

# **Community@Cyberspace.com**

**An Ethnography of Community and Commerce on the Internet.**

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## **Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

L. Conradie

Date

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There are many people who deserve thanks for supporting me during my research. However, I would like to single out a few people for special thanks.

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## **Abstract**

The Internet and its Cyberspaces were developed in the 1960s to create a means to transfer information without the risk of interception and annihilation. Today, 40 years later, the Internet has grown in both size and application. The most used applications are still conversation and sharing of information. This thesis is an ethnographic account of my experiences in a Cyberspace of the Internet- a virtual community with the name Amazon City.com. Virtual communities are spaces on the Internet where people come together to discuss their daily lives, issues and anything that's appropriate for the particular community. It is seen as a response to the demise of third places in off-line life, globalisation, etc.

The communities that form in these areas develop cultural assumptions. These cultural assumptions are revealed to a new member through time and interaction in the conferencing area. The assumptions that I experienced range from knowledge needed to be an accepted and successful member of the community, to language use and identity of the members. The conclusion was reached that members view their participation and membership in these communities as just as fulfilling and real as their activities in off-line communities.

Further aspects that make a site a growing and economically feasible business strategy for its owner(s) were my next focus. Internet commerce is growing at an astonishing rate. Internet business does not only imply the selling of products on-line. Computer-mediated communication devices have been implemented on commercial sites after it was found in the early 1990s that people are looking for something more than just another shopping area. Other ways that this type of dot com site uses to generate revenue and whether the members on the site are perceived as citizens or ultimately as consumers were also studied. It was found that members see themselves as citizens but site loyalty will push them to act as consumers when need be. The commercial aspects of these sites are a part of and necessary for the existence of the dot com site, and the community that fosters there.

## Sinopsis

Die Internet en sy Kuberruimtes is ontwikkel in die 1960s as 'n manier om inligting oor te dra sonder die risiko van intersepsie en vernietiging. Vandag, 40 jaar later het die Internet gegroei in beide grootte en toepassing. Die mees algemene gebruike is nogsteeds kommunikasie en die oordrag van informasie. Hierdie tesis is 'n etnografiese studie van my ervarings in 'n Kuberruimte van die Internet- 'n virtuele gemeenskap byname Amazon City.com. Virtuele gemeenskappe is areas op die Internet waar mense bymekaar kom om hul daaglikse lewens, kwessies en enige iets toepaslik vir die spesifieke gemeenskap, te bespreek. Die tipe gemeenskap word gesien as 'n reaksie van die verval van "derde plekke" in af-lyn lewe en globalisering

Die gemeenskap wat vorm in hierdie areas ontwikkel kulturele veronderstelling. Hierdie veronderstellings word openbaar aan 'n nuwe lid deur tyd en interaksie in die konferensie area. Die veronderstellings wat ek ervaar het strek van kennis benodig om 'n aanvaarde en suksesvolle lid van die gemeenskap te word, tot taal gebruik en identiteit van die lede. Die konklusie is bereik dat lede hul interaksie en lidmaatskap in hierdie gemenskappe as net so bevredigend en "eg" ervaar as hul aktiwiteite in hul af-lyn lewe .

Verdere aspekte wat 'n webblad 'n suksesvolle en ekonomiese vatbare besigheids strategie maak vir sy eienaar, was my volgende fokus. Internet besigheid groei teen 'n geweldige spoed, en impliseer nie slegs die verkoop van produkte aanlyn nie. Rekenaar-ondersteunde kommunikasie toestelle is geimplimenteer op kommersiële webbladsye nadat dit gevind is in die vroeë 1990s dat mense soek vir 'n plek wat meer is as net nog 'n winkel. Ander maniere wat hierde dot com webbladsye gebruik om inkomste te genereer en of die lede gesien word as burgers of as verbruikers word ook bestudeer. Daar is gevind dat die lede hulself sien as burgers maar webbladsy lojaliteit sal die lede aanspoor om as verbruikers op te tree indien nodig. Die kommersiële aspekte van die tipe webbladsy is 'n noodsaaklik deel vir die voortbestaan van die dot com webbladsy, en die gemeenskap wat daar ontwikkel.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Internet**

### **1.1 Introduction**

From the birth of the Internet in the 1960s, as a means of linking a few universities and defence laboratories together, the Internet has grown into a global network connecting roughly 130 million people all over the globe. According to the Computer Industry Almanac this number is predicted to rise to 327 million by the end of the year 2000 (The Times, Interface, August 11, 1999:2). Social linkages, such as e-mail and discussion groups appeared in the first days of the Internet, and are still multiplying and growing at an astonishing rate. In 1994, more than 5 000 Internet discussion groups existed, and this number has grown considerably since then (Liberty, 1999:1).

Apart from its sheer size, this new social milieu commands research attention because it is one of the new “collaborative mass media forms” in which information comes from a wide variety of participants with little or no centralised control. It therefore blurs the traditional boundaries between interpersonal and mass communication and raises new opportunities and risks for the way individuals relate to one another (Parks, 1996:80). It creates the opportunity for the formation of on-line communities and “these on-line communities offer people a reason to log on” says Jason Boswell of Compuserve UK. “People like to talk to others, share interests and exchange views” (The Times, Interface, 1999). To some people these communities provide much more than shallow, superficial interaction with virtual strangers; they provide a lifeline in times of death, illness or coping with day to day life, and are a valuable resource in finding information on any conceivable subject.

This thesis is an ethnographic account of my experiences since I first logged onto the Internet to find a virtual community. I joined a number of sites but found my Cyberhome at Amazon City.com. It is a site with mostly women as members that was first created in 1996. Amazon City is a member-generated content site with interaction occurring mostly in the conferencing area. A study of virtual communities, why people join, the cultural assumptions that form in different communities as well

as the life and development of the site will be ethnographically experienced and recalled. This thesis will aim to identify and discuss these factors.

This chapter relates a concise history of the Internet as a whole, because it is instrumental in showing the development and growth of virtual communities on what is commonly known as the Internet. The reasons for the importance of this research are discussed and the chapter ends with a brief thesis overview.

## **1.2 History of the Internet**

### **1.2.1. The Birth of the Internet**

The Internet has its origin in the 1960s as a result of the Cold War. The threat of nuclear attack necessitated the development of a decentralised government network without a central point of control in order to make destruction impossible. This network was to be used to send encoded messages without the risk of failure. The RAND Corporation provided the groundwork for the Internet by devising a scheme for such a centreless network of computers. The Internet therefore began its life as a government network named ARPANet (Advanced Research Projects Agency), with the purpose of enabling communication between researchers, government contractors, and the government itself (including the military). A protocol was designed for the Defence Department of the United States to meet the requirements and fit the assumptions upon which this decentralised network was built. It was named TCP/IP, or Telecommunications Protocol/ Internet Protocol.

The Internet was designed to function according to the principle that all computers on the network work together as equals. The links between the computers allow pockets of information to be transferred over the network using any convenient route rather than the shortest, the most convenient, or the fastest. As a result of this decentralised nature of the Internet, it possesses outstanding flexibility and resilience in terms of routing information. Many thousands of people worked on the design of the Internet without financially benefiting from it, e.g. software, to simplify or enable various tasks, was often created by people who shared it freely with others on the Internet.

This has given the network the appeal as a medium “for the people by the people”.(Whittle,1996:13-14).

The idea of creating new kinds of communities using this new technology was noted and encouraged from the very beginning of the Internet's existence. Before ARPANet went on-line in 1969, the people who sponsored its initial development, J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor, wrote an article in collaboration with E. Herbert, entitled "The Computer as Communication Device". In this article they shared with the public their vision for the future of computer-linked communities:

Although more interactive multi-access computer systems are being delivered now, and although more groups plan to be using these systems within the next year, there are at present perhaps only as little as half a dozen interactive multi-access computer communities... For the society, the impact will be good or bad depending mainly on the question: Will 'to be on-line' be a privilege or a right? If only a favoured segment of the population gets a chance to enjoy the advantage of 'intelligence amplification', the network may exaggerate the discontinuity in the spectrum of intellectual opportunity. On the other hand, if the network idea should prove to do for education what a few have envisioned in hope, if not in concrete detailed plan, and if all minds should prove to be responsive, surely the boon to human kind would be beyond measure (Rheingold,1994:76).

### **1.2.2. First Virtual Communities**

When ARPANet went on-line, electronic mail was implemented as a means of sending information regarding the maintenance of the network. It soon became clear that people used electronic mail not only for this reason, but also for personal communication. A study done in 1973 by ARPA found that 75% of all ARPANet traffic consisted of e-mail (<http://www.isoc.org/zakon/Internet/History/HIT.html>).

Electronic mail can be sent to one person or to a group of different people, and it is possible to reply privately to only one person on a group list or to the whole group. ARPANet veterans recall that the first large list to foster its own culture was SF-LOVERS, a list of ARPA researchers who wanted to participate in public discussions about science fiction. SF-LOVERS started appearing publicly on ARPANet in the late 1970s. Attempts were made to suppress it, because it clearly fell outside even the most liberal interpretation of research related activities. It is to the credit of the top

ARPA managers that they allowed virtual communities to flourish, despite pressure to control the activities that took place on ARPANet. The system engineers had their hands full with continuously redesigning the system in order to keep up with the explosive growth in network communication traffic (Rheingold,1994:77).

Until this stage, computers were mainly used as scientific workstations and business machines, and the personal home computer had not yet been developed. The explosive growth in network communication traffic and the connection of more and more networks to the Internet led to a personal computer revolution. With the use of the technical foundations created by the ARPANet researchers, the younger generation of researchers decided to turn computers into thinking tools “for the rest of us”. This led to the development and sale of computers for personal and home use for every population group (Rheingold,1994:67).

The Computer Revolution led to an increase in the number of and popularity of USENet newsgroups in the early 1980s. USENet operates as a free global bulletin board system that allows like-minded individuals to share their thoughts in a text-based system consisting of different topics. The first newsgroups were set up in 1979 to create a means for students at Duke University in the United States to communicate with each other across campus (The Guardian, 21 October 1999). Some users of USENet have become disillusioned with the system for various reasons. These reasons can range from, among others, being tired of all the spam sent to the board, sending spam oneself and being flamed for it, or just boredom with the topic being discussed in general.

As a result of this disillusionment, web-based discussion forums, which work in a similar way to newsgroups, made a debut. For example, in 1985, The WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), which is today one of the most well known virtual communities, was created. This type of Internet-based discussion forum is a part of what are now commonly known as virtual communities, and offer a space for intelligent discussion and small talk alike. In 1988 Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was developed by Jarkko Oikarinen (<http://www.isoc.org/zakon/History/HIT.html>). Internet Relay Chat is made possible by software that allows two or more users to have an almost immediate real time discussion (synchronous communication) with

each other on the Internet. Internet Relay Chat forms a part of many virtual communities today.

During the 1980s the National Science Foundation (NSF) provided funding to universities and foundations in order to allow researchers, faculties, and students to link to the Internet. The NSF established an acceptable-use policy that stated:

NSFNET backbone services are provided to support open research and education in and among US research and instructional institutions, plus research arms of for-profit firms when engaged in open scholarly communication and research. Use for other purposes is not acceptable.

This development allowed the Internet to grow from a few hundred computer networks to thousands of computer networks linking many more computers. “Knowbies” or old-timers on the Internet started to complain about “newbies” or newcomers, and justifiably bemoaned the loss of community spirit as “newbies” came to view the Internet less as a valuable shared resource and more as an exploitable public service. However the NSF was only able to enforce this policy up to a certain point, and with the establishment of the Commercial Internet Exchange Association (CIX) in 1991, the inevitable extension of the use of the Internet for business began (Whittle,1996:15).

The addition of the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1991 had a significant impact on the perceptions of others regarding the value of the Internet. The WWW allowed new users to experience the Internet as less unapproachable and less technical. The WWW can be accessed by installing a browser such as Mosaic, Netscape or Microsoft Internet Explorer on your computer and then connecting to the Internet via a modem or telecommunications connection. The World Wide Web consists of a collection of pages, that can be personal or commercial, and links to these pages. Some of these sites are organised according to themes. The theme can, for example, include a whole range of sites linked together and related to a particular category, e.g. women, poetry, cars or anything imaginable (Crandall & Levich,1998:78). The establishment of the WWW and the subsequent ease of navigation on the Internet, paved the way for the use of the Internet as a commercial medium.

### 1.2.3. The Internet as Business Medium

Businesses and the media began to take any notice of the Internet only in 1993. In 1994, when Internet/ARPANet celebrated its 25 anniversary, the first shopping malls, cyber radio-stations, Net pizza delivery orders and the first Cyber Bank arrived on the Internet.

It is noteworthy that the early texts (books and articles) on Internet business very much ignored the notion of community on the Internet and the subsequent cultural assumptions. During 1993 and 1994 these texts focused on how to establish a commercial presence on the Internet by setting up a web site, virtual storefront or web mall. Advice was also given on how to become listed on a directory service, and on how to access lists of e-mail addresses. The Web designs that grew out of these business models emphasised electronic product lists, on-line catalogues, order forms and static mall-like architecture. Many texts written in this era fostered the notion that: "If you build it they will come". This phrase is also the title of a section of one of the most popular books on Internet Commerce, Ellsworth's "The Internet Business Book" (1994). The "they" in this title is the Internet user, an anonymous, undifferentiated mass, and Web commerce is primarily about setting up a shop in Cyberspace to which "they" will naturally gravitate. Who "they" are and how "they" interact with each other is of little importance in these texts. In Canter and Siegel's text, "How to make a Fortune on the Information Highway" (1994), as with most others written in the same period, the on-line community is "at best irrelevant to models of Net commerce, and at worst an impediment" ([http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue4\\_9/werry](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue4_9/werry)).

Almost two years after these types of Internet commerce models and sites were developed, a renewed interest in the on-line community as it relates to Internet Commerce was rekindled:

The successful marketplace will invite consumers into a communal experience and let them meet people as well as buy products... it will make shopping a transaction involving not just goods and services but also experience. It will not forsake community for commerce (Harvard Business Review, Rayport and Sviokla, 1995).

This text has become one of the most quoted in the realm of Internet Commerce. Rayport and Sviokla describe in some detail how marketing, advertising, and general commercial development is to be integrated into concern for and analysis of community dynamics (Werry,1999:4).

#### **1.2.4. Back to Basics: Commerce with Community**

During 1993 and 1994 the Virtual Mall proved to be a disaster, and the slogan “If you built it they will come” proved to be utterly untrue. Few people visited these sites and even fewer of them bought anything. At this stage of Internet development, it became clear that in order for Internet Commerce to succeed, it would be imperative to integrate the reason why the Internet was developed in the first place, in other words for communication.

In 1995 and 1996 a shift was observed away from the Internet mall design that dominated early business texts. Emphasis was now placed on building sites that enabled interactivity i.e. allowed users to communicate with each other and with site sponsors, and on methods that would repeatedly bring people back to the same commercial site (Werry,1999:5).

It is important to note that not all on-line communities are vehicles to be exploited by companies and organisations trying to make money from people. The last few years of the history of the Internet have made it clear that people are looking for community and a place to belong, but they are also prepared to buy into the newly evolved commercial aspect of the Net. The commercial aspects of the Internet don't only refer to shopping malls, but also to the means a site uses to make money for the upkeep of the site. A few methods can be used, for example, by displaying banner advertisements on the site for other sites and businesses. This aspect of the Internet will be discussed in Chapter 5.

#### **1.3 Importance of this Research**

In the last few years of the twentieth century the development of the Information Age has resulted in attempts by users, service providers and governments to bridge the gap between the Information Rich (people with access to the Internet) and the Information

Poor (people without access to the Internet) by trying to decrease the cost involved in accessing the Internet. The Chancellor of the United Kingdom, Gordon Brown, told an audience of business leaders and Internet gurus that the government wants all families in the UK to have access to computers and the Internet. Mr. Brown also stated that no one should be without computer or IT (Information Technology) skills, and that as we enter the next century, we must make sure that nobody is left out of the computer revolution (BBC On-line, October 28, 1999). This trend can be observed in many other countries as well. For example, in the USA, the telephone companies have made this more possible for the citizens by charging a flat rate (pay for the call and not according to duration) for local telephone calls and by including Internet time in this rate. The telephone companies in the United Kingdom are also introducing similar schemes.

This interest and concern shown by the government in the United Kingdom stresses the importance of being part of the Computer Revolution and the subsequent Information Age. If this policy of the United Kingdom government is implemented it would lead to a 60% increase in the number of adults on-line in the United Kingdom (BBC On-line, October 26, 1999). This increase in the number of people on-line would make the study of this social milieu even more important as it would cease to be an elitist structure and become a true network “for the people by the people”.

### **1.3.1. Communication**

So far in this chapter it has been shown that communication and information sharing are the reasons why the Internet was created, and that these are still the main functions of the Internet today.

“Communication is and will remain the primary purpose of participants in Cyberspace. The goal of communication is to transmit knowledge from one sentient being to another. Our desire to communicate is closely tied to our yearning for knowledge and is an inherent part of our humanity. Now the human family seems to be discovering new ways to communicate- including the new modes of communications that distinguish cyberspace” (Whittle, 1996:35-36).

Until the twentieth century, traditional forms of communication have included; conversations, mail, magazines, music, art, messages, meetings, oratory and books. In the twentieth century this list has grown to include the new Cyberspace communications. Cyberspace communications include radio, television, electronic mail, forums and newsgroups, bulletin boards, web pages and chat rooms. These forms of communication are constantly being modified and developed to minimise the effect of not “being there”, for example, the lack of facial expressions, and to prevent the subsequent misunderstandings which can result (this will be further discussed in Chapter 4). The Internet has become the medium to keep in touch with people who are not in the same geographical area or time as oneself.

Cyberspace communications have the potential to replace certain forms of traditional communications. As the citizens of the world become more mobile and are able to move to different countries and continents, Cyberspace communications are replacing traditional ways of keeping in touch. For example electronic mail is cheaper and much quicker to use than traditional land mail, and even Christmas or birthday cards can be sent via the Internet. For this reason land mail is already commonly referred to by Internet users as snail mail. The only cost involved is the connection to the Internet. In the same way chatrooms and video conferencing facilities have the potential to replace a face-to-face conversation with someone. More people are coming on-line by the day, and in a study done by Nielsen Research Media (UK), it was found that 44% of Internet users in the United Kingdom ventured on-line for the first time in 1999 (BBC On-line, October 26, 1999). This exponential growth in the number of users of the Internet, and the fact that most people still use the Internet mainly for communication and information gathering, makes the study of virtual communities, as a new social milieu, relevant and necessary.

### **1.3.2. The Demise of Third Places in Public Life**

America and most of the rest of the western world manifest a sorely deficient informal public life. The social structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job and passive consumerism is small and dwindling. The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals. In Rheingold's (1994:25) view: “American lifestyles, which are characterised by

material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation, and a high price tag...”

Ray Oldenburg proposed in his book “The Great Good Place” (1991) that there are three essential places that people frequent: the place we live, the place we work, and the place we gather for conviviality. Oldenburg states that the public spaces of the past are where communities come into being and continue to hold together, even though conversations in these places are idle and trivial. These are the agorae of modern life. With the demise of these public places, the social fabric of existing communities started shredding.

“Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile. Since the formal institutions of society make stronger claims on the individual, third places are normally open in the off hours, as well as at other times. The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people’s more serious involvement in other spheres. Though a radically different kind of setting than a home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support it extends. Such are the characteristics of third places that appear to be universal and essential to a vital informal public life...” (Rheingold,1994:25-26).

The Internet and its virtual communities are ways in which individuals and groups are responding to the demise of third places in public life. As a result of crime, work and family, people cease to go out to find their third places. As an alternative they use the technology at their disposal to simulate these third places in the privacy, security and comfort of their own homes!

Sites such as Amazon City, Salon.Com, The WELL and other virtual communities are the new areas where people go after work to relax, play, talk and discuss anything that comes to mind. Virtual communities represent a new variety of public third places. Places where we can learn from friends and foes, where we can fulfil many of our

social, spiritual and intellectual needs, and where we are free to come and go as we please. A “knowbie” and host of Amazon City responded to my question of why people frequent virtual communities by saying:

“If not for Amazon City, my opportunities for interaction with friends would be extremely limited. For years I worked long hours. When I had free time, most of my friends did not and coffee houses, cafes, etc. were not open. But I could log on here and see what was happening. I could even keep up with friends that I did not see often via e-mail. Being on-line has helped maintain relationships as well as build new ones.”

For some people these virtual communities are the only “third places” that they have access to at particular times in their lives. This social environment is therefore even more important to study than off-line social environments because of the added implications created by the lack of certain social cues (This topic will be further discussed in Chapter 4).

### **1.3.3. Internet Commerce**

In the early 1990s, Internet Commerce came into being. It is interesting to note that Internet Business on its own, was a failure. Companies and organisations in the last three years have tried to incorporate the missing element for a successful Internet business, i.e. a sense of community, into the on-line business world (Werry,1999:2). This phenomenon stresses once again the importance of virtual communities for people on the Internet, and clearly shows the reason why people go on-line. This is not simply for shopping or consumerism, but also to find information, communication, a sense of place and to experience a feeling of belonging.

A major survey done in the United Kingdom between the dates of 16 August and 19 September 1999 found that three-quarters of the 40% of the UK population that have access to the Net, have never bought anything on-line. They therefore must use the Net for other purposes: information gathering or research, and computer-mediated communication. Jerome Samson of Nielsen Media Research says: “The Internet user’s demographic profile in the UK today is very similar to that of North America two years ago. However, UK Internet users are embracing e-commerce much more

rapidly than users in North America did in 1997” (BBC News on-line, October 26, 1999).

“The successful marketplace will invite consumers into a communal experience and help them meet people as well as buy products... it will make shopping a transaction involving not just goods and services but also experience. It will not forsake community for commerce” (Harvard Business Review, Rayport and Sviokla, 1995).

The commercial aspect and nature of the Internet and how it functions in relation to virtual communities are inseparable and important aspects that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

#### **1.4. Brief Thesis Overview**

The Internet is seen as one of the most important and far-reaching man-made creations in the world. The Internet’s primary reason for being is to be used as a reference and research tool and to enhance communication between people divided by time and place. It therefore enhances the process of globalisation to such an extent that only the advent of commercially accessible aeroplanes has made a bigger contribution to globalisation. Many Internet users combine searching for information with communication. The traditional areas on the Internet where this happens are commonly known as virtual communities.

The number of sites on the Internet has grown at an incredible rate and the amount of information is overwhelming. For this reason some people prefer to have a specific site on the Internet where they go back to when on-line. It is in these sites that people meet other people, exchange ideas, ask questions and gather information. The members refer each other to sites of interest, generally hang out, make friends, get support and love from people they’ve met on-line and in many cases take these friendships into their off-line lives. In this thesis I studied this phenomenon in collaboration with the newest innovations, i.e. Internet commerce that becomes integrated (for different reasons) into some of these virtual communities.

The first chapter of this thesis gives a brief overview about why it is important to study virtual communities on the Internet. This is done in the light of the demise of

third places in traditional off-line societies and the history of the Internet per se. Chapter 2 continues by discussing the bigger space in which these communities can be found- Cyberspace. This chapter also looks at the definition of community as it relates to traditional off-line societies, and the new post-modern definition of community that was formulated to include communities in the various areas of Cyberspace. The term community as it relates to the Internet has in many cases been misused, and sites that is not communities at all has been cited as communities. A distinction will be drawn between the correct and wrong use of this term.

Chapter 3 states the methodology used to study a number of sites where the post-modern definition of the term community can be experienced in varying degrees. In this chapter I also elaborate on the reasons why I chose the sites being used for the study, and not others. The ethical issues experienced during the course of this study conclude Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 starts with the occurrence and development of on-line friendships and relationships. An ethnographic account of my experiences at Amazon City and other communities forms the basis of the discussion of the creation and transmission of cultural assumptions in on-line communities. If communities do exist within the framework of the post-modern definition given in Chapter 2, then a form of culture must be present. My experiences and research include different cultural assumptions, for example, language, attitudes, knowledge, values, laws and norms of behaviour.

Chapter 5 reveals the broader and less obvious aspects of my experiences in virtual communities. I concentrate on the aspects that determine the nature of on-line communities, and the differences that exist between various sites that foster community. It includes aspects such as architecture, reason for creation of the site, content of the sites, means of interactive communication and if the topics being discussed adhere to the representation created by the site or not. The importance of funding of a site and the means of how this is done became a very important part of life at Amazon City and led to changes at the beginning of the year 2000. The means of funding sites on the Internet as a whole are mainly the same, but do the advertisements and links to other sites adhere to the representation created by the site or are there other powers at work? Linked to this are ways being used to increase the

“stickiness”<sup>1</sup> of sites, for example, by including shopping areas, on-line magazines and other innovations.

The phenomenon of combining commercial sites with interactive communication devices in order to attract more people to a site will also be discussed in this chapter. In this part of the chapter I debate whether community and commerce on the Internet are mutually exclusive, or, if they are forms of innovation and growth that strengthen each other. Commerce and community on the Internet can be found on the same site, but they are the result of different visions. For example, a virtual community can evolve to a new state of innovation and address more of the needs of their community members. On the other hand, it can be the result of an on-line shopping mall with added interactive devices, and users were more interested in the community aspect of the site than the commercial aspect. In recent years many of these sites have been the result of a commercial site trying to increase its “stickiness”. An important question that is answered in this chapter is whether the inclusion of interactive software on a site guarantees the development and growth of a community or not.

Chapter 6 ends my ethnographic study with the meeting of some members of Amazon City. I give the main conclusions that have been reached through this research and state recommendations for further study.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Internet, stickiness has come to mean, the process of converting visitors to customers and retaining prior customers in order to ensure repeated business.

## **Chapter 2: Cyberspace and the Communities on the Internet**

### **2.1 Introduction**

It is imperative to include a chapter on the definitions and literature available for the phenomenon that is being studied. Even though the Internet is already 30 years of age, there is still dispute about some of the definitions being used. This chapter focuses on the definition of Cyberspace, the definition of the term community as it applies to off-line life, and the adaptations made to the definition to make it relevant for on-line life. The reasons why community fosters on the Internet, and whether these communities are in conjunction with off-line life, or in response to it, will end this chapter.

For the purposes of this thesis the terms “off-line life” or “traditional” (conventional) life, is used instead of the term “real life”. In the context of this research the term “real life” shows a bias against computer-mediated communication experiences. In the course of this study it was found that people view their virtual community experiences as “real” as traditional experiences. The term “on-line life” is also used instead of the term “imagined life”, when speaking about computer-mediated experiences.

### **2.2. Cyberspace**

#### **2.2.1. Definition of Cyberspace**

The term Cyberspace was coined by William Gibson in 1981 in one of his first science fiction novels. It became well known only when he used it in his book *Neuromancer* (1984):

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...

The idea behind the concept of Cyberspace did not originate with the fictional writings of William Gibson. Benedikt points out that Cyberspace, or the promise of Cyberspace, has provided western culture with the means of realising what is essentially an “ancient project”. “A dream thousands of years old: the dream of transcending the physical world, fully alive, at will, to dwell in some Beyond- to be empowered or enlightened there, alone or with others and to return” (Waters,1997:420).

