postmodern online communities insinuate themselves into everyday life? Meyrowitz (1985) argues that computer-mediated communication is changing our notions of literacy: 'mastery of literacy may soon be as irrelevant to the operation of computers and computer-controlled machines as it is to the operation of television sets and automobiles.' (p 116) However, the role of language in operating computers should not be confused with its role as a communications medium within online 'worlds'. Nguyen and Alexander (1996) claim that 'language that is no longer checked and verified by physical reality loses its very grounding. Eventually it may well cease to retain its *raison d'être* as a tool for human communication.' (p 104) I suggest that this is an extreme view, and that the grounds for such an assertion have not been established theoretically, let alone empirically. The actual use of language in the online community could stand closer examination. Anna Cicognani (1998) has argued that 'a deeper understanding of the linguistic nature of cyberspace could lead to the development of more constructive forms of design and communication', (p 23) and that online communities are fertile grounds for observing

how people structure their online places by 'doing things with words'. Online community may be to a certain extent a mental construct, but that doesn't make it telepathic. Language is involved at every level: from the computer languages in which the software is written, through the descriptive language by which the virtual environment is imagined, to the everyday dialogue between members.

I suggest that closer inspection of the linguistic nature of online communities will bring us closer to answering the 'how?' question I posed earlier, and to answer the 'how' question will further help us to define the nature of the 'holding power' of the online community.