The book *Neuromancer* created a community of people united by an aspiration towards the development of this ancient dream as a new kind of social interaction (Stone,1991:192). For them, Cyberspace is “a parallel universe created and sustained by the world’s computers and communication lines. A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and other-human agency takes on form” (Benedikt,1991:1).

The definition of this ancient dream, manifested as Cyberspace, as a consensual hallucination is debatable. Jean Baudrillard (1995) argues against this view of Cyberspace. He says that what people experience in Cyberspace is as “real” as anything else that is normally considered as “reality”. The French philosopher Paul Virilio disagrees with Baudrillard. Virilio claims that there is, in fact, a “real” and that the “virtual” is something distinct that is, unfortunately, beginning to replace the “real” (Starrs and Anderson,1997:178). In a sense both of these philosophers speak the truth. On-line reality is as “real” as traditional reality, but at this stage they are still distinct. This is a result of the relative youth of the technology and because not everyone has access to it yet. As time moves on and the technology gets more accessible, this might change: “As aspects of the virtual environment become part of our natural environment, the distinction between computer reality and, for lack of a better word, conventional reality will become increasingly blurred” (Mantovani,1996:108).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Cyberspace does not exist only on the Internet. Electronic banking at an ATM (automatic teller machine), a telephone conversation and many other things that we view as normal parts of our every day life, are in fact Cyberspace. John Perry Barlow, lyricist for the Grateful Dead, and one of the founders of the

Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)<sup>1</sup>, has described Cyberspace simply but symbolically as “that place you are in when you are talking on the telephone.” When our focus shifts to a place other than our immediate surroundings through the use of technology we enters Cyberspace (Rheingold,1994:257).

Therefore, when entering Cyberspace through the use of a modem to connect to the Internet, a person’s mind finds itself in a virtual space created by the matrix of telecommunications networks. In this space millions of individuals across the globe interact through information retrieval, discussion and conversation, commerce, and a wide variety of other activities at any time of the day or night (Loader,1998:16).

It is clear that “Cyber” means automation, artificial control and computerisation, while “space” refers to a multidimensional place (discussed further on page 20). The reality of Cyberspace at this moment in time doesn’t do the term or concept any justice. It’s clearly still futuristic, and although not everyone agrees that this is the best term to use, the word Cyberspace continues to increase in popular usage and meaning.

Another term to describe the Cyberspace of the Internet is the “Information Superhighway”, but this term is falling into disuse as a result of its obvious disadvantages. The use of the “superhighway” metaphor extends only as far as the transmission or movement of information, and it leaves out the variety of different Cyberspaces on the Internet. For example it does not include the chatrooms, bulletin boards, conferencing areas, and workareas in which this vast transmission of information becomes places of communication and relationship (Featherstone,1995:82).

This movement away from Cyberspace and the Internet as an Information Super Highway and towards a space for communication and interaction is clearly put forward in Howard Rheingolds’ book “The Virtual Community” (1994:5):

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<sup>1</sup> The Electronic Frontier Foundation is an organisation started by John Perry Barlow and Mitchell D. Kapor both members of The WELL with the aim to: “fund, conduct, and support legal efforts to demonstrate that the Secret Service has exercised prior restraint on publications, limited free speech, conducted improper seizure of equipment and data, used undue force, and generally conducted itself in

“Cyberspace... is the name some people use for the conceptual space where words, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using computer-mediated communications”.

Whittle (1997:7) also formulated a definition that clearly illustrates the movement away from the Internet being only used as an Information Superhighway to the Internet being a Cyberspace:

Cyberspace: the imaginary or virtual zone just beyond any group of related physical access devices which may connect to facilitate interactive communications or exchange of information which transcend the limitations of time and space through artificial representation of reality.

This definition of Cyberspace is made up out of three different important aspects. Firstly, it conveys the notion that Cyberspace is a virtual space. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it is a space that occurs when the focus of the mind is transferred to a space that is not the immediate surroundings of the body. Examples of this mind transferral are, speaking on the telephone, listening to music and reading a book. Secondly, Cyberspace cannot be entered without an access device, whether this device is a CD player, telephone or modem. Thirdly, the interaction and communication that is enabled by Cyberspace are largely independent of the traditional view of both time and space (Whittle,1997:6-7).

### **2.2.2. “Spaces” on the Internet**

A range of debates occurred concerning the existence of “space” or non-existence there-of on the Internet. Traditionally, it was believed that “space” does not exist on the Internet because of the obvious lack of physical place and material objects in this area. Users lashed back at this sort of argument, and geographers and researchers found that space on the Internet can be perceived as a geographical place.

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a fashion which is arbitrary, oppressive and unconstitutional.” In general the EFF’s mission is to liberate Cyberspace from oppression and control.

Space in relation to the Internet is perceived by users as geographical places that are reconstituted in non-material form. Researchers, designers of virtual reality, and users of Cyberspaces all experience and express on-line worlds as places. It might not be a place in the traditional and theoretical sense of the world, but nonetheless it is a place to them. These on-line worlds also seem to contain the quality of "space". Literary (text-based) on-line worlds and virtual reality application programs have spatial dimensions:

They have internal extents and boundaries, users orientate their way through them using direction, and the virtual landscapes are laid out along a precise Cartesian coordinate system. Within some of these virtual worlds there are also more particular places- perhaps 'locales'- structures of specific locations frequented by regular visitors. Distinct social spaces exist in virtual worlds, as does Newtonian space. Absent from virtual worlds, of course, is materiality, or physical reality itself (Adams, 1997:179).

There are various "places" or "spaces" on the Internet where Cyberspace exists: electronic mail, newsgroups and forums, mailing lists, chat rooms, telnet destinations, web sites, electronic libraries, electronic conferencing, MUD's (multi-user domains) virtual reality, and interactive television (of all forms including visual telephones).

For the purpose of this thesis the focus will be on virtual communities, as they are commonly known on the Internet and the World Wide Web. These communities consist out of a few of the above mentioned areas of Cyberspace:

- Web sites-** The Internet is made up of websites or home pages. The "place" you get to when you log on to the Internet or find as a result of a search is a web site or page.
- Newsgroups and forums-** Such as USENet (discussed in Chapter 1).
- Mailing lists-** Electronic mail that is sent to a whole list of people. Any person can then reply to the whole list or to any one of the participants separately (Rheingold,1994:76).
- Chatrooms-** Chat programs are designed to allow people on the Internet to communicate synchronously (i.e. at the same time) in text. The number of users

communicating at the same time is theoretically limited (for example some chatroom software limits the amount of people in the chatroom area to 500 at any given moment) (Starrs & Anderson,1997:148). Some chatrooms have specific themes for example European chat, teenchat and anything to do with sex. General chatrooms also exists. In these chatrooms anything can be discussed (figure 2.1). The conversation can be very shallow and impersonal or can centre around a heated discussion. As a result of the fact that more than 2 people can be talking in a chatroom the conversation might be very difficult to follow, especially since it is more than likely that more than one conversation can be happening simultaneously. If two users want to engage in a private conversation they can move into another room with the hope that it's empty or they can send private messages to each other. The message will appear on the other users screen, and works as a private chatroom. I frequented a few chatrooms at the start of this research because most people start their Internet interactive experiences in chatrooms.

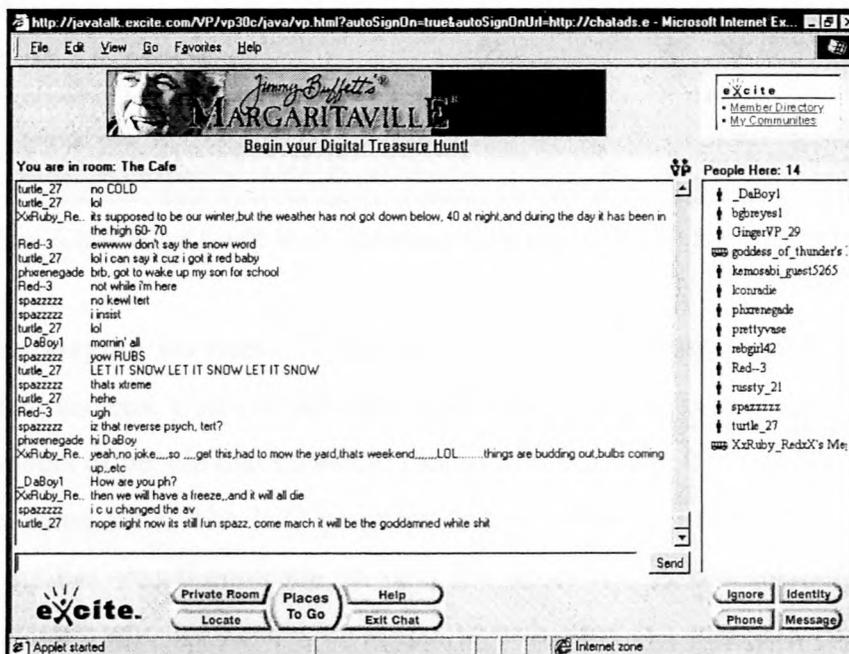


Figure 2.1. A General Chatroom at Excite.

•**Electronic conferencing-** This is a many-to-many communication system that works on the same principle as the community bulletin board in traditional society. Someone “posts” a note on the electronic bulletin board, and then other users can reply to the posting (Whittle,1996:55). A bulletin board is divided up into conferences, for example, “Issues”, and “Internet and Computers”. The conferences

are then sub-divided into topics for example, “Politics”, “Buying and Selling”, and another “Windows 98 Problems and Support”. Out of the topics different conversations start, for example, in the “Fun” conference of a community, there might be a topic “Word Games” and one of the conversations in the topic might be “Before and After” (figure 2.2) This form of computer-mediated communication happens in asynchronous time.

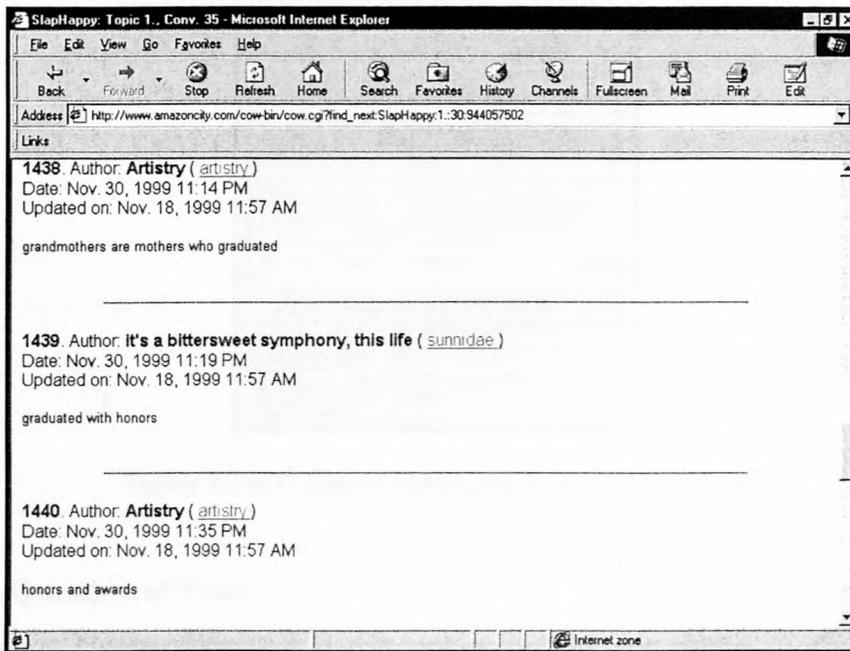


Figure 2.2: A Word Game in a Conference Conversation of a Virtual Community

•**Instant messaging services-** This allows users to talk instantaneously with each other on their screens. Users do not have to enter a chatroom for this. The user has the access numbers of people that he would like to converse with if they happen to be on-line at the same time. The ICQ program that is commonly used by Amazon City members notifies you if someone on your list is on-line. A chatfunction does exist where the people who are sending messages to each other can enter a chatarea without logging on to anywhere. This is one-to-one communication and occurs in synchronous time. Users can also send messages via ICQ to other users while the other user is off-line. You can send messages off-line or on-line to the people on your list by double clicking on their name (figure 2.3). A menu will appear with the option of sending a message.

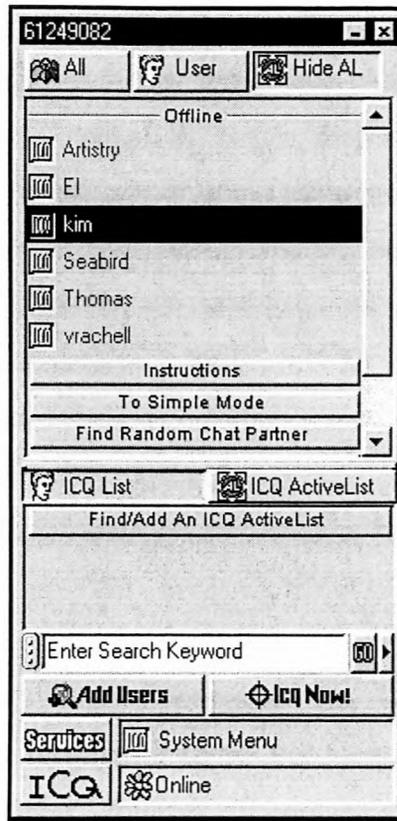


Figure 2.3 ICQ Instant Messaging Service Main Menu

### 2.2.3 The Question of Time

“Synchronous Communication” occurs when people are sitting in front of their computers at the same time (real time), while communicating with each other via the Internet. Face-to-face communication is also synchronous, but the people involved with the communication have the added advantage of being able to see the other person’s body language and facial expressions. With synchronous communication via the Internet there is sometimes a slight time delay of anything from a few seconds to a few minutes. This time delay is mostly a result of bandwidth limitations and how “busy” the server is, for example, the traffic on the server at the specific moment in time. Examples of synchronous communication via the Internet are chatrooms and instant messaging services. With synchronous communication the message won’t be stored for later reading by the person the message was addressed to. ICQ can also be asynchronous, for example, when one user sends a message to another user who is off-line at the time that the message is sent. In this case the message will be stored until the off-line user is able to read it.

“Asynchronous communication” is when the people communicating are not on-line at the same destination (webpage) at the same time. Asynchronous communication messages are available for the person or people they are addressed to for reading when the person(s) goes to the appropriate destination. Forms of asynchronous communication include electronic mail and messaging boards, as well as newsgroups and on-line forums. With asynchronous communication the time between sending (posting) a message and receiving a reply on the message is longer than in synchronous communication. John Suler (1996:2) states that: “Cyberspace creates a unique temporal space where the ongoing, interactive time together stretches out.” This gives the responder (user) time to reflect and think before they respond to a posting.

According to John Suler (1996:3) Cyberspace time can also be condensed. For example, if you have been a member of an on-line community for a few months, you may be considered an “old-timer”. Internet environments also change rapidly because of the ease and speed with which software can be rewritten and developed. The memberships of on-line communities and the people we meet on the Internet also change rapidly as a result of the ease with which we can move around on the Internet, and the ease of joining and subscribing to new communities. A survey conducted in 1999 by Engage Technologies and NVision, an Internet consultancy based in the UK, found that four out of every five visitors to the average Web site do not return. Most virtual communities therefore have a subscribed number of “citizens” that by far exceed the number of active members of the site. I found this to be true at Amazon City. The site has a few thousand subscribed members but less than 40 post messages. Some others might be lurking but most of them have never returned after registering.

To conclude this section, the virtual communities on the Internet do not have the same functions and structures, but they all have computer-mediated communication devices, for example, a conference area and sometimes also a chatroom. The heart of a virtual community is mostly the conferencing area. Today, communication in Cyberspace centers around the written and spoken word. The explosive growth of the World Wide Web (WWW), however, is rapidly ushering in connections that add pictures, sound, and video to the Cyberspace experience. In the future the connections

will become increasingly more realistic with more social cues and will therefore become more like face-to-face communications.

Virtual communities also have other functions and structures depending on the purpose, the age and the history of the site. These extras include things such as free electronic mail, a shopping mall, library, on-line magazine, and on some sites even radio stations (this will be discussed further in Chapter 5).

In the light of the above discussion of Cyberspace it is clear that the purpose and use of computers, in general, and the use of the Internet specifically, has evolved and grown since it was used as a way of sending encoded messages along the Information Super Highway during the Cold War. Computers are no longer seen as “tools of the mind”, but as “engines for new world experiences” (Waters,1997:415).

The question now arises if it is at all possible to have “communities” in Cyberspace? In order to answer this, it is necessary to look at the definition of community as it relates to off-line life and if it is possible to include virtual communities into this definition or if a new definition can be formulated that will include virtual communities.

### **2.3. The Term “Community” and Cyberspace Communities**

The term community has more than one definition and they all differ slightly from each other. These definitions have changed through the years, to include newer forms of community. These newer forms of community have been made possible by the process of globalisation. Cars, aeroplanes, and the Internet are instruments that can be seen as devices that have created more space between people, because people can now easily emigrate to another continent, work in a town far from home, and communicate with friends and strangers alike on the Internet. Globalisation is a result of technological advancement that has bridged “space” between people and led to new forms of community. To understand the new definition of community it is imperative to first look at the traditional term of the definition.

### 2.3.1. Modernist Definition of Community

According to Poplin (1979:8) most sociologists use the word community to refer to such units of social and territorial organisation as hamlets, villages, towns, cities and metropolitan areas. Community therefore is where people maintain their homes, earn their livings, raise their children and carry out most of their life activities. Hillery (1955) has found that at least three major elements can be found in most major sociological definitions of community:

1. Geographical area
2. Social interaction
3. Common tie or ties

His formulated definition of community states that: “community consists of persons in social interaction within a geographical area and having one or more additional common ties.”

Robert M. MacIver (Poplin,1979:14) had a more inclusive meaning in mind for the term community: “Any circle of people who live together, who belong together so that they share not this or that particular interest, but a whole set of interests wide enough and complete enough to include their lives, is a community... The mark of a community is that one’s life may be found within it.”

This fullness of scope is not commonly part of the modern societies that we live in today, even though, it is the rule in many primitive communities. The problem with the above definitions of the term “community” is that in today’s life many people don’t live and work in the same area or neighbourhood. People commute to work and back home in the evening. As a result of this commuting people also have less time to socialise with their neighbours with the result that they do not share a whole lot of interests. The only interest many neighbours in today’s society share are the fence that divides their respective properties.

The term community has been used in a variety of different ways: it has been used to refer to social groups, total institutions, and neighbourhoods. It has also been used in a philosophical sense, and, of course, it has been used in a generic sense that includes villages, cities, and metropolitan areas. A term with so many meanings can be confusing and it is impossible to write about virtual communities on the Internet

without having a chosen definition for the term community. Jessie Barnard suggested that the term “the community” refers to those units of social organisation that have a territorial dimension. According to her, the term “community” must be used when talking about the common ties and esprit de corps that can develop among people in diverse settings (Poplin,1979:22). Other researchers feel that the common ties that develop among people in diverse settings must rather be called lifestyle enclaves and not “communities”.

### **2.3.2. Way of Life and Lifestyle Enclaves**

In “Habits of the Heart”, Bellah and his co-authors note that community has many meanings, and the term is often used in connection with a way of life, for example, the skiing community, the show dog community, the criminal justice community or the truck driver community. They agree with Jessie Barnard that “the community” is a evolving and ever-changing collective in which the public and private lives of its members are moving towards interdependency regardless of the significant differences among those members. In contrast, lifestyle enclaves are segmental because they only take into account part of their members’ private lives. The part it takes interest in is usually their behaviours of leisure and consumption, and it celebrates the “narcissism of similarity” through the common lifestyles of their members. Anyone different is “irrelevant or invisible in terms of one’s own lifestyle enclave” (Doheny,1996:50).

Lifestyle enclaves are found in circumstances where individuals do not need to depend on others for anything more than companionship in their leisure lives. The result of globalisation is that individuals rely more on national and international ties than on local ties. The need for complex and integrated communities, where the public and private lives of its members, is interconnected are replaced. Taking its place is the need for isolated individuals to connect with each other through lifestyle enclaves which only provide a sense of community. According to Doheny it is obvious that what we perceive as community today, is in fact an intersection of different lifestyle enclaves. Our sense of community arises out of interest group interactions.

Some researchers and academics were willing to adapt the definition of “community” in order to include new forms of sociability and not reduce all communities to lifestyle enclaves. In terms of virtual communities the term “lifestyle enclave” is too limiting. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, virtual communities are not only interested in the habits of leisure and consumption of their members. Virtual communities also consist out of a wide variety of different people, with different perspectives and outlooks on life, but that does not lead to members ignoring other members who are different than themselves. My own participant observation revealed that although one person might not agree with another person's lifestyle, they will still give support and understanding to that person.

### **2.3.3. Postmodern Definition of the Term Community**

In Howard Rheingolds book “The Virtual Community” (1994:24) he explains that the existence of computer-linked communities was predicted 25 years ago by J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor, both research directors for the Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), who set in motion the research that resulted in the creation of the first such community, the ARPANet. The question of what on-line communities will be like was answered by Licklider and Taylor who wrote in 1968: “In most fields they will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually. They will be communities not of common location, but of common interest...”

With technological advancement and the move towards a postmodern society, the definition for the term community has been adapted to fit, for example, into the Computer Age of interaction and socialisation via the Internet. The main part of human communication consists out of a series of messages exchanged between humans. The continuous exchange of messages between the same people can be considered to form a community. When this communication occurs over a network, it is known as a virtual community that overcomes the limitations of geographical distance and time. The virtual community has the following features:

1. People in distant places can join the community: in other words, place is not a limitation as in the modern definition of community.
2. Each person can participate in more than one community at the same time.

3. There is no specific structure defined beforehand in the community and its structure changes dynamically.
4. A community itself is spontaneously created and modified, and possibly diminishes over time (Ishida,1998:13-14).

As is clear from the features of these virtual communities, the biggest threat for this type of community is communication. As a result of the lack of face-to-face communication in most virtual communities, text is the only link we have with the other person and the only way we have to make what we want to convert clear and understandable (this will be further discussed in Chapter 4).

One scenario for establishing a virtual community involves the following stages:

1. Gathering or assembly
2. Common ground
3. Sharing mutual interest and understanding
4. Agreeing on common needs and/or goals.

People get together either by chance or on the basis of an implicit common interest or objective. For example, some members of Amazon City were doing a search for the on-line bookstore Amazon.com and ended at Amazon City.com. Instead of realising their mistake immediately, they browsed through the site and became members. Other people hear about a particular virtual community from a friend who is a member and then decide to join to be able to communicate with the friend. This especially happens if they are divided by space or by space and time. Another person might be looking for a discussion on a certain topic and someone on-line or off-line tells him/her about a relevant discussion in a particular virtual community and then the person decides to join the community in order to partake in the discussion. As is clear from these examples, initially there might be no awareness of the possibility of forming a new community. The users or members have conversations, and that leads them to the knowledge that common ground exists between them. This common ground can manifest in shared interest and thereby they gain a better understanding of each other through this process. After this stage it may go further into something like mutual problem solving.

Of course this whole process isn't without problems and difficulties. Communication problems occur constantly, for example, someone didn't understand what someone else meant because the meaning of some words isn't universal. The problem of misunderstanding each other happens as a result of differences in personal background, geographical language differences and because not everyone is aware of the norms of behaviour of the community and rules that exist. Such misunderstandings frequently arise in a pre-community group. Some of the people might also not be aware of the common needs and goals which may exist, and the dormant potential that the members share to tackle problems together. Even though the first stage of community forming may be quite easy to reach in a space on the Internet, it is still difficult to plan joint actions if the members don't know each other well enough to share the roles to reach a common goal (Ishida,1998:165-166).

A virtual group where people know each other well enough to reach a common goal and where misunderstandings get fewer and fewer is a sign of the formation of a virtual community. In Rheingolds words: "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" (Rheingold,1994:5).

#### **2.3.4. One Community or More?**

Adam Newey (1999:30-31) says that the Internet is a collective community and does not consist out of separate communities. From the previous section it is clear that community forms where people are in interaction with each other for long enough to form relationships. These discussions and relationships form in thousands of different discussion groups and virtual spaces, all with a different focus and catering for different people with different needs. The idea of the Internet itself therefore forming a community of shared values is almost self-evidently wrong. There is maybe only one respect in which Internet users have a shared interest, and that is in keeping the channels of communication that they all use as open and as free from restriction as possible.

The Internet can be viewed as a planet just like the earth. The earth consists out of different countries with different cultures and communities. In the same way the

Internet consists out of different spaces with different cultures and communities. The question can now be asked if people join virtual communities in an effort to oppose off-line life or if the two forms of community can co-exist.

### **2.3.5. In Opposition to, or in Conjunction with Real Life?**

Virtual reality<sup>2</sup> and Cyberspace are commonly imagined in terms of reaction against, or opposition to, the off-line world. It is seen as an alternative “place” where people go to avoid the dangerous and difficult conditions of contemporary social life. Researchers such as Benedikt (1991:15) see this elsewhere of Cyberspace as a place of salvation and transcendence: “Consider: where Eden (before the Fall) stands for our state of innocence, indeed ignorance, the Heavenly City stands for our state of wisdom, and knowledge; where Eden stands for our intimate contact with material nature, the Heavenly City stands for our transcendence of both materiality and nature; where Eden stands for the world of unsymbolised, asocial reality, the Heavenly City stands for the world of enlightened human interaction, form and information.”

Not all virtual realists and Netizens<sup>3</sup> are as unrealistic and idealistic as Benedikt. There are others who are more realistic and practical and therefore have more to contribute towards the understanding of the relationship between Cyberspace and the off-line world. For them there is still the sense of Cyberspace as an alternative reality in a world gone wrong. Technological advancement in the field of computer-mediated communication is seen as the basis for the development of new and compensatory forms of community and socialisation. Networks are understood to be “social nodes for fostering those fluid and multiple elective affinities that every day urban life seldom, in fact, supports” (Heim,1991:73). Virtual communities represent:

“flexible, lively, and practical adaptations to the real circumstances that confronts people seeking community.... They are part of a range of innovative solutions to the drive for sociality- a drive that can be frequently thwarted by the geographical and cultural realities of cities.... In this context, electronic virtual communities are complex and ingenious strategies for survival” (Featherstone,1995:147). This

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<sup>2</sup> Virtual reality mostly refers to the completely emersive 3D variety, that has been portrayed in films such as Total Recall. The term can however be more broadly applied to such interfaces as MUD's, chatrooms and therefore to virtual communities as well. Fodor use the term virtual reality to include all worlds created by computers, this includes all computer simulations of real or imaginary phenomena (Kizza,1996:261).

strengthens the argument given in Chapter 1 that stated that the growth and popularity of virtual communities are a result of the demise of third places in public life. These communities are the result of people trying to overcome the limitations set upon them by contemporary society.

In Doheny's (1996:54-55) view the Internet can either enhance off-line communities by enabling a new kind of local public space or it can undermine communities by pulling people away from local enclaves and toward, global virtual ones. The occurrence of the second possibility is ever increasing. For Doheny the sense of community that one can find on-line is only positive, if the participation on-line leads to a better integration into the persons local community. In this view the Internet must act as a public space for local geographical communities, where people can learn more about the local government, schools and activities in their local area.

According to Doheny (1996:123) the Internet must be used, not to isolate us from each other, but to enhance the community we already have (however fragmented it may be). The problem with this idea is that not everyone in a society has access to the Internet, so this idea will result in an ongoing unequal distribution of information between the Information Rich and the Information Poor. Doheny (1996:188) ends his book by saying: "The net, like the glowing city I gazed at, is a seductive electronic specter. Take a part in it not to connect to the world but to connect to your city, your town, your neighbourhood".

There are researchers and members of virtual communities who do not agree with this sentiment of Doheny. Many people think that virtual communities can be used to connect people to a global network, and not just to their local community. Although it is one of the important uses of virtual communities, it can not be seen and developed as the only use. "A community that has not been chosen is a community of lesser quality" (Whittle,1997:240). Cyberspace allows us to be free of the notion that the only communities that we can belong to are communities within our geographical area.

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<sup>3</sup> People who are members or "citizens" of virtual groups and communities on the Internet.

Shelley Turkle (1996:178) responds to the demise of the public space and how we deal with it in a different manner than Doheny. According to her, many people spend most of their day alone at the screen of a television or a computer. As a result of the social nature of human beings, these people are trying to find new forms of sociability to fit into their lifestyle, and the Internet is playing a central role in this process. People correspond with each other through electronic mail and contribute to electronic bulletin boards and mailing lists. They join interest groups whose participants include people from around the world. It is therefore clear that because people don't have the same access to the local public space than in the past, they increase their access to the global electronically connected space.

“People look at a technology and see beyond it to a constellation of cultural associations. When they saw the early computer enthusiasts take the machine and make a world apart, many people felt they did not belong and did not want to belong. Now, the machine no longer has to be perceived as putting you in a world apart. Indeed, it can put you in the centre of things and people, i.e. in the centre of literature, politics, art, music, communication, and the stock market” (Turkle,1996:61).

In response to the idea of the machine putting us in the centre of things, Trevor Haywood (1998:26) says that networking is about maximising returns by remote communications and therefore we should not be surprised if it makes us more remote from each other. This is a serious paradox. That which can connect us with others in far-off places can limit and distort interaction between people if it's used over short distances to replace meeting each other in off-line space. He therefore does not have a problem if the Internet is used to put people in the centre of other areas and aspects of the world and people, that are spatially far from each other. But if it is used to replace face-to-face interaction and communication between people who live near each other, it creates a problem.

Networking allows people who are separated by time and space to participate in serious political, social and economical debates about their shared situation, or allow for an outsider's point of view in a situation. Indeed one could envision a future in which citizens of the world could join together across the wires to influence and achieve valuable common and individual goals. As part of a process of building

solidarity it may yet prove a powerful and potent instrument. But to be effective for all citizens, including those without the access devices, it has to be followed up by action in the traditional, off-line space that they inhabit. This may be difficult. Tucked away in virtual worlds, we will be less organised, less streetwise and thus less effective in the off-line world because we will have forgotten how it works (Loader,1998:29-30). Howard Rheingold also warns against this and therefore he states that for a virtual community to be a true community and not an instrument that will lead to disconnected individuality, it is necessary for the on-line interaction and relationship to be taken into the off-line world.

This viewpoint builds on the assumption that such communities exist in, and in relation to, everyday life in the traditional world: “virtual communities of Cyberspace live in the borderlands of both physical and virtual culture” (Stone,1991:112). Virtual interaction is a compensation for the increasingly difficult circumstances of the off-line world. People are trying to adapt to their changing social environments and for lack of anything better, they are turning to on-line worlds. Stone (1992:618) suggests that participants code “virtual” life or reality through categories of “normal” reality. People do so by communicating with others on the Internet as if they are in the same physical space. Participants perceive the space to be inhabited by bodies, and mappable by a Cartesian perspective. The users also regard the interactions as events and occasions and therefore as fully significant.

In other words virtual communities allow members to experience communications in Cyberspace as if the intercourse is embodied social interactions. Just as virtual communities are understood as having some of the attributes of traditional communities, so traditional communities can be seen to depend on the imaginary. What makes a community vital to its members is the treatment of the communications as meaningful and important. Virtual and traditional communities can be experienced as mirroring each other in chiasmic juxtaposition (Featherstone,1995:90).

Shelly Turkle (1996:21) states that virtual communities ranging from MUD's<sup>4</sup> to electronic conferencing systems allow people to generate experiences, relationships, identities, and living spaces that arise only through interaction with technology. For her book "Life on the Screen" (1996:21) she interviewed college students. Mike, a college freshman from Kansas, has created a whole virtual room in his favourite MUD. Even though it exists only in textual description he says: "It is where I live, More than I do in my dingy dormroom. There's no place like home."

It is thus clear that virtual communities do exist if the postmodern definition of community is applied. The growth in popularity of these communities is in part a result of the demise of third or public spaces. Uncertainty exists about whether these communities are a response against the traditional (off-line) world or if it can be seen as an additional dimension to life and not as substituting "traditional" life experiences. As mentioned in this chapter the idea must be for these communities to function as an added dimension to life. For this purpose it is necessary to study this social milieu so that literature exists that keeps up with the exponential growth and development of this environment.

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<sup>4</sup> Multi-user domains or dungeons are imaginary worlds in computer databases where people use words and programming languages to built worlds and all objects in them, and compete for power and prestige in these worlds.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology Used and Ethics of Study**

### **3.1. Introduction**

The Internet is one of the most easily accessible social study fields. For this research all I needed was a computer, electricity and a modem and the newest social milieu in the world was literally on my desktop. Unlike other social, economic, and political environments being studied by social scientists, I didn't have to drive or fly to some distant location. It was all right here on my monitor any time of the day or night. I could be in the middle of conducting research, and then take a break for a few minutes to make a cup of coffee. As a result of the time and space difference it is therefore clear that conventional research methods must be adapted to suit this newest of social environments. It is impossible and very rarely necessary to fly, for instance, to America, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Jamaica or England to conduct interviews with other members of the community.

### **3.2. Research Methods**

#### **3.2.1. Participant Observation**

The main form of research I used for this thesis is participant observation. John Suler (1996:2), who mainly used participant observation to study "The Palace"<sup>1</sup> gives the following reasons for his choice of research method: "By joining and participating in the group to be studied, the researcher becomes the very thing she is studying. Everything the researcher subjectively experiences is grist for the scientific mill." Therefore it was necessary for me to become an active member of some of the sites that I studied. At the start of my research I did participant observation in a few virtual communities and chatrooms. As will be discussed in Chapter 4 some of these communities died, and I use others to overcome the problem of apt illustration. My first few weeks of participant observation in a virtual community were spent in trying to get to know the geography and functions of the site. It is imperative to know how the chatrooms and conferencing system or bulletin board works so as to be in a position to communicate with other members.

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<sup>1</sup> The Palace is a virtual community where the users must pay to register and where the text communication is supplemented with avatars (images/pictures). The avatars are chosen to portray a certain image of the user, i.e. to tell the other users something of the person behind the avatar.

Just as in a face-to-face relationship, I had to introduce myself as a new member or “newbie” to the other members and share information about my life. The information the old members or “knowbies” are interested in concerns the type of job the person does, if the new member is married or single, has children or not, and any other aspect of the member's life that he/she is comfortable sharing. As a new member I asked questions, about, for example, how things work, where everyone is from, and why they became members of the community. In the above mentioned respect, it is possible to draw a clear parallel between a new member in a virtual community and a new member in an off-line community. After a few weeks, depending on the amount of time spent in the community, the new member feels like an “old-timer”. This time condensation has been discussed in Chapter 2. By doing participant observation I am one of the subjects that I study. In John Suler's words: “Can you think of a better way to understand a community of people than by moving in and becoming one of them?” (Suler,1996:2).

### **3.2.2. Surfing the Internet**

Before I started doing participant observation, and right through my research, I surfed the Internet. I looked at different types of sites, member-generated content sites, commercial sites and academic sites. I found articles and books written by students and researchers that are not available via the traditional printing press. These articles and books are mainly written by people for publication on the Internet. Other researchers and scholars place parts of their articles and drafts of books on the Internet as a means to get feedback and contributions from people who read their work.

### **3.2.3. Reviewing Relevant Literature**

Chapter 2 discussed relevant literature that's been written in the past by people studying the Computer Revolution, computer-mediated communication and commerce on the Internet.

Howard Rheingold and John Suler both conducted intensive participant observation research at two different virtual communities. Rheingold studied “The WELL”

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(Whole Earth 'Electronic Link) and Suler conducted research at "The Palace". Both these researchers created a foundation that can be used for any study that is done about virtual communities. Therefore this thesis about virtual communities cannot be complete or credit worthy without reference to their work.

#### **3.2.4. On-line Questionnaires and Informal Questions/Interviews**

Amazon City is a virtual community on the Internet that caters mostly for women and was founded in 1996. Most of my participant observation was done in this virtual community. I started a conversation at Amazon City, under the conference title Meta<sup>2</sup>, titled: "Anthropology of Virtual Communities". In this conversation I asked questions concerning people's participation at Amazon City, as well as their own general Internet use, their on-line shopping experiences and other general questions that are relevant for this study. I posted a questionnaire in this conversation with questions relating to the study. The chapters of this thesis were also placed on the Internet with a link posted in the conversation, so as to make feedback possible. This was done for ethical reasons that are discussed later in this chapter.

#### **3.2.5. Lurking**

Conferencing software stores the posts (messages) after they have been posted. If a new member joins a virtual community with a conferencing system the messages in all the conferences will be there for the new member to read. A function that is called a Hotlist Editor is used by the new member to choose relevant conferences in which to participate. After the editing process, the conferences in which the user is not interested will not appear on the user's Hotlist (figure 3.1). All the posts in the conferences that the new user placed on his Hotlist are available to read.

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<sup>2</sup> A conference in Amazon City to discuss the community itself, its standard practices and the concerns of both the users and the conference hosts.

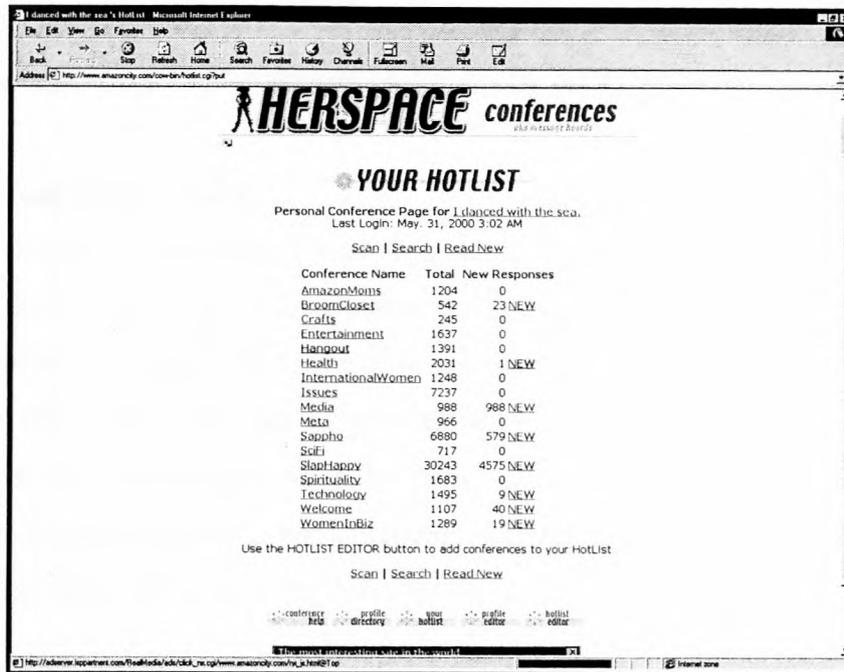


Figure 3.1: My Hotlist at AC/Herspace

Not all virtual groups keep all the messages. At USENet the messages are erased on a weekly basis, so as to create more space. In communities where the old posts are still available to read, years after they have been written, the text creates a wealth of information to be used, as the whole history of the site is chronicled. A member of a community can reply on comments that have been written years ago. It would be necessary for the person to give an abstract of the previous posts. The reply on the posts can also happen only at the end of all the posts in the relevant conversation. Some conversations exhausted information and participation and these conversations could evolve to read-only conversations. The same read-only principle can be used on a day to day basis, when for example, a member doesn't have a comment to make in a conversation or has too little time to reply. A risk involved with participant observation is that I had to be careful not to influence or change the community that I studied. For this reason, and many others (for example, time constraint and a lack of interest in a particular discussion) I as a researcher and a member of the community converted to lurking in some topics and conversations. Lurking has a very negative connection in most virtual communities, but all members do it at one time or another. The problem is not with active participants in the community who lurk, but with inactive members who lurk around a community for whatever reasons they might have. These reasons might range from a person doing research who doesn't

want to become involved, or it could be a family member or colleague who got hold of someone's password and username and is spying on the member.

### **3.3. Sites Used for the Study**

The main site used for this study was Amazon City.com. As a result of changes that happened during May 2000, the community is now known as Herspace.com. The changes started to occur after I had done most of my research and therefore I will keep using the name Amazon City until nearly the end of this document. The members on the site are still using the name Amazon City. The reason for this is because the changes are being implemented slowly and one aspect at a time is being changed. Remnants and URL's for Amazon City still exist.

Participant observation was also used to study other virtual communities in order to make this study relevant for more than just Amazon City. These sites include Salon.Com, Cafe Utne and the "here today gone tomorrow" communities of, for example, the Excite server. The WELL and The Palace are included in the study but no participant observation was done in these communities. Rheingold and Suler both did extensive research in these communities and they proved according to their work that community do exist at these sites. It is therefore imperative to use their research to avoid the problem of "apt illustration".

A study was also done on the sites in the same network as Amazon City to give an example of a collection of sites that are linked together as a network. This was also done by participant observation and some relevant literature on networks and web rings. This study also gave insight into Internet Commerce, and marketing done by Internet businesses.

### **3.4. Why these Sites and not Others?**

The reasons why these particular sites were chosen above others are very simple. The Internet consists out of millions of sites, and this amount is growing daily. Sites are added daily to this world of computer-mediated communication and Internet business. The size of the Internet is also influenced by sites that have fallen into disuse that are not always removed. Some parts of the Internet create a feeling similar to that of a Ghost Town. These parts of Cyberspace consist out of half finished or finished sites

that have never been visited or have not been recently updated. Numerous sites are found that have computer-mediated communication devices, for example, a bulletin board or conferencing system, but if you post a message you never receive a reply. I experienced this phenomenon at some of the sites that I joined at the beginning of my research. Needless to say after going back to the sites for the umpteenth time expecting a reply, and receiving none, I no longer consider myself a member of any of them.

#### **3.4.1. Longevity**

When doing a study about virtual communities on the Internet it is imperative that a site is chosen that will still exist after two months of research. At the start of my research I joined three Excite virtual communities as well as the other mentioned sites. The sites had between 2-15 members each. Interaction and communication at all three of these communities is very infrequent and almost non-existent, which makes studying them impossible, even though it gave me some valuable insight into why communities exist and grow or not. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, a number of reasons can be given for the lack of longevity in certain virtual communities, for example, lack of interesting topics, annoying graphics, page-layout and more. All of these deficiencies will result in very small numbers of members. I found that it is therefore not a good idea when doing research about virtual communities to pick a site with only a few members.

For this reason, Amazon City, Cafe Utne, and Salon.com were chosen for participant observation. They all have a large number of users and there are more than 150 new posts on any given day. Amazon City functions as my cultural text and for this reason most of the participant observation was done at this site. The research I conducted in Salon.Com and Cafe Utne was mostly lurking in nature. This once again was to avoid the problem of “apt illustration”, and to see if the phenomena that are observed at Amazon City can be found in other virtual communities as well.

#### **3.4.2. The Existence of History**

I chose communities with a history. Amazon City and Table Talk at Salon.com were founded in 1996. Cafe Utne made its on-line debut in 1995. These communities have managed to exist for years on the Internet, and in this time they have grown,

developed and evolved. These three communities were each founded for different reasons. This helps to answer the question for what reasons virtual communities are created (this will be discussed in Chapter 5). Cafe Utne has been rated as the biggest on-line community in North America and Salon as the second largest. Amazon City is one of the oldest on-line communities for women. As mentioned in Chapter 1 The WELL was founded in 1985 and The Palace was also founded in the 1980s.

It is therefore clear that all five of the virtual communities I used for this study have a history and an active membership. For this reason they can give valuable insight into the conflict, challenges, problems, joys and cultural assumptions experienced in the life of a virtual community. In an environment as volatile and ever changing as the Internet the existence of history is imperative. The history of any community is also unavoidable if a study about the cultural assumptions of the community is undertaken (Chapter 4).

### **3.5. Ethics Involved in the Study**

Just as in any off-line study involving people, there are some ethical issues that I, as a researcher, had to take into consideration.

#### **3.5.1. Misrepresentation of the Self**

In an on-line community the most important ethical issue is to not lie about one's identity as a researcher. If a researcher withholds the fact that he is researching people's interaction, he is deceiving them. The ramifications of this might be very serious.

Immanuel Kant (1959:40) has this to say about deception: A man in need finds himself forced to borrow money. He knows well that he won't be able to repay it, but he sees also that he will not get any loan unless he firmly promises to repay it within a fixed time. He wants to make such a promise, but he still has conscience enough to ask himself whether it is...permissible. He will immediately see that he intends to make use of another man merely as a means to an end which the latter does not likewise hold.

If a researcher defines himself as anyone other than himself, and then interacts as this altered identity, he is deceiving the people he is interacting with (Kizza,1996:264). For this reason I thought it an ethically sound idea to ask the permission of the owner of the site before I started my research. This was a process of defining my identity and of course also good manners! This would also avoid some sticky copyright issues that might have arisen. I had to be honest concerning my intentions. I made it clear that my objective in joining the community was to research it, but I also mentioned that I enjoyed the community for what it was. I had to realise that, although my reason for being in the community was to gather data, for other members it was a place of relaxation, debate, and support. To be effective in participant observation I had to be honest about who and what I was, and I also became involved in the mundane activities and interaction of the community. I played the wordgames, gave support and encouragement, debated the issues of the day and took the time to become an active member of the community and a “knowbie” or “oldtimer”. John Suler has this to say on the issue: “In my eyes, this honest approach to participant observation was the best possible way to conduct this research. It also avoided the sticky ethical issues that arise when on-line researchers attempt to hide their identity from the people they are studying” (Suler,1996:4).

### **3.5.2. “You Own Your Own Words”**

Text communication on-line is the equivalent of a face-to-face embodied conversation. If a person speaks in off-line life the words are audible only at the moment they are spoken, unless of course they are recorded on video or tape. In the conference areas, and mailing lists, (asynchronous communication) interaction between people takes place, but their words are captured for posterity to witness. Members in many-to-many computer-mediated communication have to face the fact that an informal conversation on-line, is a potential publication as well as a conversation. These communications can be read by anyone who is a member, or who has access to another members' user identification (userid or pseudonym) and password. This can have severe ramifications for individuals. Members discuss anything from their health, families, relationships, and political identities in these conferences, and according to virtual community members they open up much more in the virtual community than in face-to-face conversations.

James Rutt is the chief executive of Network Solutions Inc., a Herndon-based company that stores the master directory of Internet addresses. This company's main functions and roles are directly defined by the federal government. Rutt has been a member of the virtual community "The WELL" since 1989, and during the years he has made some elaborate and harsh statements about President Clinton and the government he heads. For this reason Rutt decided to erase himself from "The WELL". He activated a program that erased every message he ever wrote and posted in "The WELL". The risk involved of anyone seeing what he wrote was just too great. Rutt isn't the only person this sort of thing has happened to. A Washington area lawyer dropped out of a heated discussion in a different on-line forum, after another user threatened to send the messages to the lawyer's superiors. The blackmailer said: "I don't think it will help your career if I was to dump all this information on somebody you work for... If you don't shut up, that's where it's going to." The lawyer stopped posting in the forum after this message. Ironically the topic of the conversation was "Free Speech Issues" (Schwartz,1999:A1).

It is important to remember when posting that someone might want to use your words against you. For this reason some virtual communities, including Amazon City added the feature of being able to post some provocative or very personal messages anonymously. In this way, the message won't be able to be traced back to you and you can still give your opinion or get the support you need.

Other communities, such as "The WELL", that don't allow anonymous postings, offer their users some measure of privacy through the policy, "You own your own words". This basically means that no one else can claim another member's words as their own. It places a copyright on the words that have been posted in a conference. This means that before I as a researcher or any other member can quote a member of a virtual community in an article, book or another website, the permission of the writer must be obtained. This also allows the person who wrote the words to remove them from the system whenever they want to, as in the case of James Rutt. For this reason I placed my research on the Internet for the members that have been studied to read. As a researcher doing participant observation in an area where people reveal so much about themselves it is imperative that I always keep their trust. By reading the

chapters as they are finished the members can see that I am not violating and abusing the trust relationship that exists.

People have the option of using a pseudonym as a name when engaging in some of the virtual communities on the Internet. This practice is an attempt to protect the identity and privacy of the user. It has been found that people tend to act more graciously and considerately if their real names are connected to their words and actions on-line. In some communities such as “The WELL” the use of pseudonyms is not encouraged. For the above mentioned reason, the owners of the site prefer people to register under their own names. In some communities the members register with pseudonyms but do reveal their real names during the course of the interaction.

The reasons people use pseudonyms are twofold; firstly, they can use it to hide their identity if they want to experiment with their own identity, for example change their gender on-line. Or if their careers are in the public light, and what they say might compromise their integrity and offend the people they work for. Secondly, it can be an effort to give more meaning in the visually impaired environment of virtual community (in the absence of WebCam). For example, a person who enjoys wine might use a grapevariety as pseudonym, or some members combine their children’s names to create an on-line name for themselves. These pseudonyms can sometimes reveal more about a person than an off-line name. In quoting or discussing a conversation that took place in a virtual community it is imperative for me to protect the user's identity. If the member uses a pseudonym that is not his real name but through the course of his interaction he reveals his real name, I cannot use this name without the permission of the person involved. I had to change some of the less important facts involved in a discussion (when the writer of the post wanted me to), change the pseudonym when asked to, and I asked the permission of the person involved.

For the purposes of this research all the examples of interaction to prove a point, as well as of quotations from members of a virtual community, will be given in the exact words used. To protect the identity of the people I interviewed and quoted, pseudonyms will not always be given and real names will never be used.

## **Chapter 4: Cyberculture with Specific Reference to Amazon City**

### **4.1. Introduction**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Amazon City (AC) functions as cultural text for this research and therefore most of the participant observation for this section has been done in this virtual community. The chapter is an ethnographic account of my experiences in Amazon City.com as an example of a virtual community with the main focus on member-generated content.

This chapter will focus first on the appearance of relationships in virtual communities. Secondly my experiences in Amazon City will be discussed under the cultural assumptions of a virtual community.

### **4.2. Relationships in Virtual Communities**

There are two opposing opinions about friendships in Cyberspace. One side views on-line friendships as “shallow, impersonal and even often as hostile”. They hold the opinion that only the illusion of community can be created in Cyberspace. On the other hand there are people who believe that computer-mediated communication liberates interpersonal relations from the confines of physical locality. Therefore it creates opportunities for new, but genuine, personal relationships and communities (Parks and Floyd,1996:80-81).

Neither side of the debate is completely wrong or right. Just as people in off-line life don't become friends with all the people they meet, they also don't in Cyberspace. In my own experience I have encountered both sides of the debate. For the purposes of this research I joined several virtual communities and some of them (the Excite communities) died, so I formed no relationships there. In Amazon City the possibility of forming positive and genuine on-line relationships was there from the start. The new member is encouraged to post an introductory posting in the Welcome conference. The response of people welcoming me was almost immediate, and the invitation to share more about myself and to visit all the different conferences was included. I joined another virtual community where my first posting was greeted with

a very hostile and aggressive response, and based on this I didn't stick around to form any meaningful relationships. The only way to build meaningful relationships in a limiting space such as a virtual community is to spend as much time as possible in the community areas.

For the first seven months of my research I spent most of every day logged on to Amazon City. This allowed me to see who is deeply involved, and even allowed me to build relationships with some of them. Members of Amazon City create many different conversation topics in their interaction with each other. Because this is participant observation, I didn't want to alter the community in any way so I did not create any new conversations except for the one based on my research.

How does one determine who is deeply involved in a virtual community and who is not? The most obvious way I encountered is to look at the number of times a person posts a message in the community. Some of the members stay logged on to Amazon City throughout the whole day. These are mostly people who work on computers, either from home (own businesses) or from work. Some of them are also stay-at-home mothers. Some of the other members log on to Amazon City first thing in the morning and then again at night when they come home from work.

The deeply involved members are dispersed between these two groups. There are other members of the group who only log on once a week or even less often. The postings in virtual communities work as a conversation. As many of the members are logged on to AC throughout the day, on most days, the members who log on only once a week or less are more removed from the involved members and what's happening. For example sometimes it happens that someone is going through a difficult time, due to someone dying, or someone has a birthday and these members would miss the happenings. They will respond a week later when congratulations are a bit late, and support and advice has been given by someone else. The deeply involved people are there when you need help. Sometimes it happens that for a week or two they are not available. Interestingly enough they will post a message to the community saying that they will be gone for a while for whatever reason. They will also leave their e-mail address or ICQ or People Link numbers in case someone wants to contact them during this time (if they will be near a computer). Another thing I did

was to read (and browse) through some of the dead conversations and posts that were written from 1997 onwards. That gave me an idea of how long the current members have been members, and gave me more insight into the site and its members. The easiest way to learn more about other members is to read their member profiles. In the profile the person writes a short profile for herself, for example, where she lives, her age, profession or anything else the member wants to share with others. For example some of the members place a piece of poetry as their profile, instead of any personal demographics.

In interacting with people on-line there are some limitations that must be overcome, for example the lack of emotion in postings and social cues, etc. As will be seen in the next section, members use emoticons, acronyms and prolonged time on-line to overcome the limitations of CMC. As discussed in Chapter 2, members of virtual communities also have additional contact with each other in order to aid the process of forming friendships. Members of virtual communities overcome the limitations imposed by the medium by sending private e-mails to individuals with whom they want to form closer friendships. In my case these e-mails were a result of speaking to someone in a chatroom and then realising that we have a lot in common, for example geographical space and time, and interests as we are both students. The other reason was if someone read something that they thought I would be interested in for my research they would mail it to me. I have also sent a postcard to one of the members when on holiday.

Friendships are possible even with members who are not logged on every day. All it needs is a chance encounter in a chatroom and shared interest and then the relationship can be taken further via ICQ and e-mail. These on-line relationships do move out of the Cyber realm into off-line life and there are many other ways in which this can take place. Telephone calls, snail mail cards and packages, as well as face to face meetings are the next step to overcoming most limitations imposed by the medium on the building of friendships and relationships (Bruckman,1992; Rheingold,1993).

Obviously CMC relationships are different from off-line relationships. The people involved will have to work harder to form and maintain a relationship but the

structure and culture of the specific virtual community aids the members in this. This is done, for example, by creating an area where the members can post photographs of themselves, by encouraging frequent posting, and by encouraging off-line meetings. An addition made at Amazon City at the beginning of the year 2000 is the Rogue Gallery that includes pictures of all of the frequent long-term members of Amazon City. The interesting thing about it is that there are only 34 pictures of members, and they include all of the core members. An appeal was launched to the members to send in a picture to the two fair witnesses who organised the gallery. If you did not respond they went so far as to search for your webpage link or address in Amazon City and include your picture (Amazon City, Welcome, February 27, 2000).

The questionnaire I posted in Amazon City for this research asked the question whether members feel that on-line friendships are possible and if they do have any on-line relationships or friendships. It was also asked if they find off-line relationships more or less rewarding than on-line relationships. The answer was unanimously yes, on-line friendships do exist and everyone that filled in the questionnaire has experienced on-line friendships. Some friendships are still in the formative stage and others have met each other off-line and communicate over the telephone, e-mail and snail mail. What follows are a few of the responses given:

“I feel like a lot of people here at AC are my friends” (Amazon City, October 21, 1999).

“There's an energetic interaction F2F (face to face) that one doesn't get with on-line, though, and I think ultimately F2F is more satisfying”. (Amazon City, October 21, 1999).

“I think on-line friendships are more fulfilling because you start out meeting because you have a common interest, so deep conversations develop quicker. Once you meet in person, it changes into a real-life relationship...for instance, once you become romantically involved with someone on-line, you start calling them instead of e-mailing- you want to hear their voice once you've met. I think what on-line communities provide is a shortcut to meeting people you will like. In the real world,

there's much more trial and error because the chance you'll have anything in common with a random person in a bar is next to none. But, let's say you meet them in a stampcollectors chat room, the odds are much higher" (AC,October22,1999).

"I feel that AC has enriched my life. I have very good friends off-line, and spend a lot of time with them. I regard my AC contacts as an extension of my social life. At New Year I partied 'til 4am, then came home and logged on for long enough to wish the Amazons a Happy New Year. Both are important to me" (AC,January13,2000).

"At the time I joined, I guess I saw AC as a kind of interactive entertainment, only the people in there are real- and shortly I began to consider some of them friends. I've met one of them off-line once- and we hope to meet again. In some aspects these friendships can be better than those with friends who live nearby- in the sense that the physical distance somehow makes it easier to be open-hearted and share things you'd otherwise find difficult to tell someone else. I've always considered on-line friends a new version of pen-pals. One of my oldest and closest friends is in fact someone I've only met twice- yet through letters we've been friends for almost 10 years. Pen-pals are real and so are on-line friendships. The distance is of course also a problem- some times you need a hug to make it through the day..." (E-mail,October27,1999)

It is therefore clear that all the respondents agreed that on-line relationships and friendships are possible. The limitations of virtual communities that can't be overcome, for example, the lack of physical contact when the members are not meeting in off-line life, were also included. The aspects where off-line life is more limiting than on-line life were also included. For example, the chances of meeting someone on-line with whom you have something in common is more likely than meeting such a person in an off-line bar.

It is important to note that the people who responded to my questionnaire are mostly those people who are deeply involved in the community. They are the people who have formed relationships in Amazon City and spend a lot of their time in the conferencing area. None of the casual members responded to the questionnaire or are a part of my conversation in the Meta conference. Meta is one of the less frequented conferences and not on everyone's Hotlist. In contrast to this, one or two of the

members who joined after the conversation was created and announced, joined it because they were aware that I was doing research and they wanted to help. It is also true that not everyone engages in meaningful friendships or other relationships in Cyberspace. As I've mentioned, some relationships in virtual communities are hostile, threatening and sarcastic. This however doesn't detract from the potential of virtual communities as places to create meaningful relationships.

Most of the early research on computer-mediated communication was conducted on small groups of people who worked on structured problems for a limited period of time in laboratory settings (Garton and Wellman, 1995:434-453). Groups who were communicating via computers were compared with groups that were communicating face to face. The findings from this type of research generally emphasised the social disadvantages of computer-mediated communication. These findings included the following: the difficulty in moving towards shared points of view, more verbal aggression, blunt disclosure and non-conforming behaviour than in off-line groups. These findings were attributed to the anonymity afforded by CMC, or norms of behaviour that make the expression of hostility more acceptable in on-line settings (Lea et al.,1992;Prentice-Dunn&Rogers,1989;Spears&Lea,1994;Zimbardo,1969).

The reason they gave for these findings is that social cues are not as readily available in on-line communication. Computer-mediated communication was judged to have a narrower bandwidth and less information richness than of-line relationships (Daft & Lengel,1984; Kiesler, Segal & McGuire,1984).

According to both social presence theory (Rice,1987; Rice & Love,1987; Short, Williams & Christie,1976) and social context cues theory (Sproull & Kiesler,1991), this reduction in contextual, visual and aural cues should cause communication in on-line settings to be more impersonal and non-conforming than communication in off-line settings. These claims have been challenged repeatedly however, and it's clear by looking at the cultural aspects, such as language and the use of acronyms and emoticons, that the reduced cues can be successfully replaced (Walther,1992,1993; Walther, Anderson & Park,1994; Walther &Burgoon,1992).

It's been argued and accepted that time is a key element. The multiple channels and cues available in off-line communication speed the exchange of information. In CMC this process is slowed down because of the absence of some of the social and relational cues. The important point is not that CMC is unable to convey relational and personal information, but rather that it may take longer to do so. Walther and his colleagues (1994) found that the proportion of socio-emotional content was higher when interaction time was not restricted. Thus, the negative effects attributed to the computer as medium may have been the result of stringent time restrictions placed on the interaction.

In off-line life a conversation that would last half an hour will take about two hours in a chatroom or on ICQ. It therefore takes a lot of commitment and time to build individual relationships with people in virtual communities outside of the conferencing system. There are a lot of limitations that make this process of relationship building difficult and they will be revealed throughout the following sections. To start this section it is important to note that we can group all the manifestations and overcoming of limitations under the heading of Cyberculture.

### **4.3. Cyberculture**

The term Cyberculture was coined by Escobar (1994) in an article in *The Journal of Current Anthropology* (35:211-231). According to Alison Adam and Eileen Green (Loader,1998:94) Cyberculture is a curious phenomenon. At this stage in the history of Cyberspace it is not yet definable, and it remains to be seen if it can be defined in future. Cyberculture, as it is understood today, is the rise of new practices, behaviours and concepts surrounding various computer-mediated communications or Internet communication technologies (ICTs). Whittle (1997:85) sees culture simply as "a set of shared assumptions and the manifestations of those assumptions".

It is important to note that whereas members of a traditional culture are members of that culture from birth until they die, Cyberculture is not all encompassing. Most of the members of Amazon City weren't on-line four years ago. The experiences we have in Cyberspace and specifically in virtual communities are only one aspect of a person's life. All people have off-line lives and other groups of which they are part. Cyberculture is therefore only one part of a person's life, and voluntary as well.

Traditionally people are born into a family and race and are limited in the choice of places to live. Cyberculture is self-selecting in that a person has unlimited choice concerning which virtual community he wants to belong to. Cyberculture is also not mutually exclusive. A person can belong to more than one virtual community, and he still keeps his affiliation to all other groups of which he is a part. People belong to more than one cultural group and therefore we can speak of virtual community culture as a culture that doesn't incorporate the whole of a person's life, but only his affiliation to the particular group. John Sharp of the University of Stellenbosch, explains Cyberculture in terms of the fact that: "any social group whose members engaged in sustained interaction develop a (partially) shared set of understandings of the significance of what they are doing, as well as a set of procedures (or norms, or rules) to help them do it".

The ethnographic study that follows is done according to this understanding of Cyberculture. The fact that a shared set of understandings and a set of procedures will develop when a group takes part in sustained interaction is further explored under the different experiences that I've had in Amazon City.com.

As stated in Chapter 3, when choosing a site or community to study it is important to know that the community will still exist a few months into the research. For this reason I started my research by reading relevant literature and by surfing the Internet until I found a few sites that had a history and are active in their postings. After this process I joined some of these sites and I chose Amazon City to do my participant observation in, because it adhered to my requirements and it was also an area where I thought I could spend hours in every day without becoming bored and losing interest.

#### **4.3.1. Choosing a Pseudonym or Userid**

Registering at Amazon City I had to enter a pseudonym or user identification. This is the name by which a person will be known in the community. It didn't take me long to decide on my name for this virtual world. Normally a pseudonym would reveal something about the person, what he likes, his profession or his personality. Since wine is a hobby of mine, I chose the pseudonym Syrah. I used this pseudonym for a few weeks until a software problem arose in Amazon City and the server was unavailable for a while. Except for the withdrawal symptoms incited by this in all the

members it also had as result that members who registered in the six months prior to the system kablooië, as it became known, couldn't gain entry into the site with their existing pseudonyms. All the members who couldn't gain entry e-mailed other members whom they knew and they were informed that the system was back on-line, and that members simply needed to register with a new pseudonym. My new pseudonym was also wine related, but it also revealed from which country I come. Until this day I'm still known as Pinotage at Amazon City.

A pseudonym can therefore be seen as an extension of a user's identity and sometimes says more about a person and his identity and personality than his off-line name. Millions of people have the same name, but in choosing a pseudonym people are able to reveal more about themselves by choosing an apt user identification name. The use of a pseudonym can be seen as a way to overcome some of the limitations imposed by the medium, for example, the lack of knowledge about a person. By seeing a person's username you are able to make certain deductions about them.

As discussed in Chapter 3, some virtual communities prefer their users to register with their real names and do not sanction the use of pseudonyms. They feel that people are more responsible for what they say and do when their real names are attached to their posts. It is also less likely for people to alter their identity when using their real name. Some members of virtual communities prefer to use a pseudonym. This is not necessarily to be able to alter their identity and willingly deceive people, but to protect themselves from other members and non-members with bad intentions (Washington Post, October 7, 1999). For example, after one Amazon City member was banned, she started sending e-mails to members' private e-mail addresses and harassing them in this sense. This can also go further and result in an off-line threat to a life or an unwelcome intrusion.

After registering with my pseudonym I was able to enter the Amazon City conference area. A certain amount of knowledge concerning certain aspects was necessary to communicate in this social milieu.

### 4.3.2. Knowledge

A certain amount of knowledge is necessary to be an active and accepted member of any community. This is especially relevant in a virtual community. The knowledge needed to cope with difficult situations and to prosper in an off-line community is socialised and learned from birth. Most members of virtual communities have not been members for more than a few years and before the 1980s no virtual communities existed, so the period of socialisation and learning is limited. A very small number of current members of virtual communities grew up with computer-mediated communication. Charles Desforges, Professor of Education at the University of Exeter, says that babies born in the year 2000 would have mastered the computer by the age of three or four. Cary Cooper, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, goes further to say that by the time these babies are twenty they will have problems meeting people of the opposite sex, because they would have grown up in front of a computer. Their social skills would also be more suited to making friends over the Internet than in off-line life (Woman's Weekly, January 1, 2000:8,10).

Before I started my research on virtual communities my experiences of computer-mediated communication started and ended with electronic mail. Traditional media made me aware of the possible horrors and dangers of these new areas, called chatrooms and bulletin boards on the Internet, and how it is only socially dysfunctional people who are involved with this newest of innovations. Thus on becoming involved with virtual communities I lacked the knowledge even to become connected to one of these communities! I thought that if I registered at Amazon City every hacker is going to infiltrate my computer, and come and knock on my door. I was so paranoid that I even got a web-based e-mail address that was not as easily traced to me as my main e-mail address. On entering the City for the first time I had to acquire a lot of knowledge. This included knowing how the system worked, how to post a message, how to read messages posted by other members, how to create a user profile for myself and many other things. This newest of social milieus can be very overwhelming for a new member. If it wasn't for my research I would have left on seeing the thousands of new posts that appeared on my screen. Obviously at this stage I lacked the knowledge to know that I could mark them all as read and therefore did not need to read them at all. It took me days to clear all the posts (by actually reading them all!) on my Hotlist and to add the conferences that I was interested in.

The knowledge that is needed is not just technical in nature, it includes knowledge about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the community areas. For example, in a community that states that it is a “no-adult content” site, a user is not allowed to post pornography or make sexually explicit jokes. Thus, just as in an off-line community one must know the norms of behaviour, values and standards and all the other aspects that are needed to be a well-adjusted member of the community. A knowledge of the culture of the community is therefore a necessity. The informal rules of conduct and all the other aspects of life in the virtual community, are not known to a first time member of the community. Old timers or knowbies are normally quite helpful to new members. Another way to become familiar with the norms of behaviour and practices is through lurking.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, lurking is a good way for a new member to get to know his new surroundings. As will be seen in Chapter 5 different virtual communities cater for different types of people. A person who wants to join a virtual community might have very specific expectations or needs that he wants addressed by the community. Some virtual communities’ main function is more of a support network, others are more focused on intellectual ideas and reviewing of relevant happenings in the world and news. It is not always clear at first glance what the main focus of a community is. The site layout and statement of objective might create an image, but it is not always the case that the members adhere to the image that is created. As stated by a member of a virtual community: “it’s not the layout and the owner of a site that makes the site a community, it is the people in it”.

Many members of virtual communities state that when they join a new virtual community they first lurk. I also lurked to decide for myself if this is a community worth studying or not. I read the back posts and followed the discussions that happened every day. Lurking was a good way to get information about the system, how it worked, what the people were like and whether I liked the people and set-up of the site. If I saw that the community would not be tolerant towards someone who studies them, I would have left. The fact that I lurked gave me the opportunity to study the site and people without them even being aware of my presence. That helped me to make an objective decision about the site without being involved with the

members at all. It's the same as looking at properties and their surroundings before deciding to buy a house, in off-line life.

After lurking for a week or two I became familiar with the members who posted and the discussions and the trend and style of the postings. I then started to feel a need to post in response to a discussion. This was a nerve-wrecking experience! I chewed over every word used and had an irrational fear that they would flame me or even worse just ignore me! I left my computer on and went back to the conversation virtually every five minutes to see if someone responded. Some of the responses were a friendly invitation please to go and introduce myself in the welcome conference so that they could know who I was, where I came from and what I did for a living. In my introductory posting I made it clear that I was a student studying virtual communities. A few weeks later I sent an e-mail to the owner of the site and all the hosts asking their permission to study the site formally.

Many of a new member's initial postings are questions about how things work and where they can find certain information. I was no different. Amazon City doesn't have a FAQ (frequently asked questions) list. The hosts and even some of the other members provided the answers to my questions or referred me to an area where someone else asked the same question and it was answered in detail. Most virtual communities, which include USENet groups, do have a FAQ list, which answers most of the questions that a newbie might ask. In cases where a FAQ does exist, it is advisable to read it first before asking questions. Old timers become irritated by answering the same questions over and over, if the answer is available in detail in the FAQ.

After participating in Amazon City for a few months only, I was perceived as an old-timer, and treated as such. As discussed in Chapter 2, time condensation occurs in virtual communities and this makes the transition from newbie to knowbie in a short time possible (Suler, 1996:3). This shows that the knowledge necessary to be an active and successful member of a virtual community can be acquired very quickly. In order to become a knowbie it is necessary to spend lots of time in the community on a regular basis. By doing this, any member will be perceived as an old-timer much quicker than someone who posts only once in a while. A member can therefore

control the time that it takes for him to acquire the knowledge. After joining and coming out of lurking the most important thing I had to learn was how to use language to the fullest potential in the community.

### **4.3.3. Language**

When joining any new community or group a person needs to be able to communicate with the other members in order to be understood. As will be discussed in this section the hurdles I had to overcome ranged from learning new words to describe this new area, to using pictures to show emotion and intent. The development and growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC) lead to the design and use of a whole range of new words in modern languages. For example, hardware and software, to describe computers and their programs, words such as cyberspace, virtual community, hypertext, electronic conferencing and many others. Some of these terms, for example, community, existed before the Computer Revolution but this new social milieu gave it added meaning, in a new context (Porter,1997:7). Words for actions in computer-mediated communication (CMC) areas have also emerged, for example “spam” and “flaming”. These will be discussed under the section dealing with norms of behaviour.

Communication serves as the basis of community, but that doesn't mean that community is a direct result of communication. One can communicate with another person without considering that person part of a community to which you belong (Foster,1997:25). For this reason one cannot say that because members talk to each other in virtual communities they constitute a community. Communication and the language involved are nevertheless very important aspects of culture and community. The language used in virtual communities is mostly English, but the use of methods to overcome linguistic limitations makes it clear who is a member of the general Internet society and who is not. People may therefore talk to each other in a chatroom or a virtual community, and they will not necessarily be part of the same Cyberculture, but they can be part of the bigger Cyberculture. Most of the aspects of language on the Internet are universal in Internet use, but some examples of the aspects evolve and develop in the individual communities. Aspects that are different are, for example, the length of a posting.

I would not engage in conversations in a chatroom without an invitation by an on-line friend or would-be on-line friend. The reason for this is the added difficulty of trying to explain what you are saying and doing in short postings and in limited time. In conferencing areas there is more freedom to write longer posts and there isn't someone on the other side of the network waiting for your immediate reply.

Users of computer-mediated communication via the Internet, experienced a lack of information whilst communicating on-line. This led users to develop ways to overcome these language limitations and restrictions. This action came from grassroots level; people improvised and created new ways of transmission of meaning and intonations. These ways replace meaning that is lost in the purely text-driven environment of virtual communities and of sites where participants strive towards the building of community (Shields,1996:363).

“These restrictions pose a dilemma to the users of a system that must be overcome. Communication researchers looking at computer-mediated communication (CMC), have noted that users have adapted to the medium. It has been described as an altered state of communication...CMC may change the psychology and sociology of the communication process itself.... CMC may very well be neither conversational nor written, but a ‘new linguistic entity with its own vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics’” (Rice and Love,1987:86).

The purpose of communication is to convey the meaning of a message as clearly as possible. In virtual communities and other computer-mediated communication spaces on the Internet, this process of trying to convey a message as clearly as possible, is limited. As a result of the lack of social cues, it takes longer and more space to make a message as clear as what it would have been if the people were conversing face-to-face. This process is hampered through limited bandwidth and the fact that people on a modem connection pay for the amount of time they spend on-line. A variety of different ways have been invented by virtual community members to avoid these problems as well as the above mentioned problems concerning lack of emotion and meaning. These include the use of acronyms, the design of emoticons, and understood conventions. Some virtual communities have also developed “new” words that form a part of the culture of the specific community.

#### **4.3.3.1. Acronyms**

New abbreviations and acronyms for words are constantly being created. The first acronym that I came into contact with was LOL- “Laughing out Loud”. Fortunately I’d read about it before, but was a bit sceptic about using it because I thought no-one was going to know the meaning of the acronym. During my first month of posting I noticed that everyone used it. Only once in a while when a new member joined who was a first-time Internet user, would they ask what it meant. The most commonly used acronyms in Amazon City are LOL, and a few variations of this, for example LOLROTL- “laughing out loud rolling on the floor”, LOLPIMP- “laughing out loud pissing in my pants”. I tended to stick with these ones, but the observation can be made that there seems to be a correlation between length of membership and acronym wordrange.

Clearly users and members of communities can’t create acronyms for just any sentence or group of words. It must be a sentence or part of a sentence that is used relatively frequently in the specific virtual community. I had an ICQ conversation with an on-line friend one evening and a result of this two hour conversation was the acronym LOLPIMPTG “laughing out loud piss in my pants turning green”. The reason for this is that the ICQ program has icons that can be used instead of using acronyms. The icon for a smiley face was green in colour. We’ve used it once before when posting messages to each other in the conferencing area, but only users who have ICQ might guess the meaning of it. Internet dictionaries and on-line research mechanisms have been developed to track this shortening of on-line communication. A list of commonly used acronyms can be found in Appendix A.

#### **4.3.3.2. Emoticons**

A new member in a virtual community must find the use of punctuation marks very confusing. The first time that I realised that the jumble of punctuation marks in a message is actually a picture portraying meaning, I was awestruck. I use these little faces constantly in my postings, because it shows when a message is intended to be sad, angry, happy or whatever the case may be. Emoticons are one of the most well known and ingenuous ways of portraying emotion in text-driven computer-mediated communication. Just as in the case of acronyms, new emoticons are created daily. The

only thing a user needs to create a new emoticon is a bit of imagination and a keyboard.

As the emoticons' purpose is to convey meaning and emotion to the text, the emoticon must be clear and easy to understand. To "read" an emoticon it is necessary to turn your head side-ways. Most emoticons consists out of eyes, a nose, and a mouth and other relevant features, for example, a tongue, hat, or sunglasses. The following emoticon is one of the most well known and widely used ones:

:~). It consists out of two eyes- the colon, a nose- the hyphen and a mouth- the bracket. This emoticon shows that the post or sentence was intended to be "friendly" in nature, i.e. said with a smile. A comprehensive list of commonly used emoticons can be found in Appendix B.

Another form of emoticon is to put a description of an act, movement or emotion between brackets or between two star symbols (\* \*). The act, movement or emotion portrayed must be relevant to the text the user is typing. This type of emoticon is used in an effort to create a feeling of embodied space or physical interaction between the users in the virtual community or space. An example of embodied space is when someone is reprimanded for saying something wrong and the user might retort with a message that is supplemented with: "\*standing in the corner, embarrassed\*". Hugs are used extensively in Amazon City. Members share their problems and difficulties and a virtual hug is better than no hug at all. Sometimes I find that I just don't have the words to comfort someone or time is limited and the hug says so much more than words can. Receiving a post with a hug after you posted about a problem, brings at the very least a lump to the throat. The hug can be surrounded with as many brackets as is called for in the situation. The more brackets surrounding the hug the higher the intensity of the hug (Shields,1996:64). The emoticon can be the brackets with the word hugs in or it can just be the person's name whom the hug is intended for in the brackets, for example (((Catt))).

#### **4.3.3.3. New Words**

In Amazon City one of the users started to use the "made-up" word "rike" instead of the word "like". After a few weeks, whenever the word "like" could be used in a post, members would substitute it with "rike" instead (Amazon City.com,1999). In my first

months at Amazon City I felt I could not use the made-up words because they were like an inside joke. The word belongs to the members who “created” it and their long-term on-line friends and acquaintances in Amazon City. After a few months this feeling disappeared and I realised that I was also one of them, and therefore I could use it as well. It strengthened my feelings of being part of the community and belonging. Of course if other members responded by saying that I was not allowed to use it I would have realised that I was not really an accepted part of the group. Members thus create new words in virtual communities. Some of these new words are used in more than one virtual community while others are specific to the culture and topics of discussion in a certain virtual community.

These new words also include words and expressions that are used in some geographical areas of the world and not in others. For example, the American members would tell someone that they would cross their fingers for them when they have an exam or a difficult thing to do. I once responded to someone having to complete a driver's exam that I will hold my thumbs for her. After much joking and asking what this means it became common practice in the community to use: “cross my fingers and hold thumbs for you” when appropriate.

#### **4.3.3.4. Internet Language- English?**

Amazon City has a few members whose first language is not English. These members have an excellent command of the English language. But this leads one to think about the possibilities and limitations of becoming involved in virtual communities for non-English speaking people. On starting my research I searched for a community in my mother language. I found one on the Excite server but unfortunately it only had one member. The main language on the Internet is English, because it originated in America and is still mostly used by the Americans. Not all people are fortunate to speak English, and the Internet experience is limited for them to sites that are available in their mother tongue (Ribeiro,1997:500).

Amazon City is an English site but it does have a conference- International Women- where people can converse in their own languages if there are other members who speak the same language. It works well for the Swedish and Danish speaking members as well as for people who speak Spanish. In my first month of posting at

Amazon City I posted an Afrikaans message, with the hope that an Afrikaans, Flemish or Dutch user would respond. No one has yet responded to date but now that I know more about the members I know that they don't include any members from those countries :'-(. The members who post in the International Women conference also post in the rest of the community and are therefore fully English speaking. It therefore doesn't create a complete space for non-English speaking members. The homepage of the site is also completely in English and no reference is made of this international speaking area.

This leads to the exclusion of people from countries where English is not commonly taught at school. A majority of Japanese, as well as other people living in non-English speaking countries, for example, France, are excluded from these virtual communities. According to Nishigaki Toru (1998:229), a member of the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo, a considerable number of Japanese exists who are able to speak English. These English speaking Japanese will become part of the economic and cultural activities taking place in the virtual communities on the Internet. Toru states that although their English is excellent by Japanese standards, it doesn't come close to the standards of English in, for example, America and Britain.

The language used in virtual communities can take a while to learn and understand. No one is going to blame a new member for not using acronyms, or for not using the made-up words that are a speciality of the particular community. The use or non-use of the above-mentioned aspects of language gives an indication of the length of a person's membership. Someone who doesn't use acronyms, emoticons or the made-up words is likely to be a new member. As they become old-timers or "knowbies" their use of the language aspects of the virtual community will increase. The same principle can apply to the adherence to the norms of behaviour of the specific virtual community.

#### **4.3.4 Norms of Behaviour and Netiquette**

Certain norms of behaviour concerning language and communication exist in virtual communities and other virtual spaces on the Internet. It is imperative that every user of a virtual community finds out what these expectations are as quickly as possible after becoming a member. Violation of these norms can lead to the guilty user being

ignored by the other members, being bombarded by mail or being flamed. Some of the norms of behaviour might seem very simple or obvious. Norms of behaviour can be enforced by members of a community only or, more rigidly, by the hosts or systems operators (sysops). They are not as binding as laws and therefore it depends on the individual community how stringently they are going to enforce the norms. If you are a member of a virtual community or newsgroup the cultural assumptions will already be part of your understanding of Cyberculture and therefore they seem self-evident. A lot of these Netiquettes I learned through making the mistakes myself. Luckily I've been part of a very forgiving and tolerant community, but some other communities are not as tolerant, as will be seen in this section. But what exactly are norms of behaviour?

Norms of behaviour are informal and unofficial codes of conduct, and violation of these norms is not officially sanctioned. These norms define behaviour that is acceptable or unacceptable to members of the group. These informal rules can be seen as a complex set of guidelines driven by economic, cultural, social-psychological and discursive factors both within the community and outside it. In Cyberspace these norms of behaviour are classified as "Netiquette", and are basically a form of etiquette as it applies to the Internet.

Netiquette includes such aspects as not typing in capital letters. I once typed a message in capital letters by mistake, and one of the other members responded by saying that she could hear me screaming in America, with a smiley face after her posting. A posting or sentence typed in capital letters is therefore interpreted by the other members as shouting. In my case I didn't get flamed and the other members didn't become irritated by my lack of social graces. A member of a virtual community has this to say about the wrong use of capital letters in postings: "It's all part of 'netiquette'. Naturally, newbies aren't going to know about it, so there's no reason to get angry at them if they do it. A simple, polite explanation is usually all that's required" (Amazon City, Hangout, Dec6, 1999). Sometimes a member will write one word in capital letters in an effort to emphasise the word. This is not seen as a violation of the Netiquette practises.

I found that, as a new member, I tended to write longer posts because I didn't use all the emoticons and acronyms and had difficulty in expressing myself in this new communication area. Keeping posts short and to the point is a general norm of behaviour. Over time it became easier to be short and to the point whilst making myself clear. Luckily for most members of virtual communities this is a norm of behaviour that is very leniently enforced. In some conference topics it is difficult to explain what you are feeling in a very short message. This problem is magnified by the lack of social cues in the text. It is also very important to use paragraphs and to leave spaces between the paragraphs. This is especially important if the post is long.

The user who is posting must make sure that the content of the post is both meaningful and appropriate for the conference it is posted in and relevant to the particular conversation. It is noteworthy that virtual conferences do have fair witnesses, also known as "wizards", "system operators" (sysops) or simply "hosts", who are host to different conferences. One of the tasks of the conference host is to make sure that the conversation stays on topic. If people post inappropriate postings in a conference the host will tell the users to move them to a relevant conference. This function has led to members calling the hosts "topic police". This is mostly done in a good spirit and often I read in AC "topic police, topic police". This results in the guilty parties quickly moving the remainder of the conversation to an area more relevant or they change the following posts in the conversation back to the original intent.

The hosts in Amazon City also use their given power to hide inappropriate postings. The implication of this is that the message cannot be read anymore, and where the message used to appear it says "Hidden by Fair Witness". The member who wrote the message, can also hide the message, for any reason. In some aspects members have more control over a relationship and conversation in a virtual community than in off-line life. A member can hide his post, and a member doesn't have to reply to a message immediately. You can think first about the posting, and therefore can choose the wording of a reply much more carefully than in off-line conversations where you have to reply immediately. For people who are not English first language speakers it also makes it easier to conceptualise what they want to write and share with the other members.

Messages that get hidden by the conference hosts are messages that include profanity and vulgarity. These types of messages are also considered to be rude and a crude attempt to strengthen a weak argument. Some users have not yet learned the art of debating, and this results in them attacking other members instead of debating the relevant issue that's being discussed. In the Amazon City Issues conference this comes up very regularly, and we are all learning to be more tolerant towards members with ideas different from our own. This can entail becoming involved in a very lengthy discussion. At the moment I'm writing this, I'm in the middle of a discussion with a male member of Amazon City about the power of the female body. We disagree but are both trying very hard to discuss the ideas and not attack each other. We've been at it for the last six hours, and we post and reply to each other in between the work we are doing. The action of attacking a person with ideas that are different from ones own is called flaming. This is experienced as negative and the other users will point this out to the person. If the member is not willing to change his debating style it will lead to the person being banned from the specific conference, or from the whole community. Flaming also happens when someone posts something that is against the community's norms of behaviour. Flaming is the response that this evokes from the other members of the community.

It frequently happens that non-members who register at Amazon City will post an advertisement for a product they sell and a webaddress to find more information. The reaction that this incites is incredible, members old and new alike, will reply with flaming posts telling the person to first become a proper member of the community before we will consider looking at their site and product. Blatant commercial postings will also be hidden. These "members" don't take part in any part of the community and are only trying to use the site as a quick method to market their product. Some virtual communities create discussions where members can post spam- mostly for their own companies. The appropriate conference in Amazon City is "Women in Bizz" and the conversation's name is "Shameless Self-Promotion". In this conversation new or old members can market their businesses. It is stated in this conference's introduction that members must be aware that new members might not have much success when trying to promote their own products or sites. Members who have been an active part of the community for longer will have more success because

the other members know them. They also know that they're not a member of the community only to promote their own sites and products.

It is seen as a lack of social grace for a user to ask questions that have already been answered and to make points that have been raised before. Posts in a conversation logically follow on each other. The new poster might also misunderstand the discussion because he would be formulating a response based on reading the last few posts and not the crux of the conversation. This behaviour is considered to be more rude in a virtual community than in a face-to-face conversation. The reason for this is that in a face-to-face conversation the discourse is not logged and therefore not available for reading as it is in an on-line discussion. If the user is new and is not yet familiar with the system and all the conferences, the hosts or other members will point him to the conference and conversation where his questions are already answered.

Members should refrain from spreading baseless rumours, gossip and innuendo. If a user is posting a message and the information used comes out of a book, magazine or other website the user will increase the credibility of his post by giving a reference. It is also very important to realise that because a virtual community consists of members who are dispersed through the whole world, members must be sensitive to geographical and cultural boundaries. As a result of the fact that most Amazon City members live in America, a few misunderstandings have arose. Sometimes when you are a new member, people don't know that you are not an American, and they assume that you are speaking from an American perspective. I had to clarify many a time where I'm from, before replying to new members who do not know me.

Members must therefore be careful not to post a topic that is relevant only to a specific neighbourhood in a discussion about national or international happenings. Members should also be sensitive to other members' beliefs and way of life. They should realise, for example, that there might be Christians, Moslems or Jews in the community, and respect those people's rights to believe in their chosen religion. Some communities are formed around a common interest, for example, religion or raising children.

Many a day I've felt overwhelmed by other members' pain and discomforts about many different private matters. Some of them posted whilst crying out of anger, hurt, humiliation or heart wrenching sadness. I've done it myself on a few occasions. Even though people like Shields (1996:14) wrote that members should not post a message when upset or angry or under the influence of drugs or alcohol, members do this in Amazon City. AC is their base where they go when they're hurt and disillusioned. Members, myself included, feel safer to post about horrible things happening to them in Amazon City than discussing it with someone off-line.

I haven't had experience of a member posting when intoxicated, but if it doesn't influence how they write and they don't attack people, I don't perceive that it will be a problem. Virtual communities such as Amazon City function as a support network and if they didn't tolerate posting when a member is upset, it wouldn't be a community. Members are more intolerant of messages that are written in anger and that result in a personal attack against another member. Lively debates are encouraged in virtual communities, but it is netiquette to debate the idea, and not to attack or flame the person behind the idea or issue.

Lastly, users should make sure that their post is formatted properly, so as to make reading it easier for the other users. This is especially important if the information is in table form, or if graphics are included in the post, such as photographs (Whittle,1996:67). This is true to an extent, but I know of countless times when someone posted a broken link to a photograph, and then tried it over and over again until they succeed. Everyone is glad when they at last succeed in creating the link. Amazon City has a very friendly and supportive atmosphere and I think for this reason it attracts people who are new to the Internet. At some other virtual communities that I have encountered you will be flamed for doing something wrong the first time (Shade,1996:14; Whittle,1996:67).

Some norms of behaviour are universal and can be observed in all or most virtual communities on the Internet. The norms of behaviour in different virtual communities and groups may be the same, but some groups might be more tolerant towards certain behaviour than other groups. The norms of behaviour that are not universal for all virtual communities are still developing and growing over time. Amazon City is a

community consisting out of people with a great variety of interests, religions and sexual orientation. The unwritten and written codes of conduct develop over time and as a need for them arises. Some codes of conduct the members must adhere to because they sign a statement when they join the community. This consists of individual and specialised “rules” of the community. For example, people aren’t allowed to join Amazon City if their only purpose is to pick up people. Once in a while a person slips in with exactly this intent, but after the flaming welcome he/she receives from the members, we never hear from them again.

Clearly norms of behaviour can be enforced by cancelling a member’s membership, but it can’t lead to any legal action. Laws do exist that are applicable to the Internet milieu and a few of them have direct application to virtual communities. Obviously I had to look at laws, before starting to study virtual communities. My biggest concern was about the possible implications of studying a virtual community and the people in it without their permission.

#### **4.3.5. Laws**

The Internet had no laws that applied to it prior the late 1980s. Discipline on the Internet was imposed by the users themselves. At this stage the Internet was mostly inhabited by researchers, university students and lecturers, and was used for sharing research information. Laws governing the communication on the Internet were irrelevant and there was no need for regulation by means of law. In the late 1980s bulletin boards began to impose restrictions and limitations on the content of postings, in the name of the “Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1986”. This law was passed by the Congress of the United States (<http://cmcnyls.edu/Papers/ECPALayM.HTM>). In the years after this the number of laws passed concerning the Internet and computer-mediated communication increased significantly, as an appropriate issue needing governance arose (Whittle,1997:128). Internet laws will continue to be passed for as long as this newest of social milieus keeps on developing new facets and uses.

Existing off-line laws are applicable only in specific geographical boundaries. North American laws are only applicable in North America, and South African laws are only applicable in South Africa. The problem with trying to apply existing laws to

Cyberspace is that Cyberspace and the Internet do not fall into the jurisdiction of any one country. There is also no one to determine when information or images cross the border between countries. In one country the information that is distributed may be illegal, for example pornography, and in another country it might be legal.

There are a few laws that apply to the Internet, for example to Internet Commerce and to the sending of e-mail, and a few other laws still in their development phase. For this section the focus will be on laws that are applicable to virtual communities. Law is a complex and very technical field but for the purposes of this thesis only the laws that I had to bear in mind during my research will be looked at.

#### **4.3.5.1. Copyright**

One of my biggest concerns about studying a virtual community was the issue of copyright. I was concerned that if I asked a question and people responded to it in the conferencing area, and I then used it in my thesis, the owner of the site or the members themselves could sue me for copyright infringement. It is for this reason that I decided to be honest and to ask permission to study the site. I also asked for the permission of the individual members whom I've quoted or referred to in this thesis. Members whose permission I asked granted it, and therefore they cannot sue me for using anything they said. The problem with copyright is if a person loses money as a result of the copyrighted material being used by someone else. For this reason I carefully decided which information I would use so as to protect myself, the site and the members against any monetary loss. But what exactly is copyright and how does it apply to the Internet as a public domain?

The system of copyright as it exists today grew out of attempts by the government to control the Information Revolution that was a direct result of the printing press (Smith, Bird & Bird, 1997:17). Copyright can be defined as the right to copy material. Any new and original piece of information that is written is automatically entitled to copyright. This is an automatic right, meaning that the writer need not apply for it or pay any fees for the copyright. The copyright belongs to the writer of the information unless the creator is an employee such as a journalist or a university researcher who is paid to do the creating.

E-mail messages, material loaded onto FTP (File Transfer Protocol) sites or World Wide Web servers, and anything else “published” on the Internet are copyrighted. The fact that most information on the Internet is available free of charge does not change the copyright status of the material. This does not mean that authors and owners of homepages do not want their work to be used and reproduced, but that the material is still copyrighted and must be respected as such. For this reason a person should be careful when copying such material, and think twice before forwarding material to anyone else. Copying of material from the Internet is a legal problem only when the person who owns the copyright loses income as a result of the infringement. Unless a person does the copying with criminal intent, breaching of copyright can only result in being sued for financial damages caused to the copyright owner (Liberty,1999:138).

Copyright gives the owner of the work the right to prevent others from making copies of the information as a whole or a substantial proportion of the information. It is also a means to prevent people from using the information for their own purposes. “Substantial” in terms of copyright law can mean anything, depending on the nature of the work being copied or used by another person. If a person copies a piece of someone else’s work and is taken to court for this infringement, he can claim to fall under the exception “fair dealing”. Fair dealing relies on the argument that although the individual did copy all or part of the particular piece of work, the copying was done for one of the following reasons. In the United Kingdom you can “fair deal” for private research, commercial research, private study, criticism or reviewing, or for reporting current events. The exception of “fair dealing” does apply to most areas of Internet copyright (Oppenheim,1999:135-136). Some areas do exist where “fair dealing” does not apply to the Internet, for example, if a user posts an entire magazine or newspaper article in a public forum or conferencing area. To be exempt from copyright infringement the poster must be the copyright owner or someone who has the permission of the copyright owner to post the whole article or substantial parts of it.

Another infringement of copyright law would be the collection of conversations in a conference area in a virtual community or discussion group with the intent to post it in another virtual area, or to publish the content on another website, book or magazine

(Whittle,1997:133). An example of this happened at Amazon City where one of the users copied posts out of a conversation in Amazon City and posted it in her own virtual community. The discussion placed Amazon City in a bad light and the user was banned from Amazon City, and could have been sued. The onus would have rested on the owner of the site to prove that she lost income as a result of the other person's actions, which would have been almost impossible to prove.

#### **4.3.5.2. Trademarks and Domain Names**

Commercial sites view the Internet and the World Wide Web as a combination of a shop window and an advertising possibility. Just as in off-line commercial businesses this leads to the necessity of branding and trademarks. The difference between trademarks and advertisements on the Internet as opposed to the off-line world is that an advertisement placed on the Internet will be globally viewable. Traditionally, trademarks on specific products are viewed to be national in nature. In other words, a business in Canada can obtain a trademark for use in Canada, but this trademark would not infringe on another business in North America with the same trademark. A company, for example, McDonalds, can register their trademark in more than one country. This trademark doesn't mean that no other business may have the name McDonalds, but rather that no other fast food, hamburger restaurant may have the same name.

A trademark can be registered or unregistered but the laws for registered trademarks are more uniform around the world, and therefore will be more widely used on the Internet. A registered trademark is designated to cover specified goods and services (Smith, Bird & Bird,1997:43; [http://www.cli.org/x0025\\_LBFIN.html](http://www.cli.org/x0025_LBFIN.html); Johnson and Post,1996). This therefore means that companies that sell different products can have the same name in the same country under trademark law.

On the Internet trademarks extend to domain names. A domain name refers to the unique numeric address that is assigned to every computer connected to the Internet. This address is known as an Internet Protocol (IP) address. As a result of the growing number of sites on the Internet, a numeric address creates a problem when trying to access the Internet. Commercial Internet sites and dot com virtual communities want people to remember their sites address, but if the IP consists of a collection of random

numbers it is difficult to memorise. For this reason and others, a domain name, which is a mnemonic associated with a particular IP address, makes Internet resources much easier to access and remember. Most businesses on the Internet try to acquire a domain name that relates something of the service they render or the product they sell. A domain name that consists of a business entity's trademark or trade name, makes it easier for customers and "surfers" to locate and remember the address of the entity on the Internet (Campbell,1998:32).

Domain names on the Internet are registered on a "first come, first served" basis. In off-line business, trademark law allows sellers of different products and services the use of the same trademark if the possibility of confusion between the organisations and products does not exist. The same trademark can also be used in different countries by different organisations and companies, if another company in the particular country has not yet registered the specific trademark. On the Internet, it is only possible for one entity to use a specific domain name. In the United States it is becoming generally accepted that traditional trademark law applies to the use of domain names on the Internet (Campbell,1998:33).

With trademarks on the Internet it can happen that two sites have almost the same IP address. This is especially true because only one site in the world can have a particular address. At Amazon City we had a discussion concerning the fact that people can confuse Amazon City.com with Amazon.com. Members contemplated changing the name of the site so as to avoid the confusion. At this stage it was agreed that the confusion is actually to Amazon City's advantage. It was then later decided that it is not to the site's advantage and a change of name became unavoidable. A few of the current members of Amazon City came upon the site while doing a search for Amazon.com or other Amazon related sites. So it depends how one sees the similarity of domain names, if it's going to be a problem or not.

#### **4.3.5.3. Free Speech**

Before joining Amazon City and other virtual communities I was concerned about the issue of free speech. What countries' laws are relevant? What does free speech entail on the Internet?

The First Amendment in the American Constitution guarantees United States citizens the right to free speech. In Britain, free speech is defined negatively; Britons can only speak freely if the laws covering confidentiality, contempt of court, data protection and official secrets aren't broken. This will be the state in the United Kingdom until a "bill of rights" is established in the year 2000, under the European Convention of Human Rights.

Free speech on the Internet, and how far it is allowed to be taken, is still being widely debated. On the one hand there is the opinion that freedom of speech and freedom to act is different, and that written or spoken encouragement is not action. For this reason, the 19th century philosopher J.S. Mill in his book "On Liberty" argued that there must be no barrier to the expression of opinions (Mill, 1859). He held strongly that even offensive lies must be allowed to be freely expressed, for it is only in the expression of the statement that it can be exposed as untrue. It is this classic liberal argument that is still used by civil liberties' campaigners on the Internet.

On the other hand the opinion is held that free speech can never be absolute. This side of the argument received more credibility when a \$107.9 million fine was implemented against anti-abortionists for publishing a list of abortion doctors on their website. The publication of these doctors' names was done with malicious intent. This fine represents a victory for those who argue that where the issue of free speech is involved, a balance must be found between conflicting freedoms and the different freedoms of different people. This site, with the name "The Nuremberg Files", incited violence against particular doctors, and led them to live in fear (Barkham, 1999).

As a result of the extensive reach of the Internet the effects of free speech become much more globally accessible than in the case of the traditional media. It has also been found that Internet speech can facilitate and incite action much more readily than traditional means. This leads to an intensification of the problems that come with free speech. There are no universal free speech laws in the world and therefore individual countries' different laws apply to Internet communications and content. The problem that arises from this is that it is difficult to trace who is responsible for particular sites, especially if they originate from, and are hosted in, foreign countries. In countries such as China, America, France and Germany, the individual

governments have taken significant steps to curtail free speech on the Internet. Another way to curb free speech on the Internet is through filtering and rating of sites (Barkham,1999).

The last method to curb free speech on the Internet is through self-regulation. There are many forms of self-regulation on the Internet, for example Internet Service Providers, such as Demon Internet (UK-based Service Provider), has an acceptable use policy, referring to homepages of their customers. Demon users are responsible for “ensuring that the contents of these pages do not violate English Law”. The pages must include a clearly readable warning page if it is going to include any adult material (Barkham,1999).

Norms of behaviour in virtual communities play the role of self-regulation. For example, at Amazon City it is made clear that the site will not contain any adult material, and that it will not function as a pick-up bar. The site also promises that members’ privacy will be protected and therefore they do not need to be concerned about their words being used against them by other users. The people who therefore decide to become active members of the community must hold by these norms of behaviour or standards of conduct, to avoid action against them. This action would consist of a warning and if that didn’t help, the member would be banned from the community and his account will be cancelled. The warning can be issued by anyone in the community but only the hosts or owner of a site can cancel a person’s membership. The approach a virtual community has to self-regulation (via the hosts) and to its members will determine the attitude the members have towards each other and towards the management of the community.

#### **4.3.6. Attitudes**

Negative or positive attitudes towards a new member joining a community and towards others can be observed within minutes after the person has posted a message for the first time. The reason I have left this section to almost the end of the chapter is that the initial attitudes I observed were those of individuals and it was not necessarily the attitude “policy” of the particular community. It therefore takes time to get a better idea of the attitudes towards new members, old members and the hosts. I left

the informal questions and discussion of this issue to very late in my research so as to be completely sure of the members' attitudes towards me as a researcher as well.

The attitudes towards members are different in different virtual communities. Since the earliest days of the growth and development of the Internet there has been conflict and mistrust between new users and old users. In the beginning this conflict was mostly between hackers, and technologically minded people and the people who joined the Internet when it became more accessible. Conflict between the newbies and knowbies still exists in some virtual communities.

#### **4.3.6.1 Attitudes towards New Members**

Most virtual communities with the intent to grow and create a community on the Internet will welcome new members. The user can register and then be a member. Even though the software welcomes the user by giving him access to the community, does this mean that the other community members will also welcome the new member?

This differs from community to community. In some communities, such as Amazon City, new members are welcomed by the other members of the community. The older members (older by a few weeks, months or years) introduce themselves to the new members, ask them for more information about themselves and answer any questions asked. The members who take it upon themselves to greet new members also give the member advice about where to post, the software, and about anything else the new member might question. For example, when a person becomes a member there are a huge number of unread posts on his/her Hotlist. The old member will advise the new member to "mark all as read" so the new member can start with a clean slate. As a result of this huge number of posts, and the unfamiliarity of the surroundings, the new member might jump into a discussion without introducing himself, or introduce himself in an inappropriate conference. Many members find the new environment too overwhelming and unorganised and will therefore never return. The hosts have the task to keep this from happening, and to ensure that the new member knows that he is welcome and that his questions will be answered:

“We built the Welcome Conference to ensure that new members had a place to ask questions, that there was a spot where they could get a "guided tour" and to make sure that they knew how welcome they were in our community. I have never seen anything that indicates any negative feeling toward the hosts here. I would hope that nobody feels that way. Being a host is a volunteer position. Hosts are people who care a great deal about this community and donate their time to try and keep it interesting.”  
(Amazon City, Jan.6,2000)

In contrast to Amazon City I found a very mixed response in some other virtual communities. In one particular community the people were downright rude, and no host was in attendance. Only after my third day of responding to the negativity of the members, did someone appear who said that the host was ill and that they would ensure a welcome conference to create a more welcoming atmosphere for new members. Unlike the experience I had in this virtual community, the hosts, sysops or owner(s) of a particular virtual community should make sure that people who greet new members are friendly and welcoming. As flaming is not good social behaviour in most virtual communities, being hostile and negative towards new members would hopefully lead to a reprimand from the host. This could happen publicly in the conferencing area or it can be done via private e-mail. The individual situation would determine what course of action would be followed. It might also be that the old member reacted negatively towards a new member because the new member was spamming or an unwelcome member who returned, or for a number of other reasons.

#### **4.3.6.2 Attitudes towards Old Members**

There are once again no hard and fast rules. As in an off-line community not everyone agrees at all times and not everyone is friends. The same applies to the on-line world. Through interaction in Amazon City I have found accord with some users and not with others. This can be ascribed to the fact that just as in off-line life not all people have things in common. In Amazon City the members tend to be friendly and helpful to all other members, but we tend to become close friends with only a few of the people in the community. The people you become friends with are people you are drawn towards because of some similarities in lifestyle, for example, a fellow student. This doesn't mean that people don't become friends with members with whom they

don't have similar things in common. It might just mean that it would take longer to build a friendship, if the members involved would want to.

Generally new members have positive attitudes towards old members. The attitude of the old member towards a new member will determine the new member's attitude. For this reason hosts are so important. Not all old members are interested in greeting new members and making them feel welcome. Virtual communities with unfriendly old timers lose a lot of new members as a result of this. An example was the community I joined where the welcome was very hostile and negative. The principle is the same in off-line life as in on-line life. Would you return to a group who made you feel totally unwelcome and are rude when they meet you?

I posted informal questions, concerning attitudes in another virtual community, Salon.com. One of the replies received from someone who qualifies as an old timer was: "The 'old timers' are fond of whining about the 'good old days of USENet' and they frequently dissolve into apoplexy when people write, 'I don't have time to read the last 1,000 posts so can someone tell me what this thread is about?' We generally wheel the old timers out into the day room and ignore them" (Salon.com, January 17, 2000).

#### **4.3.6.3 Attitudes towards Hosts and Systems Operators**

Individuals in the same community might feel different towards the sysops and hosts. In Amazon City some members feel that the hosts are capable of censorship and are sometimes more interested in organising conversations than letting a conversation flow where it is happening. Some members think they are doing a wonderful job while others might feel that they are too domineering and controlling. As mentioned before Amazon City is a very supportive community that prides itself on the fact that they create an area where people can support and talk to each other as friends. For this reason most of the members are friends with and happy with the hosts.

A member of Amazon City (Jan6,2000) had this to say when questioned concerning her attitude and experience of hosts and other members: "The hosts have always been extremely helpful and inviting. The citizens have always been friendly. And everyone has, quickly, become friends to my heart. I worry about the people who dwell within

this virtual city. I pray for them, laugh at their jokes, and share their lives through the stories they tell, the advice they give, and the wisdom they seek through the experiences of the other members. And, just like a real family, this one goes through changes. I have always tried to make the new member feel very welcome and relaxed and I've seen the others do the same thing countless times. Almost everyone, I know, likes to see their family grow, through time...so why not this one?"

The following answer was given in Salon.com when the question about attitudes towards sysops was asked: "The Sysop's Creed: I've got a Delete button and I know how to use it!". This member experiences the sysops (hosts) as negative and domineering. It is important to remember that this is the answer of one individual and he doesn't speak for the whole community. Another person who posted in response to the same question responded that Table Talk at Salon.com, is the only virtual community where she has found people to be friendly and helpful. This shows clearly how differently members can experience and perceive the community and hosts.

In the community statement that the user has to sign before becoming a member of Amazon City and other sites, he agrees to do or not do certain things. This statement also makes it clear that the sysop or host has the function of reprimanding a user if he is not keeping to the norms of the community and if he's breaking any rules.

The attitudes that long time members reveal towards each other will be determined by how well they know each other. Knowing someone implies that you know that person's identity, who they are, and what they want out of life. The longer a person is therefore a member of a virtual community the better he will know the other members of the community.

#### **4.3.7 Identity**

The more time a user spends in an area such as Amazon City the more of his identity will be revealed. Most researchers believe that a majority of members of on-line communities alter their identities, but is this true for the type of virtual community that is studied in this thesis? Identity on the Internet is one of the most studied and contentious aspects of Cyberculture. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, when registering at Amazon City I had to choose a pseudonym. This pseudonym

could be my real name or a different name. As a result of some virtual communities, such as Amazon City, giving their members the option to use a different name, people who are not involved in these communities think that it is a means to hide a person's identity.

I have never changed my identity in Amazon City. What I have done though, is to keep some critical information to myself. For example, as I stated in the beginning of this chapter I was paranoid that a Cyberstalker was going to come and knock on my door if I revealed anything about where I lived and if I used my real e-mail address. I opened a new e-mail account for interaction with members in the virtual community. At the beginning I didn't want to reveal more about my personal demographics. Now people know the town in England I live in, as well as my college e-mail address and therefore they can knock on my door if they want. I didn't change my gender, age, physical attributes or anything. I gave the real facts about myself. What I did not do is discuss deep and personal revelations about myself. The reason for this is that everyone that reads this thesis can go to Amazon City and read everything that has been posted.

Before I joined Amazon City a very private conversation was copied out of Amazon City and posted in another members' website. This contained personal information and it made the members more wary about posting very personal information. Other members still do post very private and personal information, but after this incident the possibility of posting anonymously was added to the conferencing area. The aim was not to increase the anonymity of the members in a negative way, but to protect them against people with bad intentions. This allows users who fear for their privacy, like myself, to post whatever is on their mind without being concerned about people who aren't members of the community joining to read what they posted.

The feeling that this invokes is similar to someone stealing the key to your diary to read your innermost thought. Amazon City also created private conferences after the above breach of privacy. Members who want to join these conferences must e-mail the host of the conference and ask permission to gain entry to the appropriate space. This creates an added feature for members to share all that they want without their

identity and privacy being in jeopardy of being breached. It also gives them the liberty and confidence to be free in their speech.

I posted an informal questionnaire in Amazon City and the question was asked if members alter their identities when they are interacting and posting in AC or not. Most of the core members of the community answered the question and a 100% response was that they do not alter their identities any more than what they do in off-line life. The following are a few of the responses to the question posted in Amazon City:

“Do I alter my identity at a virtual community? No more than I do in a face to face community. I almost always (on line and face to face) try to portray myself as a strong person, stronger than I am. But, I try to live up to that image. ;-)”

“I’m exactly the same in real life as I am here, except in real life you can hear my accent. ;)”

“No, I am just me, in all my flawed glory.”

“I think I come across as more myself in writing than I do in person...so, people in AC may understand me better than people I meet every day. But, I don't alter truths about myself to suit an ‘image’. I may talk more about the parts of myself I'm proud of, but I think we do that in real life, too...”

Identity is one of the issues that’s been extensively discussed in books and articles concerning the Internet. One of the biggest criticisms and fears concerning the Internet is that you don't know to whom you are speaking. You can be under the impression that you are speaking to a twenty year old female college student, but in reality you are actually speaking to a fifty year old male. Accounts of this sort of experience have been widely published since the Internet became available for all to use (figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1: Cartoon Concerning the Issue of Identity on the Internet**  
(<http://home.earthlink.net/~alandp/nobody/index.html>)

Role-playing and gaming areas, for example MUDs (multi-user domains), are some of the most obvious spaces where people will alter their identity. They create a new character, a fragment of their imagination, and how much of themselves they put into the character is up to them. Sherry Turkle (1996:260) studied MUDs and she found that some people sensed the possibilities of self-discovery and even self-transformation. Psychologists, such as Turkle, studying identity firmly believe that a person doesn't have only one identify. People wear masks, which reflect how they want people to see them and how they want to see themselves. People play so many different roles in their lives today and, depending on whether they are at work or home, with the kids or husband, a different facet of their identity manifests itself.

What is the implication of this for the Internet? This shows that the Internet, as a social milieu where people can alter their identities, is not unique in this aspect. The only difference is that in off-line life you are not able to alter your gender, race or disabilities. On the Internet people can't see you and therefore it is easier to alter these fundamental parts of your anatomy and identity. It is also more difficult for people to see through your mask or altered identity. In role-playing and gaming dimensions this is the norm and intended to take place. People who meet others in chatrooms are more wary today of the people they meet than what they were a few years ago. People almost expect this type of behaviour in a chatroom and especially in

rooms with sexual themes, where it is almost acceptable, since it is seen as people living out their sexual fantasies.

On the other hand an alteration of identity on the Internet can liberate people who for example have a physical handicap or deformity. It gives them the opportunity to be perceived by other people as just another human being and not as someone to be pitied (Kitchin,1998:80). In this sense a person can leave his body behind, and therefore shape his identity based on how he wants to be perceived by other people.

In virtual communities the real issue arises if someone creates an altered identity and makes other people believe that this is their real identity. When this altered identity is able to harm other people- physically, emotionally and spiritually, it is a problem (Kitchin,1998:81).

Thus, clearly members in the type of virtual community that is studied for this thesis do not alter their identity any more than they do in off-line life. The reason that's been found for this phenomenon through this research is that a person's interaction in, for example Amazon City, is an extension and continuation of their off-line life. Members of Amazon City discuss their life, work, children, problems, joys and challenges of off-line life in this virtual area. Amazon City and other virtual areas, for example The WELL's parenting conference, derives its value from its connectedness to off-line life. It gives advice, support, encouragement as well as an area to learn and relax after a hard day's work. Most of the value and insight a person can gain in virtual communities such as these will be lost if the person alters his identity.

#### **4.4. Concluding Remarks**

It would be safe to make the assumption at this stage of Internet research that a person who stays an active member of a community for long enough to learn, and also become part of, the cultural assumptions and trademarks of the community, can be classified as a "true" or core member of the community.

This chapter illustrated through participant observation, questionnaires and informal interviews in conjunction with the relevant literature, that a set of partially shared understandings do exist in Amazon City (as an example of a virtual community). The

conclusion was reached that on-line friendships can be formed in virtual communities and that members value these friendships. Not everyone will form on-line friendships but the potential for deep meaningful relationships does exist, as does the possibility of shallow and demeaning interaction. Some of the cultural aspects of virtual communities are a result of the efforts of Netizens to decrease the limitations imposed by computer-mediated communication, and to make it more interactive and more real.

Throughout my participant observation I have realised and experienced the potential of these communities to create forums and areas for people to meet new people and to share their thoughts and feelings. It is important to note that these communities, in order to be healthy and supportive and of any real significance to the members, must be an extension of the persons off-line life. A site such as Amazon City is a definite third place- a place where people can come and relax after work, be superficial but also offer support and get support alike. Even though I entered the community as a researcher with the intent to observe the members and be objective, I very soon found myself to be emotionally involved with the other members. I shared their grief and pain, and the amount of support I've received from them in my research and personal life cannot be surpassed. If this will eventually lead to a complete breakdown of off-line society as we know it, or not, is not clear at this stage. How people embrace and include this newest social milieu into their lives will be the determining factor. More research is needed to make people aware of the dangers as well as possibilities of interacting in virtual communities such as Amazon City.

“People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything that people do on real life but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures is attractive, even addictive” (Howard Rheingold in Kitchin, 1998:75).

The additional aspects of the sites where-in these cultures grow and develop will be discussed in Chapter 5. The architecture and contents of a site have a direct influence on the culture of the virtual community. The economics of virtual communities will end the chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Stickiness of Sites**

### **5.1. Introduction**

As concluded in Chapter 4, Cyberculture does exist in virtual communities with computer-mediated communication. The time usage might be asynchronous but the space in which this community forming and building occurs is the same for all the individuals involved, and the main tool used is communication.

A virtual community consists of a tangible and an intangible part. The intangible part is the humans involved and the relationship they foster. The tangible part is the necessary hardware and software. Hardware and software allow certain functions and tools and they create the space within which these communities can form. They provide the context in which the architecture, design, layout and extra functions, for example advertisements and commerce, can happen. The interaction between these tangible and intangible parts will result in the full emergence of Cyberculture.

The name of Amazon City changed to Herspace at the beginning of May 2000. Most of the members still speak about Amazon City. The main reason for this is that the owner of the site is making the changes gradually. The URL for Amazon City is still used as well as the name Amazon City in some of the conference names. Amazon City mail is also still available. The reasons for the change will be discussed later in this chapter. With the name change the colour usage changed as well.

The questions that are answered in this chapter include the aspects of architecture, marketing and commerce. Does the architecture of a site have an influence on the culture of the community? Under architectural aspects such as layout, design, colour usage, software and additional features and attractions, will be looked at. Part of the architecture is how the World Wide Web and the Internet organise themselves in a structure of sites that are linked to each other. What methods are used for this, and more importantly why do owners of sites do this? In recent years a lot of attention has been given to Internet commerce, to such an extent that people who do not use the Internet regularly, or not at all, think that the Internet is mostly used for shopping and marketing of products. This image is mainly created and maintained by the more

traditional media, for example television and radio. This is done through advertisements for sites and products in these and other forms of traditional media. This phenomenon will be fully studied in this chapter. One of the main issues of this chapter will be whether the creation and building of a site is really to meet the needs of the users or if it is only a marketing ploy. Does it need to be one or the other? Are community and commerce on the Internet mutually exclusive?

Mitchell (1995:131) sees the development of virtual spaces on the Internet, as “that of urban history replayed in fast forward- but with computer resource use playing the part of land use, and network navigation systems standing in for streets and transportation systems.” He sees these virtual areas as similar to the architectural and building plans of cities and towns, “large-scale structures of places and connections organised to meet the needs of their inhabitants.”

## **5.2. Architecture**

If the existence of virtual communities is viewed as an opportunity to recreate third places for people to relax and to re-create the meaning and experiences of community, based upon interest and affinity and not geographical location, the following question can be asked. What will motivate a person to choose one virtual site above another? When I had to choose a main site for my participant observation one of my criteria was to find a site that I would enjoy spending time in and that “looked” like a site that could be successful. What gives a site the look of having the potential to be successful? This would include attractive features, appropriate colour use, extensive extra functions and in general a well laid-out and attractive site.

The architecture of a site, such as Amazon City, refers to the space created by the owner of the site, with what the space is filled and in what manner that is done. Did the members have a say in what will be available on the site, and how it will be implemented? When Amazon City was created in 1996 the owner, with her partner, had elaborate ideas of creating Amazon City.com in the likeness of an off-line spatial city. Unfortunately due to time constraints on the part of the owner the idea didn't materialise in full but remnants of the efforts can still be found on the site (figure 5.1).

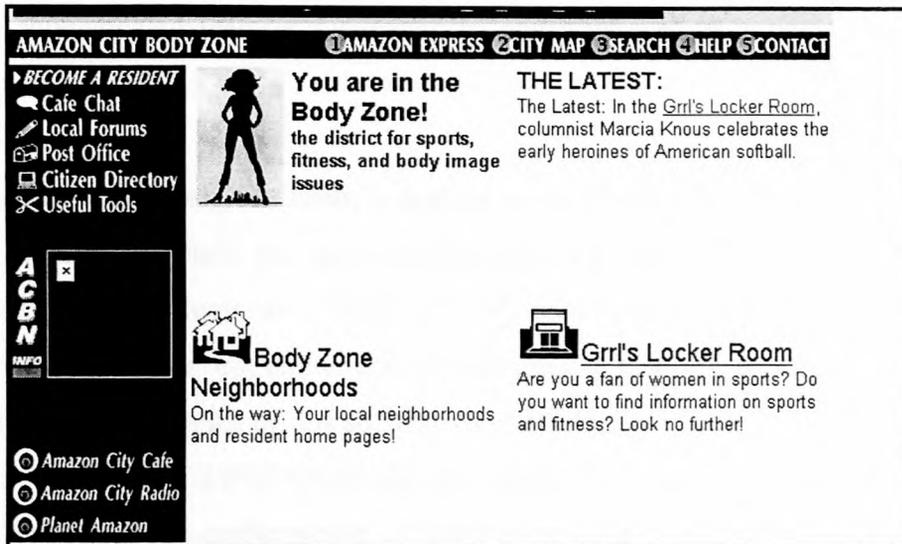


Figure 5.1: One of the Planned Districts of Amazon City

One of the most important things that determines whether a person visiting a site is going to like the particular website or not is the design and layout of the site. The software used by the site will influence the design and layout of the site, as well as the ease of manoeuvring.

### 5.2.1. Software

On the most basic level the architecture of the conferencing area, and the rest of the site, will depend on the software that is being used. David R. Woolley (1996) published an article on the Internet in which he categorises the different communicative software on the Internet. According to his categorisation the different types of software used in the electronic conferencing systems of the virtual communities used for this study are centralised forums (<http://www.umuc.edu/iuc/cmc96/papers/wool-p.html>).

Centralised forum software originated on mainframes in the early to mid-1970s. This software was designed specifically for group discussion, and the messages are treated as part of an ongoing discussion with some inherent structure. Discussions are stored on one central computer, and each new message is assigned a place in the discussion structure immediately after being posted. This means that the computers of the users taking part in the discussion don't need to access every message from the computer from where it has been posted. They are linked to the one central computer where all the messages are stored on one system. Over the years this line of software has

evolved sophisticated features for managing and participating in conversations over the Web.

With this software design as basis, a system originally developed in 1975 by Robert Parnes became the basis for new conferencing software. Wooley describes these newer software products as "WELL-style" conferencing systems, because The WELL was one of the first virtual communities to use this type of software and made it very popular. Examples of this software are: Backtalk, Caucus, COW, Motet, Web Crossing, YAPP, WE (Well Engaged) and many others. If a search is done on the Internet for electronic conferencing software a list with more than 60 different types of conferencing software is the result.

Generally all these types of software have the same function. They allow members of a virtual space to have conversations with each other while being in different places and different time zones.

The software that's used by Amazon City is COW. COW stands for "Conferencing on the Web". The software was written in 1996 and the writer and copyright owner offers it free to other people who want to use it. The main reason that the owner and founder of Amazon City, decided to use COW was the price, but also for its very advanced features. COW is also very easy to install and easy to modify. The initial software had some limitations but the owner decided to install a newer version of COW, instead of changing to Motet. This version has new features, such as the function to forget a conversation, if a user doesn't want to read a conversation and "Leave as new". This allows the user to read the conversation but then to keep the conversation and the last posts in it to be marked as new so that the member can easily go back to read it again. Each conference on the Hotlist page also has a little link that says "New" that allows a user to read new posts easily.

Cafe Utne, according to a study done in 1998 by Forum One's discussion-counting search tool, is the most active non-subscription-based forum on the Web. This community and many other virtual communities use Motet as software (Figallo,1998:285). Motet and COW have many similar features, as would be expected from software that's written for the same purpose- conferencing. The

interface is different, meaning that the features are differently placed on the page, etc. Except for the obvious differences between the two software packages as named above, COW adds a third level of organisation that Motet doesn't offer. COW divides the communication up into Conferences that are separated into Topics and these Topics are then further divided into Conversations. Motet gives the user different Conferences and these are divided into different Topics. Motet does not allow for the extra level of adding Conversations under Topic.

A third software package that's used for electronic conferencing is WE (WELL Engaged). Like Motet, Well Engaged Discussions has its roots in The WELL style of asynchronous interaction. The software also has conferences, topics and responses, but the HTML is more graphically designed than Motet's interface (Figallo,1998:290). Some of the problems of WE are that it is slower than Motet or COW, but it is able to accommodate more traffic. Virtual communities can change their software as a need for it arises. Reasons range from if they need software that can accommodate more people, that have more functions, that are cheaper or more expensive and many other reasons.

Software is important because it has an influence on the interface: what the user sees and how he experiences a virtual area. Some software packages can be confusing and disorientating for a new member and therefore it is imperative for the site owner to use the best possible software available. The software that is used on a site forms the basis of the architectural design and layout. Amazon City didn't change to different software when it amalgamated with Herspace.com.

### **5.2.2. Web Site Design**

I came upon Amazon City through a paper written by a student doing a Cyberspace course on the Internet. She mentioned a few sites that could be visited and I went and took a look at some of them. Amazon City caught my attention for a few reasons. The URL I used took me to the homepage which is the content page and marketing opportunity of a site. If the homepage of a site is not interesting or full of promising features, chances are that the person browsing will not return. I found the homepage of Amazon City to be bold and inviting, with strong use of colour- the site was mostly black and red. The main colour usage of the site after its change to Herspace is now

yellow, orange, light blue and purple. Some of the members have described it as a retro seventies look. At this stage the same graphics are still being used. The homepage also makes clear what can be expected on the site. The layout of the homepage makes it clear that the main feature of the site is communication and interaction. Amazon City is thus a member-generated content site.

The homepage must create and transmit an image of the site. This will allow the browsers to get an idea of the site and know if they adhere to the image created by the site or not. If the members adhere to the image that is given in a member-generated content site or not will be discussed later in this chapter. The bold use of colour and the graphics of a so-called “strong” woman transmit the image created by the owner (figure 5.2 and 5.3). The image created by use of colour, graphics and language will determine what type of person will not only visit the site, but become an active member of a site. Different sites target different types of people, for example Women2Women.com uses a pink background with lace detail, and this typifies the type of women that they are trying to reach.



Figure 5.2: Amazon City Homepage



Figure 5.3: HERSpace Homepage

The Amazon City homepage loads very quickly, and is easily navigatable to all the other parts of the site. When I asked questions about the layout of the site and the

homepage of Amazon City, it was interesting to hear that many of the members never see the homepage. They bookmarked the site on the URL that takes them directly to the conferencing area. Out of the 10 members that responded to my question, 7 said they bookmarked the Hotlist and only 3 said that they enter the site via the homepage. I bookmarked the site at the homepage. I did this just after I started my research at Amazon City. I was under the impression that the features and contents of the site would change quite regularly. They didn't, but it gave me a chance to experience even the smallest change on the site. This is also the reason why most of the members who responded to the question don't have the Homepage bookmarked but the Hotlist: "I bookmarked the Hotlist, I seldom look at the homepage. It never really changes" (Amazon City, 31March2000). The consequences of the bookmarking of the site on the Hotlist and not the Homepage will be discussed under the section on Internet Commerce.

A study done by the Internet Research Company Limited in the UK (1997) found that Internet users feel that there are a few general rules when it comes to website design: "Most importantly the site must be user-friendly and ergonomic in design, and the site must also be uncluttered. Users that participated in the study praised graphics that are unusual, striking, impactful and intriguing. Graphics should never be so complex that it will lengthen the time it takes to download the page" (IRCL,1997:43).

This finding is important on all the pages of a site, but these criteria are more rigorously enforced by users on the site's homepage. The homepage is mostly the part of a site or community that a visitor sees first. The homepage is seen as the page that represents the whole site, and therefore users form an opinion concerning a site based on the homepage. The study found that many users stated that if the homepage doesn't attract or intrigue them, they would leave the site without even entering the other pages.

Only if the person likes what he sees will he go through the effort of registering to be able to take part in and read the conferences. In the past it was possible to access a few of the conferences from the homepage without registering to the community. This was done so that the would-be members could experience the core of the site, the member-generated content, first-hand. Unfortunately this was stopped at Amazon

City because the members felt that their privacy was being invaded and that they couldn't freely participate and share in these open conferences. "We do have some private conferences, but they are not intended to exclude any member. They are private because none of us wants to share our most intimate feelings and problems with the world at large. We got burned when someone posted private information on another site. Abuse of Amazon City policies meant we no longer allowed guest access... everyone now must have an Amazon City Passport" (Amazon City, January 6, 2000). Some of the other big member-generated content sites, for example The WELL, still have conferences where browsers who are not yet members can experience the content of the site before committing themselves.

The IRCL study also found that users prefer sites where the layout of the site clearly outlines the content of the site without being too obscure or even unnecessarily showy. A balance is required between creating interest and being easy to use (IRCL:1997:43). A few of the responses they got were:

"The contents page is the most important- if they haven't got that right and it looks all shabby then you know you're on to a loser and you leave without wasting any more time".

"I think there is too much time spent on complicated graphics that takes bloody ages to appear- you lose interest" (IRCL:1997:43).

### **5.2.3. Content**

As Amazon City is a member-generated content site there is something new every few minutes to read. If I post a message in my research conversation in the Meta Conference I am guaranteed to have my first reply within a few minutes. This is a phenomenon that is generic in all successful and active member-generated-content sites, for example Cafe Utne, The WELL and Salon.com. A member-generated-content site that doesn't have an active interactive area will soon lose even the few members that it does have.

Virtual communities for such as Amazon City have been likened to traditional mass media. They are a mass medium because any post or piece of information has a potential worldwide reach of millions. Unlike conventional mass media every

member of a virtual community has the ability to reply in an existing conversation or to create a new conversation. The power of publishing in virtual communities is not centred in the hands of a few but in the hands of the masses (Rheingold,1994:130). This leads to a state where the producer is also the consumer. A member produces a piece of information (product) that he wants to be consumed by other members, and that he wants other members to respond to.

Before the Web, the interface to the Net was exclusively text, and text is the last thing the television news industry wants to broadcast to their viewers. On TV text doesn't sell, but pictures do, and moving pictures even more" (Randall,1997:178). Other reasons why people compare the Internet to television are because the screen of a computer is almost the same as a television screen. Secondly, the Internet provides us with graphics, animation, sound and video. Thirdly, it offers a combination of "information, advertising, controversy, and frivolity". Fourthly, just as a person channel hops between channels on television he can also click his way from page to page on the Internet. Fifthly, it has also been found that no matter how many new choices you might have, it's almost certain that a person will return to a small number of favourites (Randall,1997:178).

But if the Web is similar to the medium of television, it is even more similar to the medium of print. A huge amount of websites are home to Internet magazines and newspapers, and some of them promise to offer the hypermedia solution to books themselves (Randall,1997:178-179).

The IRCL (1997:46) study found that the average Internet user accesses hundreds of sites, although this amount lessens to a certain extent the longer the person stays on-line. The sites that are most enthusiastically remembered by respondents to the study were sites with some degree of interactivity. Interactivity refers to computer-mediated communication (CMC), which allows users to manipulate information, as well as the opportunity to download things (screensavers, cards) from the site, competitions, etc.

Ongoing development must be the focus of any business on the Internet. The site must be innovative and on the forefront of technological and site development. This can range from, for example, auction facilities to simply better, newer and faster software. If the site does this it will increase its “stickiness” and members will come back to the site. Methods that Amazon City uses to increase its stickiness include free web-based e-mail accounts for both its members and for non-members. The site also has a chatarea with chatrooms for different topics that can be visited 24 hours a day. The site also features a personalised horoscope reading area, and links to other related sites for women. Unfortunately Amazon City has not kept up with the innovations and developments in the virtual community field. The result of this will be further discussed in the section concerning commercial activity.

### **5.3. Commercial Activity**

As discussed in Chapter 1, for the first two decades of the Internet’s existence it was a research and academic network. Businesses were found on the Internet but not for making money on-line. The Internet’s “acceptable use policies” (AUPs) restricted anyone using the Internet to communicating and sharing resources for non-commercial purposes. No activities such as public relations and product or service descriptions were allowed. Before the World Wide Web was born, the Internet was limited in the extent of technology that businesses on the Internet could use. In 1992 NSFNET’s Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) still excluded commercial activities from the Internet (Randall,1997:247-248).

The Acceptable Use Policy was successful in stemming the bulk of commercial activity. Only commercial activity with academics and researchers was allowed. An extremely limited number of companies were capable of doing business with researchers in any discipline at all. This situation was unacceptable to those who saw the expanding commercial opportunity resulting from the growing global network. These included United States firms who had bought into the Information Superhighway vision articulated by the American Vice President Al Gore as early as 1992. What was needed for these organisations was a complete relaxation of the AUP, an organisation to help press for that relaxing, and indeed an effective removal of the US government from the Internet’s infrastructure.

The birth of the World Wide Web in 1992 and an organisation called the Commercial Internet Exchange Association (CIX), made the commercial use of the Internet a possibility without breaking the NSFNET's Acceptable Use policies (Randall,1997:250).

Many of the virtual communities in the early 1990s and even after the birth of the World Wide Web, felt that the Internet was not a commercial arena. Hagel and Armstrong (1997:16) include these fears and apprehension of the early Internet enthusiasts in their book concerning commerce in virtual communities. They argued however that "community provides a unique context in which commerce can take place as customers equip themselves with better information." Some virtual communities still resist the idea of using the Internet and the other networks to which it is connected for commercial gain. Is it possible to have both commerce and community both on the same site?

### **5.3.1. Dot com URL's**

In an on-line interview I asked the owner of Amazon City.com why her site has a business approach and a dot com URL? I also asked if the community aspect of the site was just a ploy to get more people committed so they would want to support the business side of the site:

My reason for having my business (besides wanting a better life for myself outside the confines of traditional corporate structure) is to create a company that supports and promotes the success and well-being of women. The reason it is a commercial venture, and not a non-profit, is that I think we can reach more people by running the entity as a business (in the long run). While the company is still too small to really have a huge track record of "socially responsible" behaviour, the vision behind the company- and where we are going- is firmly planted behind our mission to help women live better lives (Amazon City,October20,1999).

The dot com electronic conferencing sites are predominantly business entities. These businesses could have started for different reasons. For example, Amazon City is a

business that wants to help women, Cafe Utne and others are discussion areas for on-line magazines, and businesses that want to provide people with a place to confer on the web. For all of these ventures capital is needed. On the most basic level, the person who wants to start the business must have a computer and a connection to the Internet and the World Wide Web. In order to run a conferencing system a central computer (server) is needed to which all the computers of the members can log on. Software can be free, but more often than not communities have to pay for more reliable and faster software. For many owners of virtual communities, including Amazon City, the community was started as a business venture and therefore they were hoping to make revenue from the site. Unfortunately, as will be discussed later in this chapter, this does not always happen.

### **5.3.2. Sources of Revenue**

Any on-line or off-line business' initial concern is to make money. What are the sources of revenue for virtual communities with a dot com URL? There aren't many different methods to fund a Web community. According to Figallo (1998:360) the variety is in the combinations and different angles in which the few funding methods can be employed. Hagel and Armstrong in their book "Net Gain" (1997:45-46) stressed that sites that have achieved dominant positions in their genres do receive the most and best advertising possibilities. Unfortunately, this shows that size does matter when it comes to virtual communities. Through my participant observation I have observed a few methods that can be used to generate revenue in the virtual communities that I studied. Not all of these methods will work for all communities, but they are still relevant.

#### **5.3.2.1. Advertising**

The most active revenue producing strategy that I observed at Amazon City is the use of banner advertisements. In this type of advertising the banner creates a direct route (link) into the advertiser's website. A study done in the United Kingdom in 1997 found that the respondents saw this type of marketing as a legitimate part of the Internet economy. Many respondents felt that a website owner would not be functioning in the best interest of his site if he does not place banner advertisements around the Internet. This would be in order to create more traffic to their site. Respondents said that the banners that they were most likely to click on were the ones

that made them feel they would miss out on something if they did not click on the icon (IRCL:1997:50).

If a site such as Amazon City is going to use advertising as its primary source of income, it is necessary that the members should be clearly identifiable and targetable by advertisers. "Your advertising and merchandise sales are only as effective as you are successful in reaching the right audiences" (Figallo,1998:70).

One needs to ask if users actually "see" the advertisements and if they click on them. I asked this question in Amazon City and the response was overwhelmingly that members don't really see the advertisements. This is mostly a result of the fact that the advertisements are placed at the top or bottom of a scrollable page. If people therefore start to read the posts in a conversation, the advertisement will disappear from their screen. Secondly, because Amazon City is a community that targets a very wide audience, the advertisements don't always grab the user's attention. Members noted that the advertisements they can remember seeing are mostly annoying advertisements that flicker or are very inappropriate, and therefore offending, advertisements. For example, a Playboy advertisement that was placed on the site at the end of 1999, provoked a lot of conversation and unhappiness.

A very small number of members have actually bought anything through a banner advertisement. The interesting and significant phenomenon that I encountered was that a great percentage of the members of Amazon City click on the banner advertisements even though they have no interest in the product whatsoever. What is the reason for this? The members in the community know that Amazon City's main source of revenue is the banner advertisements and therefore they click on the advertisements in order to support the community. Every few months one of the hosts will remind the members that the owner of the site needs money to keep the site going and therefore the members should please click on the banners. Figallo brushed on this issue when he mentioned that: "The deep interpersonal relationships that develop in a virtual community should be supported to raise members feeling of identification with the entire community, including the provider (Figallo, 1998:385).

Figallo observed the same limitations in a member-generated-content site and stated that advertising as a source of revenue for a virtual community is not always the best strategy. He says that a site supported by advertising is more likely to work in a site where the population prefers browsing. "People who are looking and reading, rather than thinking and posting, have more of their attention available for noticing ads and clicking on them. People who have their attention plugged in to conversation would rather not be distracted. Advertising to them, if it's going to be effective, must be especially relevant." Figallo uses as examples both Cafe Utne and Salon.com as communities that are supported mostly by advertising. The members focus in these communities is on conversational intercourse and debating and therefore the advertisements must address their other interests to be noticed (Figallo, 1997:70).

Building sufficient advertising revenue to support a site with moderate traffic requires that the advertisers be perfectly matched with the identity and preferences of the community. These perfect matches are very unlikely to happen, because the desires and needs are different for all the people in the community..

Community sites assist the advertisement companies such as Flycast, which handles Amazon City's banner advertisements. They do this by identifying their users through several different methods. Firstly, if a member registers in a virtual community he fills in an information form with information regarding age, gender, income and profession on it. The virtual community makes this information available to identify the types of advertisements that will appeal to the members of the specific community.

The topics of discussion in the conference areas and the chatrooms are also used to identify the appropriate advertisements. The personal profiles that users create for themselves for other users to read are also a good source of information regarding the interest and needs of the members. All three of the above methods make it easier for communities and advertisement companies to place the right advertisement in the right community. It is clear that to keep this information updated and relevant can be an expensive and time consuming exercise. It is well worth it though, because the more certain the advertisers are that their advertisements are seen by the right people the higher the rate they're willing to pay per hit or advertisement view. Most of the

advertisement companies only pay per thousand hits. A specific target is necessary if the community wants to have any hope of receiving revenue generated through banner advertisements on their site (Figallo, 1998:367).

Salon.com, as well as Cafe Utne, are adjuncts to magazines. The forums and discussion areas in Salon.com's Table Talk are marketed as an area where the articles can be discussed. Obviously it is used for more community-oriented purposes, for example support, as well. Salon.com is an electronic magazine, so it isn't sold off-line. Like Cafe Utne, Salon.com's Table Talk displays banner advertisements in the conference area. There is a difference between the advertisements placed in Salon.com and the ads placed in Cafe Utne. "The profile of the typical Salon member would seem to be economically upscale from that of the Cafe Utne reader. Salon displays ads from IBM and Mercedes Benz, while the Cafe features ads from lesserknown and smaller businesses. Demographics count heavily where advertising rates are concerned, though the determination of user demographics on a web site is still far from an exact science. The difference in ads on these two sites could just as easily be due to the differences between their ad sales teams and the fact that Salon is based in San Francisco while Cafe Utne is based in Minneapolis" (Figallo, 1998:383-384).

Even though advertisements are the most obvious way for member generated content sites to make money, they are not the only way. The site can also sell products for other sites or for themselves.

#### **5.3.2.2. Products and Links to Other Sites**

Amazon City has a virtual shopping area or mall. Most of the products in this shopping area are not products that Amazon City sells itself, but are links to other sites. In other words, Amazon City places the link on their site and only when someone buys the product through this link does Amazon City get a commission. Unlike the banner advertisements that are placed in Amazon City and other sites, the owner of the site receives money only when the member actually buys the product through the link. The colour use of the Amazon City Mall in this screen shot below has already been changed to the Herspace colours (figure5.4). This makes it clear that the changes the owner is making are being done slowly and step by step.

Figure 5.4: Amazon City Mall

Figure 5.5: Amazon City T-Shirts

Amazon City also sells Amazon City T-shirts (figure 5.5) on the site. Prospective buyers need only to register to use the conferencing area of Amazon City, so any Internet surfer can buy the products in the shopping area. It is noteworthy that the members of Amazon City don't see the T-shirts as a purely commercial activity. They see it as a means to affirm and strengthen affiliation and a sense of belonging. This product is sold by the owner of Amazon City herself, and is not a link to another site, so the owner gets the full monetary benefit. Unfortunately because the number of core members of the site is limited to about 30 this doesn't generate a lot of revenue. The fact that the T-shirt can also only be shipped in America also prevent members from other countries from obtaining one. A proportion of the revenue generated by the sales of the T-shirts is given to a charity against violence towards women.

It is also interesting to note that since I joined the community in June 1999, the products in the shopping area stayed exactly the same until March 2000. Only at the end of March did the owner of the site make changes to the products and extended the range of products to include, for example, different styles of T-shirts. At the end of

May/beginning of June the Shopping area was changed to a Herspace shopping area that at the moment only has one link to another shopping area, but is in the process of adding more (figure 5.6). It is clear that the owner is slowly but surely making changes at Amazon City and changing it over to Herspace in all aspects.

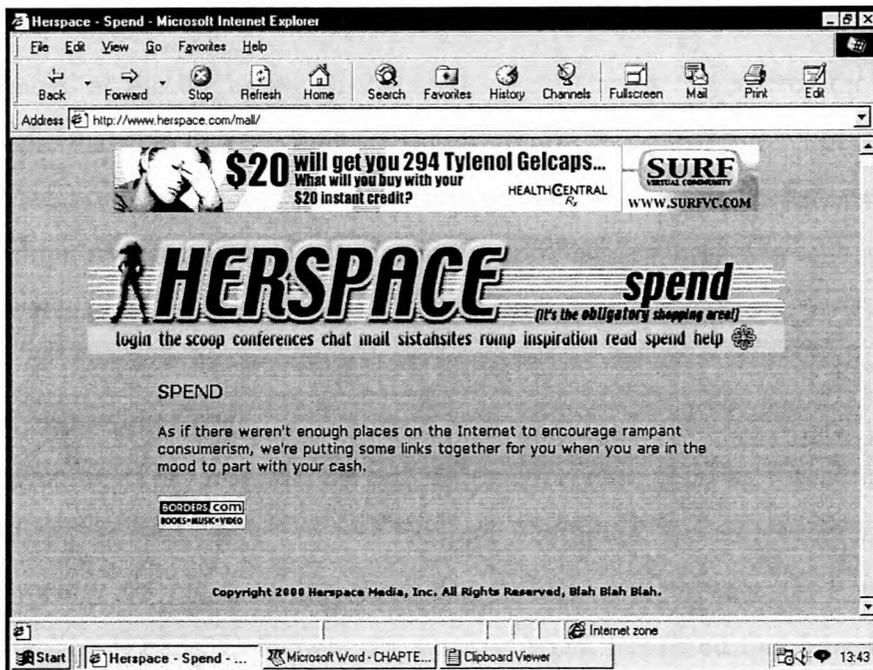


Figure 5.6: The New Shopping Area in Herspace

Most dot com sites sell products. For virtual communities it can be that the site owner first sold the product and then incorporated interactive communication devices on the site. Figallo (1998:368) speculates that “it could be that the Internet storefront is going to become even more popular as a centre for communities.” The reason for this is that the buyers of a specific product already have something in common. It is also relevant that he stated that “many products define the cultural niches their buyers occupy as clearly as almost any other means available for doing so”. What a person buys identifies his demographics, preferences and interests. The ability to purchase specific products on a web site can draw groups of people together in the same manner as content does (Figallo, 1998:368). In cases like this, the product becomes the content. Amazon.com, the book selling site, can be seen as an excellent example of this.

It can also happen the other way around. The community might already exist, and the owners can then match products with the self-defined community. Both ways have been followed on the web: selling the product first and then building a community around it consisting of the buyers of the product, or building the community first and then finding appropriate products to sell to its members (Figallo,1998:370).

As mentioned at the beginning of the section on Internet Commerce there are still many people that feel that the Internet should not be a commercial venture. Sites that don't like the commercial aspects of the Internet but which still need money to buy a central computer and to employ staff can use another, less commercial way to make money for their site.

### **5.3.2.3 Membership Fees**

At the beginning of my research the only Internet researcher doing research on virtual communities that I was aware of was Howard Rheingold. He writes extensive books focusing mainly on his involvement at The WELL. For this reason I went to the website for The WELL. Great was my surprise when I realised that I would have to pay a membership fee to become a member! That led to the use of The WELL for this research only as an instance of apt illustration from Howard Rheingolds' books and wishful staring at the homepage.

Why do some virtual communities charge a membership fee? Advertisements are not placed on The WELL site, and revenue is earned only from membership fees (figure5.7). This fee enables the owner of a particular site to pay the salaries of the personnel they employ to upkeep the site, and to pay for any other expenses that might occur. These may include a new central computer, new software and more personnel.

Home | [Join](#) | [About](#) | [Conferencing](#) | [Members](#) | [Services & Help](#) | [Enter](#)

**THE WELL** [Join us!](#)

The WELL has engaged, informed, enraged and transformed its subscribers since 1985. On The WELL, "You Own Your Own Words," and members are known by our real names, two policies which foster extraordinary conversations.

Meet experts on almost any subject, find unparalleled networking opportunities, and enjoy conversations of a quality found in few places, online or off.

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a [Sales.Com](#) Community  
[Website Feedback](#)

**Figure 5.7: The WELL Membership Page**

Hosts are not paid at The WELL, but they do not have to pay the \$10 membership fee. Some of the discussion topics (conferences) on The WELL can be accessed without paying the membership fees. The reason that payment of membership fees as a form of revenue works at The WELL is because of the site's reputation and history. Membership fees are not a good choice of revenue for a new site. As a result of the huge number of discussion-centred communities on the Internet and World Wide Web, users will rather go to a site where they can converse with people free of any direct cost (Figallo, 1998:382).

### **5.3.3. What is the Best Strategy for Member-Generated Content Communities?**

The problem with making money in a member-generated content community such as Amazon City is that the members are not interested in much other than the conferencing area. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter most of the members of Amazon City bookmarked the site not on its homepage but on their Hotlist. This means that when they enter the community they are already in the conferencing area and that's where they stay. Some of the members have Amazon City mail and they will visit the Post Office from their Hotlist page. This shows that the members do not visit the shopping area. This can be for a variety of reasons, including that people who frequent Amazon City are members of the site for the

friendship and the support they are offered. The other reason is that the virtual shopping area of Amazon City has only changed its products or links once since I became a member a year ago. A new member will therefore go to the shopping area once or twice, buy the things they want, and because there are never any new products they will not return to that part of the site.

According to Figallo (1998:380) sites that exist primarily to host group interaction don't rely on special interests, content or products to attract people. These sites' main marketing tool is to make people aware of the existence of the area they provide to allow conversation. At these sites the focus is on conversation and the site appoints hosts to make sure the conversation flows, conversations are kept orderly and norms and standards of behaviour are adhered to. "Because such sites provide their services on a commercial basis, they can afford to build out their facilities enough to entertain larger populations than the hobby and small business sites, incurring correspondingly higher operational expenses as a result" (Figallo,1998:381-382). These services are normally an area to speak to friends and acquaintances through a bulletin board and chatrooms. Although these sites provide the same service to their different members it doesn't imply that their revenue models will be the same. The revenue model of a site will be influenced and determined by the form of discussions, the topics of discussion, and the consumer profiles of the participants.

#### **5.3.4. Can the Community Exist if the Commerce Fails?**

Unfortunately the Internet does not automatically guarantee success. Owners and managers of sites must exercise constant attention and effort. When an owner becomes less zealous and does not place the newest innovations on the site, the site will not gain new members. Some of the old members might stay because they made friends on the site, and view the community as their Cyberhome. The truth, however, is that if the owners of the site created the site to generate revenue, they will face a serious issue if the site does not make money. Owners will then have to decide to either change their business plan and marketing strategy or else sell the site or cancel it.

Since joining Amazon City I became aware that the site did not make any real money. The owner of the site made a few dollars a month from the banner advertising, but as

one of the hosts described it “it’s not even enough to buy herself a cup of coffee every day”. The community, in discussion with the owner, and in my conversation concerning my research, made the deduction that this can be ascribed to two reasons. Firstly, because it’s a member-generated content site with its main form of revenue being banner advertisements, the number of members would need to be significantly increased for the site to make money from advertisements. This will however only work if the members have the same loyalty to the site as the current core member group. This loyalty encourages the members to click on the banner advertisements in order to support the site financially. Otherwise a bigger population wouldn’t help, as was seen in Figallo’s discussion of banner advertisements.

Secondly, the name was seen as a drawback. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the name Amazon City can be confused by people with Amazon.com. During late 1999 the owner of Amazon City asked the community members how they would feel if she changed the name to something less confusing. The response was overwhelmingly against the idea. The members felt a strong sense of commitment and attachment towards the name. As a result it was decided just to add a disclaimer on the homepage stating that the site had nothing to do with Amazon.com. It seems that in the end, however, the owner decided that this was not enough.

After months of indecision about where to take the site and the business a few options arose. In the end the owner decided to amalgamate Amazon City with one of her other sites- Herspace. The name Amazon City fell away because not only could the name be confused with Amazon.com, but it also specifies a too narrowly defined target group. The owner of the site was concerned that the name of the site attracted a certain type of person that she didn’t see as completely fitting in with her idea of the target group. Although the image created by the owner of the site on the homepage is that of a strong woman, she also stated that she wants to help women. On closer inspection the site is clearly there to help and support women. This can be seen in the chosen conferences, topics and conversations, as well as through the products the site sells, and the money the site gives to a charity to stop violence against women. Most of the members at Amazon City discuss their problems and ask for support and suggestions. The owner of the site is also open for suggestions about new conferences to be added to the existing ones. This implies that the members have more power than

just expressing their feelings in the existing conferences; they can also create new conferences if there is enough member support. The members mostly keep to the image that is created by the site, but they do have the power to influence and change the community part of the site.

After the change to Herspace has been completed, a further option the owner has is to give the domain name, Amazon City, to members of the community so that it becomes a community run site. This idea was welcomed by the owner, but only on condition that the site then operates as a non-profit organisation. If the new community member owners generate revenue from the site, the site can be perceived as competition for the owner's other sites. This interest of some of the members, who are long-time hosts at Amazon City, is a very interesting phenomenon. These are members who give freely of their time to help organise and run the site. Their loyalty and commitment to the site now extends further.

The question is what is their motivation? Is it money, loyalty to the site, or commitment and loyalty to their friends and acquaintances at Amazon City? If the owner is not willing to give or sell the site to these members, they are planning to create their own site. A question that cannot be answered at this stage is whether the other members are going to stay with Amazon City now that it changed into Herspace. This new amalgamated site will have a changed focus on a different demographic group that is not yet fully revealed. Or will the members follow their long-time hosts and friends to their new site, which in the planning phase, is looking for ways for all the members to generate revenue from the site for themselves.

As stated, at this stage these and other questions cannot be answered, because only the future will be able to reveal the full extent of the changes. It can be observed that the owner of Amazon City decided that the site was not profitable anymore, and that she was faced with an adapt or die choice. She was forced to decide if the site was worth the effort simply as a community with citizens, or if it could survive without consumers. The question that arises is whether the members of a virtual community, with a dot com URL, are to be seen as citizens or as consumers?

### 5.3.5. Citizen or Consumer?

When reading and participating in Amazon City, my fellow members and I mostly forgot that Amazon City was a business and that the owner wanted to see a return on her investment of time and money. We don't buy all the products in the shopping area, we don't click on the banner advertisements every day and we don't promote the site to all our friends and relatives to create a bigger audience. Now with the cloud of change hanging over our heads as a result of the lack of financial success of our Cyberhome we clearly realise that it is a business entity. It also made me think about whether the members of the community are ultimately seen as consumers or citizens by the power that be? I know that we think of ourselves as citizens of the City, but if the future of the site ultimately depends on money and financial gain then aren't we ultimately considered and experienced as consumers?

According to Werry (1999:12) a consumer model will focus on the consumption power of the member instead of on the production and control of community resources power of the member. "While members obviously use corporate sponsored community sites in creative ways for a variety of ends, it is important to note that real power is in the hands of the site owners." America On-line (AOL) and a number of other service providers shut down a number of community areas without prior notice to the members. As Brown writes in: "Netscape to Community: You're Evicted", "when the community area of the Netscape Netcenter Web site was closed in April 1999, members were neither consulted nor given advanced notice: No warning-cancelled, the hosts let go, the community members left to consider what, exactly, happened to their home" (Werry,1999:12). Hagel and Armstrong discuss these acts in their book. They call it "weeding", and these acts take place because community sites are more and more placed under pressure to organise their member-content in ways that are commercially profitable. If they fail in doing this, it is commercially necessary to get rid of them. The ways in which the site owner does this however will determine the value the owner attributes to the site's members.

Amazon City is in the welcome position that the owner was open about the fact that the site was not making money and that she was considering changes. She also listed the possible options that she was considering. Therefore we, as the members, could organise ourselves to start a new site or to find another existing Cyberhome. We

could also join one of the other communities of the owner, or stay to see the change of Amazon City into Herspace through.

Even though the Internet and communities on the Internet have not been around for very long, a historical analysis can still be made. This analysis of the history will enable us to make an assessment of whether commerce and community are mutually exclusive or not.

### **5.3.6. The History of Commerce on the Internet**

#### **5.3.6.1. Community as Impediment**

Some virtual communities are the result of people wanting to start e-commerce businesses and adding conferencing software (as a marketing tool) to their sites. As seen in Chapter 1, during the early days of Internet commerce, the motto was: "Build it and they will come". The first Internet commerce book that paid any attention to the community and culture on the Internet was Canter and Siegel's book in 1994 "How to make a fortune on the Information Superhighway". Even though they discuss community and culture they dismissed it as something that might have existed in the earlier history of the Internet when academics and researchers were the only inhabitants of Cyberspace (Canter and Siegel,1994:12). They went as far as to dismiss community and culture on the Internet completely: "Some starry-eyed individuals who access the Net think of Cyberspace as a community, with rules, regulations and codes of behaviour. Don't you believe it! There is no community... Along your way, someone may try to tell you that in order to be a good Net 'citizen', you must follow the rules of the Cyberspace community. Don't listen" (Canter and Siegel,1994:12).

They promoted and advertised their business everywhere on the Internet, regardless of norms of behaviour and rules of acceptable behaviour. They posted spam for their business to all the USENet groups that they could access, and they didn't see anything wrong with it. Millions of people complained, and Canter and Siegel received a lot of media coverage mostly born out of outrage. "In spite of the fact that the Internet is now becoming more commercial with every passing day, there is a group of individuals, mainly students and faculty members from universities, who insist that using the huge USENet communicating faculty for advertising amounts, at best, to

rudeness. At worst, the truly committed and committable see advertising on the USENet as an act of war” (Canter and Siegel,1994:82).

If we take Canter and Siegel’s example and look at it in terms of the examples of norms of behaviour and Cyberculture as discussed in Chapter 4, it is clear that they breached a few of the cultural assumptions of virtual communities. For example, their actions were rude in the simplest form because they were off-topic. Their “advertisements” had no bearing on the issues being discussed in the different USENet groups, and it took up unnecessary bandwidth, and the time of the usual members of the community (Canter and Siegel,1994:83). But then again, Canter and Siegel didn’t see people who converse with others on the Internet as members of a community. They see them as “users”, “readers”, “individuals” and “consumers”. This strengthens their perspective that the Internet “is the community that isn’t” (1994:187). The fact that people complained about their advertising postings in different USENet groups is a distortion according to them. “These distortions are based largely on the fictional concept of Cyberspace. Just as there is no real Cyberspace, there are, in actuality, no rooms where people are talking. What you do have is a series of messages posted to computer bulletin boards. Nothing more, nothing less” (Canter and Siegel,1994:83).

Throughout their book it is made very clear that Canter and Siegel see the Internet as a marketing tool to make a fortune. According to them the on-line community does not exist. Therefore they can argue that no social or community relations exist that could be offended or encroached upon by the spread of advertising and commercial activity. It is safe to say that Canter and Siegel might have given people some insight into Internet commerce and advertising, but their dismissal of the different Internet communities, and the practices they use, would still not be received favourably by community members. Their book is nevertheless an example of business texts of the early 1990s, in that it presents community as largely at odds with commercial development on the Internet. Werry (1999:4) comments that, “in Canter and Siegel’s text, as with most others written in the same period, the on-line community is at best irrelevant to models of Net commerce, and at worst an impediment.”

It would have been fine if the “non-existent” Internet community agreed with Canter and Siegel. The business texts that were written less than two years after Canter and Siegel’s book realised that the on-line communities can’t be ignored as irrelevant to Internet Commerce. As early as 1995 business text writers began to realise the importance and value of the virtual community for on-line businesses (Werry,1999:4).

### **5.3.6.2. Community as Means to Increase Stickiness**

People who wanted to create successful on-line businesses had to increase the “stickiness” of their sites. Computer technology innovation is in the order of the day, but the businesses also moved back to the original intent and purpose of the Internet-communication and interaction. On-line businesses added computer-mediated communication devices to their sites. Does this mean that community originated on all these e-commerce sites?

Many on-line businesses started only in the mid- 1990s, and by then e-businesses were already combining business with computer-mediated communication (CMC). Amazon City.com is the result of such an exercise. At that stage people weren’t clear about what would happen on their sites, and a lot of people were and still are surprised about the community that develops and grows on their site.

Several reasons can be found for why this interest in virtual community started to occur in 1995 and 1996. Firstly, the virtual mall proved to be a disaster (Werry,1999:5). Business people did build commercial sites, but the users of the Internet did not come. A survey done by Christopher Anderson of *The Economist* in 1997 found that a successful alternative model for Internet commerce can be found in “the few businesses that begin grouping themselves by theme, joining or creating communities with shared interests.”

Secondly, it was found that the most easily made money on the Internet was through advertising. Analysts found that although people don't buy much on-line (in 1997), but they did make purchasing decisions based on what they read and saw on-line. The most important thing for these sites to do became to create a repeat audience

Thirdly, from 1995 a huge amount of demographic information had been gathered and a number of key market segments identified. Werry (1999:5) states that “‘community’ became a polite way of talking about audience, consumer demographics, and market segmentation while seeming sensitive to Internet users, their culture and community”.

An interesting finding of the study was that many claimed that they have never knowingly accessed sites whose primary concern was selling. Sites that offered entertainment and information features, and also included a section for shopping, were more readily accessed by respondents. Respondents saw these as being different from sites whose primary purpose and extensive focus was on selling, even though the process is basically the same (IRCL,1997:53).

It is therefore clear that the business texts of this time reflected the users’ feelings about sites on the Internet. Members want to visit sites where there is something more than just a commercial theme and where the main focus is not on selling.

### **5.3.6.3. Finding the Balance**

Hagel and Armstrong’s (1997) business text “Net Gain: Expanding markets through Virtual Communities”, has a very contrasting view of virtual communities from Canter and Siegel’s perspective. They don’t see virtual communities as an impediment to commercial possibilities, but rather as a central and very important feature of on-line commerce. “By adapting to the culture of these networks, however, and by giving customers the ability to interact with each other as well as with the company itself, businesses can build new and deeper relationships with customers. We believe that commercial success in the on-line arena will belong to those who organise virtual communities to meet multiple social and commercial needs. By creating strong virtual communities, businesses will be able to build membership audiences and use those audiences to generate revenue in the form of advertising, transaction fees, and membership fees” (1994:4).

Hagel and Armstrong identify member loyalty as the main reason why Internet commerce is better suited in a virtual community environment. Virtual communities such as Amazon City consist mostly out of member-generated content. According to

Hagel and Armstrong (1997:8) virtual communities change the power relationship between companies and their customers. Virtual communities "...will allow customers to extract even more value from the vendors they interact with. In essence, virtual communities will act as agents for their members by helping them to get increased product and service information- not to mention lower prices- from vendors at the same time they meet a broad range of social needs to communicate." This added value of commercial sites with a virtual community is a result of four elements:

- These virtual communities target a specific segment of the population. This helps the potential member to know what type of resources will be found in the community. It also helps the organisers to focus their efforts, and to cater for a specific group and not for all potential customers in general.
- Combine content (products and advertising) with communication. This allows members to discuss products with each other and with the vendors. This also leads to member-generated content.
- Access to competing publishers and vendors. Virtual communities act as agents for their members. Therefore they must create links and information to different vendors and products, in order to give their members as much information to make as educated a decision as possible.
- Commercial orientation. All of this leads to a more empowered shopping experience. Members of virtual communities will value this commercial addition to the community (Hagel and Armstrong,1997:8-9).

It is clear that member-generated content is a focal point for the virtual communities that Hagel and Armstrong have in view. These will be organic communities that won't be able to be forced in a direction. The community members will form the community, and steer it in a direction. The owners of a site can't force a community to grow, but they can create a stimulating and attractive site for the community to grow in by doing the above. In a discussion between members of Amazon City and Cafe Utne, the truth was revealed that an owner of a site/business could only build the site, and provide the context for community and commerce. It is up to the members of the site to provide the content and to foster the community and create a workable site.

The member-generated content will attract new members and will foster strong member loyalty, both to the other members and the site as a whole. As made clear from the above, it creates ways to incorporate both commerce and community on the same site. The distinctive focus on a specific target group allows for customisation, which also leads to loyalty and increases the stickiness of the site for members of the target group. One of the biggest benefits for business owners is that the virtual community creates detailed and inexpensive demographic information about the members' interests, habits, money, and what they like to buy (Werry,1999:9; Hagel and Armstrong,1997).

An excellent example of e-commerce on the Internet is Amazon.com, which started as a site that sold only books. They now sell, books, videos, and music. The site keeps track of the technological innovations and was one of the first sites to include an auction area on their site. An auction area is where individual members of the public can advertise products that they want to sell on the site and then people can place bids. The highest bidder is contacted and the transaction then takes place between the seller of the product and the highest bidder. The site, therefore only acts as agent for the individual who want to sells, for example, his collection of Beanie Babies. This gives the individual member more input and direct interest in the site, and innovations such as this leads to customer loyalty and increases the stickiness of a site. Amazon.com also created an Amazon.com community area. The site now functions as a shopping area, auction house, and community that creates a sense of place and belonging to its members. Amazon.com allows their members space to construct their own homepage, and therefore gives them their own personal space as well. Most of the conversations in the conferencing area focus around books people have read, or problems for which books have been written that are available at Amazon.com. Many of the responses to people asking for advice or support are a link to an appropriate book that a person can buy to answer his questions. It is therefore clear that the conferencing area in Amazon.com is a way to get people to interact about the products being sold on the site and not much else. I must admit that I didn't experience any sense of community on the site. It felt like an interactive marketing ploy cleverly disguised as a community area.

Communication is necessary to allow community, but the fact that people can communicate with each other does not qualify them as a community. This aspect was discussed in Chapter 4 in the section concerning language. The term community is unfortunately so fickle and has so many meanings and interpretations that some people will say that communication does form a community. But what is the aim of this “community”? Do the people get to know each other and become to feel like family? Do they help each other with personal problems and support each other in difficult times? Do they encourage and congratulate each other? Do they become friends, whose support, love and conversation are just as important as off-line friends?

A site such as Women Motorists includes computer-mediated communication devices on their site. The bulletin board topics are centred on car related issues and the chatroom is used for discussion with car experts. How busy are the conferencing areas of sites like these? The same phenomenon can be observed at this site as on Amazon.com. The discussions that are fostered are all centred on the topic of the site and the products the site is trying to sell to the people who visit the site.

It is therefore clear that commerce and community on the same site are not mutually exclusive. It is not obvious though that a commercial site with interactive devices will foster community. It all depends on the owner of the site as well as the image the owner creates and the people who visit the site.

Another question that emerges from this discussion is why people take part in sites such as Amazon City if they are not going to buy any products, or pay attention to the commercial aspects of the site.

#### **5.4. The Gift Economy**

Members ask for advice in the conference area of Amazon City, and other members respond with detailed and well thought out advice and support. A week later the same person who answered the question might be in a situation where she again needs some advice or knowledge. I asked the question in Amazon City why we so freely give of our time and knowledge to answer questions and queries. The members who responded to my question thought the answer was obvious:

“umm ..... because that's what friends are for? ;)” (Amazon City, Feb. 23, 2000).

“Because it feels good” (Amazon City, Feb. 23, 2000).

“Because I may need the same help one day ...” (Amazon City, Feb. 23, 2000).

“And because I have already gotten help here. \ (^ \_ ^ ) /” (Amazon City, Feb. 23, 2000).

The above answers show that the members at Amazon City are friends who like to help each other. As mentioned before, the reason for the creation of Amazon City was to empower and help women. This implies that a member should be able to ask a question and receive answers from other members in the community. It can therefore be seen as an exchange of information because the other members know that one day they might be the one that needs help and advice. Likewise they would then want other members to help them as well.

An extensive discussion is in progress at Amazon City concerning the balance between support and content conversations on the site. The owner was concerned that the site is mostly used for support and that there isn't always enough discussion about other issues. The site's vision is to be a home for women on-line and to give support. The problem is that this support infiltrated into most of the conferences and conversations of the site. The members are very open and will discuss a lot of problems and issues in their lives but not always in the appropriate places. The amount of support and advice on the site is impressive. It includes support for members with depression and other health issues. Advice and support for careers and own businesses are also freely given. Everyday needs, problems and opportunities are discussed and advice given. These everyday needs include recipes, advice with animals, and technical computer support. Members discuss illnesses and problems with wives, husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends, and roommates.

Amazon City is a very open community and support and help is very easily given. A big reason for this is because we don't alter our identities any more than in our off-line lives. The on-line lives of the members are an extension of their off-line lives. If I need advice or support on anything I can go to Amazon City and ask. If there is no

one in the community that has an answer, members will search the web and post addresses and links to sites that can provide answers. Many of the members of Amazon City learn how to create links, webpages and anything else that's possible to do on a computer as a result of help and advice given to them by other members. A few of the knowbies work or did work in Information Technology or they have their own websites and therefore have a lot of Internet skills. They share this information freely, while they charge money for the same information in the course of their daily lives. One of the other members is a motivational speaker and life coach. People pay her and invite her to do workshops on some of the information and motivation that she gives freely to the members of Amazon City.

Howard Rheingold (1993) was the first to describe the interaction and sharing of information in virtual communities as a gift economy. A gift economy occurs when someone asks a question or asks for advice and information, and someone "gives" him the answer or information in return for nothing. Kollock (1999:221) mentions accounts of programmers and lawyers sharing valuable information free of charge to members of their individual USENet groups, whilst they would charge huge amounts of money for the same information off-line.

A gift transaction involves "a diffuse and usually unstated obligation to repay the gift at some future time. Gift exchanges should not involve explicit bargaining or demands that the gift be reciprocated, but a relationship in which there is only giving and no receiving is unlikely to last" (Kollock,1999:221). Gift economies are not driven by price but by social relations. The difficulty with having to repay the gift on the Internet is the fact that a lot of the times the person you give information to is unknown to you and you may never encounter him again. Instead the gifts of information and advice in virtual communities are not seen as offered to a particular individual but to a group as a collective. The principle therefore is that one person gives information or help to someone, because he knows that when he encounters a problem someone else within the group will give advice or information to him. This is known as "generalised exchange", and occurs in off-line life as well.

Marcel Mauss (1954) and a many other anthropologists in the past have done research on gift economies. Their studies were done in archaic societies and showed that the

Gift Economy has been functioning in societies and communities for many years. It is therefore not a post-modern phenomenon that is simply a result of the Computer Revolution. The gift economies in the societies that Mauss and others have studied do not relate only to personal goods and wealth, or to real and personal property. The aspects that they found to be exchanged in these societies were rather “courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances, and feasts; and fairs in which the market is but one part of a wide and enduring contract” (Mauss,1954:3). It is therefore clear that the gift economy has been part of societal life since people organised themselves into groups. The things that are shared over the Internet are simply less tangible and concrete.

A risk involved with the gift economy system in virtual communities is that everyone would want to receive information without returning the favour to someone in the group or to the group as a whole. This risk is magnified because of the arrangement of not returning something immediately, and the unknown identity of the person you help, or from whom you received help (Kollock,1999:222). This is not a real concern in a virtual community such as Amazon City where all the members know each other. It sometimes does happen that a new member joins the community and asks for instant help with a problem. Answers and responses are still given freely if it seems a genuine problem or concern. With the answer, an invitation to become more involved with the site is also included. At Amazon City there is a culture of freely expressing and giving of help. If everyone in a community was just interested in getting their own questions answered then the community will not be able to survive. Inherent in the cultural assumptions of a functioning virtual community is the willingness and physical act of responding to other member’s questions and requests for advice and support.

For a gift economy on the Internet or off-line to function fully in a productive and credible way the following Maori proverb needs to be taken to heart:

“Ko maru kai atu  
Ko maru kai mai,  
Ka ngohe ngohe”

“Give as much as you receive and all is for the best” (Mauss,1954:69).

### **5.5. Concluding Remarks**

This chapter shows that even though the conferencing area is the heart of a site such as Amazon City, there are other areas and aspects that influence a site’s success and popularity. The word used to describe the important aspects that attract people to a site is called “stickiness”. A lot of things can be done to increase a site’s “stickiness”, and they can range from the painfully obvious (for example the use of colour and layout of a site), to the software used and the commercial activities on the site. The extra features and new innovations that can be incorporated onto a site also increase stickiness.

This chapter illustrated that commerce and community need not be mutually exclusive and that the owner of a dot com site can see the members ultimately as consumers while the members see themselves as citizens. For a dot com virtual community to succeed a balance must be found between the member as citizen and the member as consumer.

But the most radical potential impact of the virtual community may well be its impact on the way individuals manage their lives and companies manage themselves. Communities will serve to connect, much like the postage system and the telephone before them. But they will go several steps further than the telephone or fax, as they help the individual to seek out and find. Souls in search of relationship, colleagues in search of teamwork, customers in search of products, suppliers in search of markets: the virtual community might have a place for them all (Hagel and Armstrong,1997:-216).

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Study**

### **6.1. Introduction**

My Friend and Confidant:

You are half the world away; and my today is your tomorrow. I have never seen your face, nor heard words from your lips. I do not know your sounds of laughter, Or the softness of your sigh. I have not a clue as to who you are; Or the customs for which you live. I do know that you are kind and sweet, You are a thoughtful and caring soul. You think of others before yourself; ALL others, young and old. These things I know about you; Even though we have never met. I have learned this by coming home; Each day and finding you here. You are not here in body and soul, but as a lightend rectangle. You come to me every day as a message on my screen; A message that I can rely on to cheer me up and make my day. Through a keyboard we share our ups and downs; I have opened up my inner self to you, and you have to me as well. We have traded secrets and laughs, as well as sorrows and pain. I have never met you, but feel as if I have known you most of my life. To most this might sound silly, but I assure them, it is not. Even though we have never met, I feel a bond between us. A bond that should have taken years to build, yet was built in a month or two. A bond that lifelong friends should have, although most never do. A bond that I am glad to share with you... (Steven Lowdermilk, <http://web.singnet.com.sg/~chyeling/my%20friend%20and%20confidant.htm>)

This ethnographic account of life in a virtual community changed my view and understanding of interaction and socialisation in today's world. It brought me into contact with people from across the world whom I would never have had the opportunity to have met otherwise. I made friends whom I have not yet met and whom I might never have the opportunity to meet. I didn't make friends with all the people I came across but it made me more tolerant and courteous towards people with

different lives and viewpoints than my own. The community I joined provided me with support and advice that I couldn't always find off-line. It enriched my life but also made me aware of the dangers and concerns that people have concerning virtual communities on the Internet. What follows are the main conclusions that I have reached through this ethnographic account and research.

## **6.2. Conclusion**

### **6.2.1 Medium "By the People For the People"**

Chapter 5 showed that even though the Internet is a medium "for the people by the people" someone still needs to pay the bills. Even though sites such as Amazon City.com are commercial sites, community forming is still possible on these sites. The owner of a site gives the physical space or area for people to meet and discuss, but without people the site is nothing but a Ghost town. The commercial aspects of sites such as these are dependent upon the community, and the community is directly dependent upon the commercial success of the site as well. It is therefore clear that commerce and community on the Internet and specifically in virtual communities are not mutually exclusive but dependent on each other.

Virtual communities with mainly member-generated content need to consider the means of income generation much more carefully than does a purely commercial site. My research confirms Figallo's (1999) suggestion that banner advertisements are not the best means of revenue generation on a site where members are reading and responding and not just browsing and shopping. A further interesting phenomenon I encountered was that when members do click on the banner advertisements they do it mostly out of a sense of loyalty and commitment to the site. This reveals the sense of belonging and affinity that members acquire for the site of which they are active members. This happens because the members realise that money is needed for the site's existence. They do not view the site as a commercial site, but are aware of the cost for the upkeep of the site. The members feel guilty also because they invite too few other people to the site to make it commercially viable. Some of the members do invite other people through placing banner links on their own sites. In one case, one of the members has her own on-line Newsletter for her company in which, she suggested, she could market Amazon City. The question can be raised of whether the members do not invite their off-line friends to the site because the need for interaction

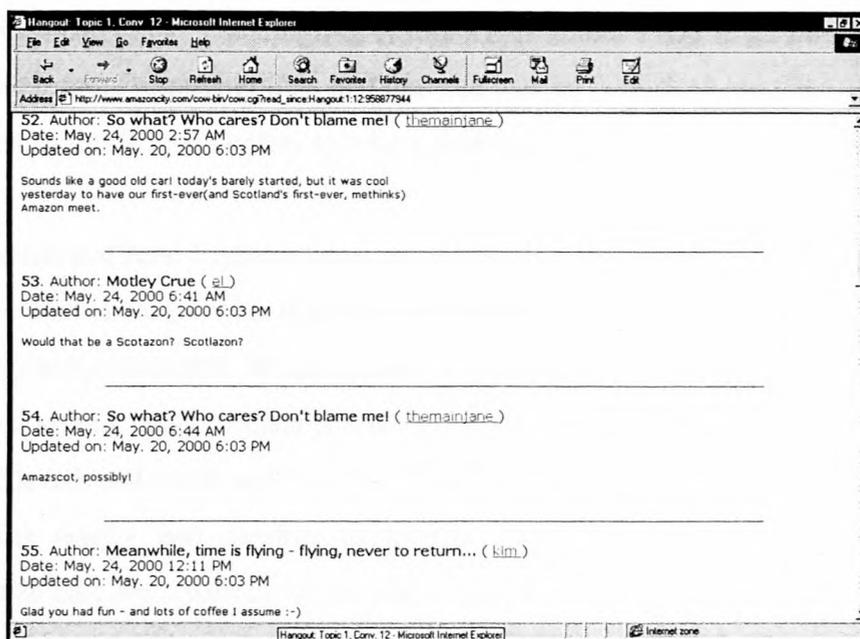
with them is already met. Or because they reveal things that they feel more comfortable sharing with faceless people.

### **6.2.2 How and Why I Finally Met Some Amazon City Members**

As written in Chapter 2 Howard Rheingold believes that an on-line community can only be a healthy and productive community if the members meet each other in off-line life as well. American members of Amazon City met each other at an Amazon get-together in Atlanta in 1998. This aptly became known as Atlantazon and the community as a whole still speaks about this meeting and regularly views the photographs. Some of the same and other members have also met each other when travelling through parts of America and Europe where other members live.

Researchers and observers alike are concerned about the anti-social and isolating characteristics of the Internet. So why would we want to meet other members? Do I want to meet other members of Amazon City, and did I? Yes, I did want to meet other members. I wanted to meet some of the people mainly to be able to put a face to the character that unfolds and develops on my screen. After being a member of the community for almost a year I met three members of Amazon City.com in one week!

The first two members I met were a mother and daughter that live in Scotland. They became members of Amazon City in September 1999. I met them in Glasgow and, as a result of Herspace being off-line for a few days and because I didn't have their e-mail addresses, I had to find another way to organise the meeting. I went to an Internet Cafe and sent an e-mail to one of the hosts in America and asked her to contact them via ICQ or e-mail if possible. The next day I received a phone call from Seabird saying that she and TheMainJane would be able to come through to Glasgow to meet me. And so happened the first ever Amascot! (figure 6.1) Even though the site merged with Herspace and Amazon City does not exist any more, we still see ourselves as Amazons. With time and as hopefully more new members join us, Amazon City will become part of the history and development of the site.



**Figure 6.1: Part of the Discussion in Hangout Conference Concerning my Meeting with the Scottish Members.**

The second meeting was with a woman from the United States who came to the United Kingdom for holiday. She already had friends that lived in Cambridge and therefore decided to come and visit them while in the country. I read in Amazon City in a conversation about travelling that she would be in Cambridge. I posted asking her whether she would like us to meet while she was here. She said yes and gave me her e-mail address to mail her. She sent me the address of the people she would be visiting in Cambridge and the telephone number. I phoned her and we organised to meet for a drink.

Even though these are all people from Amazon City, the meetings were completely different. This is a result of the fact that even though we are from the same community we don't know as much about everyone. This is not simply the result of the information not being available but can be the result of a few different reasons. I know much more about Seabird and her daughter Jane than I do about Spider. The reason for this is that because Jane and Seabird live in Scotland, I felt I had more in common with them. They also tend to frequent the same conferences that I do. Spider on the other hand is more verbal in conferences in which I don't participate. For example, Spider visits different conferences in which I don't contribute (even though I have it on my Hotlist). She does this for the conversations concerning Buffy, Xena and other science fiction shows. It is therefore clear that in virtual communities sub

communities can exist. The morning before I met Spider I had to go into Herspace to find out a bit more about her than just that she was an American member of Herspace. I also went to the Rogue Gallery to take a look at her picture.

With Seabird and Jane I did not have to do a search for more information about them before we met. I knew who they were, what they were like, and a lot about their personality and characters. When I spoke to Seabird on the phone before we met any apprehension and concern disappeared when she said she'll wear a T-shirt with the writing "dazed and confused" on the front. The comment on the T-shirt reflected exactly the wacky and carefree personality that I encountered at Amazon City. Seabird was also a contributor to my conversation in the Meta conference concerning my research, so she knew exactly what I was studying. Spider didn't know that I was studying virtual communities, because she did not participate in the Meta conference. As a result of our different lifestyles and participation in the conferences we have never had one-to-one responses to things that the other had written. After we met Spider did go and read my conversation and has since e-mailed me concerning our meeting and asked if she can contribute anything to my research.

So why still meet her? Even though we have not formed intimate relationships with each other at Amazon City, I think the reason we met is because we are part of the same community. This community that we belong too has developed certain shared cultural assumptions and we have played a part in this. We have gone through the same process of finding a site in which we feel comfortable. This includes choosing a pseudonym, having to learn how to use the software and to navigate ourselves around the site. We had to learn the language (new words, acronyms, emoticons, and so on) and explain geographically used words to people (being from Scotland Seabird and Jane had to do this a lot more than most of the other members). We had to learn the norms of behaviour and Etiquette of Amazon City through our mistakes and through lurking. We adopted the shared group attitudes towards new members, old members and the hosts through socialisation and interaction. We have also created for ourselves an identity that is an extension of and complementary to, our off-line identity.

Unfortunately when I met Spider we weren't alone, but we still discussed some of the people at Amazon City. We focused on the things at the site that we do have in

common. At both of the meetings the changes at Amazon City were discussed and our views shared. On the phone and while having coffee, Seabird explained to me why she joined Amazon City. She wanted to learn about and be involved with the Internet. The interactive part of the medium she found the most alluring. She joined chatrooms but found them horrible and then did a search for women's sites and came across AC. Seabird was very excited about finally meeting someone from AC, and therefore being able to put a life person behind my words that she reads on her screen.

The time of meeting on-line friends and acquaintances differs from situation to situation. I wouldn't have been interested in meeting a person from Amazon City a year ago when I first joined the site. I was too suspicious and concerned about my privacy and safety. But after months of being a part of the community and being accepted as a long-time member, I actively tried to meet some of the members. A result of the study that Parks and Floyd (1996) did on on-line relationships was that members who post more often and have been members of the community for a longer time are more likely to develop a personal relationship. This coincides with research about relationships done by Walthers (1992). An additional finding was also made that nearly two thirds of members that start on-line relationships take them further through additional means of communication.

Through the meetings with the three members from Amazon City I have seen that they do not significantly alter their identities. Their on-line lives are truly an extension and part of their off-line lives. On-line they discuss their daily lives and tribulations and add new dimensions to their existence. Their on-line lives are just as real as their off-line lives and therefore I have refrained throughout this thesis to use the term real life to refer to a persons off-line life.

It is important to remember that this is not the case for all people. Some people do become social recluses and addicted, but this is scarcely the fault of the medium. It is a misuse of the medium and a fault of the people involved. McCellan (Kitchin, 1998:90) feels that: "rather than providing a replacement for the crumbling public realm, virtual communities are actually contributing to its decline. They're another thing keeping people indoors and off the streets. Just as TV produces couch potatoes,

so on-line culture creates mouse potatoes, people who hide from real life and spend their whole life goofing off in cyberspace.”

But computer-mediated communication should be used to supplement face-to-face conversation and not to replace it. This ethnographic study revealed that in virtual communities where people do not create a false identity and where they use the on-line community to discuss their daily lives, problems, and joys with others it will not replace off-line life. This depends on the individual involved and not the medium. One or two of the members at Amazon City might be in danger of their on-line lives taking over their off-line lives. Virtual communities serve to supplement and enrich off-line life and the on-line friendships or acquaintances formed in a stable virtual community will move into the off-line realm. This can be done either by snail mail, telephone calls and even face-to-face meetings.

### **6.3. Recommendations for Further Study**

Clearly, this newest social milieu has far-reaching implications for all our lives. The Internet has been criticised in the past for not being a medium for all, and that inequality will develop between the Information Rich and the Information Poor. In other words between people who have access to the Internet and people who don't. In countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom this is becoming less and less of a problem as Internet access becomes more readily available to all. In the future the impact of the Internet and its virtual communities will be greater because of the greater numbers of people who have access to it.

Continuous further study of virtual communities will be necessary to shed some light on the development on some of the issues that have been raised and discussed in this thesis.

The Internet and its computer-mediated communication devices create new third places in which people can engage in conversation, discussion and banter. Whether these interactive areas on the Internet are going to replace or supplement third places in off-line life still remains to be seen. As mentioned, Cyberspace must be an extension of a person's off-line life and not a complete substitute, but only the future will be able to reveal what will happen.

The further study of the cultural assumptions of the Internet will reveal any further development or demise of these virtual communities. Linked to this is the study of on-line friendships and relationships and whether they enhance or replace off-line relationships.

Further study of the Internet and virtual communities is necessary in order to write the history of the Internet in the future. As seen in this thesis, since the beginning of ARPANet in the 1960s a lot has changed and developed, but still the Internet's main use is for communication. Will this still be the case in a few years time? Will Internet commerce become the main use of the Internet? Will all the big Internet commercial sites bloom and develop or will they die? Is Internet commerce mainly going to take place in sites with interactive devices? These and many other questions can only be answered through continuous study in the future.

Throughout this thesis I became more and more aware that the Internet is not a scary place where only Cybernerds and hackers confer. It is a social milieu that is constantly growing in size and the number of people who use it. Cyberspace, though not physical space, is still a space and part of our lives. Things that we do and people we interact with are an extension of our lives. Most of the things that people do in virtual communities are normal everyday things, looking for information, advice, support, and friendship. The balance between off-line and on-line lives in the future still remains to be seen.

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## Appendix A: List of Acronyms

AFAIK	as far as I know	LSHMBH	laughing so hard my belly hurts
AFK	away from keyboard	LTNS	long time no see
AKA	Also Known As	LTS	laughing to self
ASAP	as soon as possible	LYWAMH	love you with all my heart
BBL	be back later	LY	love ya
BBS	be back soon	NETUA	Nobody ever tells us anything
BEG	big evil grin	NTA	Non-Technical Acronym
BF	boy friend	OBTW	Oh, by the way
BRB	be right back	OIC	oh, I see
BTW	by the way	OK	abbreviation of oll korrekt (all correct)
BWL	bursting with laughter	OL	old lady(wife, girlfriend)
C&G	chuckle and grin	OM	old man(husband, boyfriend)
CID	crying in disgrace	OTOH	On The Other Hand
CNP	continue in next post	OTTOMH	off the top of my head
CSG	chuckle snicker grin	PDS	please don't shoot
CYA	see ya	PM	private message
CYAL	see ya later	ROTFL	Roll on the floor laughing
8R		ROFLMAO	...my a\$\$ off
DLTB	don't let the bed bugs bite	ROFLMAO	.....and peed my pants
BB		PIMP	
EG	evil grin	ROFLMAO	.....at you
EMSG	email message	AY	
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions	ROFLMAO	.....with tears in my eyes
FWIW	For What It's Worth	WTIME	
FYI	for your information	ROFLUTS	...unable to speak
GF	girl friend	RTF	Read The FAQ
GFN	gone for now	RTFM	Read The F***** Manual
GMBO	giggling my butt off	(The above is the original, it was later modified to:	Read The Fine Manual
GMTA	great minds think alike	RTSM	read the stupid manual
GTSY	glad to see you	SETE	smiling ear to ear
H&K	hug and kiss	SHID	slaps head in disgust
HAGN	have a good night	SNAFU	Situation Normal, All F***ed Up
HAG1	have a good one	SO	significant other
HHIS	hanging head in shame	SOHF	Sense Of Humour Failure
IC	I see	SPAM	Stupid Persons' Ad
IYKWI	If You Know What I	SWAK	sealed with a kiss
		SWL	screaming with laughter
		SYS	see you soon

M	Mean		
IGP	I gotta pee	TA	thanks again
IMO	in my opinion	TIA	Thanks In Advance
IMHO	in my humble opinion	TOY	thinking of you
IRL	in real life	TPTB	The Powers That Be
IWAL	I will always love you	TTFN	ta ta for now
Y			
IIRC	If I recall correctly	TTYL	talk to you later
JK	just kidding	TX	Thanx
JMO	just my opinion	WB	welcome back
JTLYK	just to let you know	WRT	With Respect To
KIT	keep in touch	WTF	What/Who The F***?
KMA	kiss my a\$\$	WTH	what/who the heck?
KMB	kiss my butt	WYSIWYG	What You See Is What You Get
KOTC	kiss on the cheek	YBS	you'll be sorry
KOTL	kiss on the lips	YG	young gentleman
L8R	Later	YL	young lady
L8RG8	later gator	YM	young man
R			
LHM	Lord help me	YMMV	Your Mileage May Vary
LHU	Lord help us	YWIA	You're welcome in advance
LMAO	laughing my a\$\$ off	*G*	giggle or grin
LMBO	laughing my butt off	*H*	hug
LMHO	laughing my head off	*K*	kiss
LOL	laughing out loud	*S*	Sob
LSHM	laughing so hard my belly	*W*	wink
BB	is bouncing		

(<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/smiley.htm>)

## Appendix B: List of Emoticons

:-	Ambivalent	P-)	User is getting fresh
o:-)	Angelic	.-)	User has one eye
>:-(	Angry	:~i	Semi-Smiley
~I	Asleep	:~]	Smiley blockhead
(:~[]:~)	band-aide	:~%	User has beard
:~{}	blowing a kiss	:~o	User singing national anthem
\~o	Bored	:~:	User is mutant
:~c	bummed out	:~t	User is cross
:~()	can't stop talking	:~(	Drama
:~*)	Clowning	:~)	Comedy
:~'	Crying	:~-	User is male
:~!~)	crying with joy	:~?	User is smoking a pipe
:~!~(	crying sadly	:~=)	Older user with moustache
:~9	delicious, yummy	:~\	Undecided user
:~>	Devilish	:~p	User is sticking his tongue out (at you!)
;~>	Devilish wink	:~)'	User tends to drool
:~~)	Drunk	:~	User has a cold
:~6	Exhausted, wiped out	:~)8	User is well dressed
\~/	Glass empty	:~#.	User's lips are sealed
^5	High five	:~o	User is shocked
((name))	Hug	:~*	User just ate a sour pickle
(()).**	Hugs and kisses	:~)-{8	User is a big girl
:~I	Indifferent	:~s	User after a BIZARRE comment
:~#	Lips are sealed	:~o	User is surprised
0-(	Scuba diver with a broken mask	:~{	User has a moustache
****	Popcorn	:~	No expression face, 'that comment doesn't phase me'
&&&&	Pretzels	-:~)	User sports a mohawk and admires Mr. T
@}>~'~,-	Rose	:~%	User has beard.
:~@	Screaming	:~%	User is a banker
:~O	Shocked, surprised	:~@	User face screaming
:~)	Smile	:~#	User with bushy moustache
=~)	Smile	:~7	User after a wry statement
=~o)	Smile	:~0	User is an orator
=~O)	Smile	:~6	User after eating something sour
:~o)	Smile	:~X	User is wearing a bow tie
:~O)	Smile	:~>	Hey hey
:~P	Sticking tongue out	:~*	User after eating something bitter
^	Thumbs up	:~`	User spitting out his chewing tobacco

:-&	tongue tied	:-(	Sad
:-\	Undecided	:-9	User licking he's lips
;) )	Wink	:-&	User which is tongue-tied
-(	Yawning	!-(	black eye
:-(	un-smiley	#-)	partied all night
#:-o	"Oh, nooooooo!"	:-(0)	yelling
\$-)	won the lottery	:-(=)	big teeth
:-) 8	Dolly Parton	:-)	smiley
%*:@:-(	hung over	:-) :-) :-)	loud guffaw
%*}	very drunk	:-))	double chin
%+{	lost a fight	:-)))	very overweight
%-(I)	laughing out loud	:-)--	98-pound weakling
%-	drunk with laughter	:-)X	wearing a bowtie
%-\	Hungover	:-)}	has goatee/beard
%\v	Picasso	:-,	"HmMMM."
&.(..	Crying	:------)	big liar
&:-)	curly hair	:-/	sceptical
'-)	Wink	:-7	smokes a pipe
( o ) ( o )	Hooters	:-9	smiley licking it's lips
(-)	needs a haircut	:-:	mutant
(:-	Australian	:-<	real sad smiley
(:-:-)	Siamese twins	:-=)	Adolph Hitler
(-_-)	secret smile	:->	happy
(00)	mooning you	:-?	smiley smoking a pipe
(8-)	wears glasses	:-@	extremely angry
(:)-)	likes to scuba dive	:-C	really bummed out
(:+) )	big nose	:-D	laughing (at you!)
(: #	smiley with braces	:-E	bucktoothed vampire
(:-\$	Ill	:-I	thinking
(:-&	Angry	:-O	Wow!
(:-(	Frowning	:-P	sticking out tongue
(:-)	Surprised	:-W	speak with forked tongue
(:-*	Kissing	:-X	A big wet kiss!
(:-D	blabber mouth	:-\	Popeye
(: \	VERY sad	:-]	biting sarcasm
:-[	Pouting	:-c	bummed out
(:<)	blabber mouth	:-e	disappointed smiley
(:>-<	thief: hands up!	:-l	yet another smiley
(:^(	broken nose	:-o	surprise
(@ @)	You're kidding	:-s	after a BIZARRE comment
)	Cheshire cat	:-=)	has two noses
*!#*!^*&:-	Schizophrenic	:->	midget smiley
)			
*:o)	Bozo the Clown	:->)	big nose
:-r	sticking tongue out	:-?)	philosopher
+-(:-)	Religious leader	:-@)	pig
:-{	Moustache	:-^)	broken nose
:-{ }	heavy lipstick	:-)	winking smiley
,-)	one eye or winking	:-<-(	dunce
:-)	has mohawk	:-<:-)	dumb questions

:-}	Drunk	<<<<(:-)	hat salesman
-=#:-)	Wizard	=):-)	Uncle Sam
->=:)X	Zippy the Pinhead	=:-)	smiley punk-rocker
:/)	not funny	=:-H	football player
::-)	wears glasses	>:)	a little devil
0-)	Cyclops	>:*)	Bozo the Clown
:<	Midget	>:-)	mad, annoyed
0-)	scuba diver	@:-)	wavy hair
0:-)	Angel	B-)	Batman
3:*>	Rudolph the reindeer	B:-)	sunglasses on head
3:-o	Cow	C:-)	large brain capacity
3:[	mean pet smiley	E:-)	ham radio operator
3:]	pet smiley	P-)	Colonel Klink
4:-)	George Washington	Q:-)	new graduate
5:-)	Elvis Presley	[:-)	wearing a Walkman
7:)	Ronald Reagan	d:-)	baseball player
7:-)	Fred Flintstone	{(:-)	wearing toupee
7:^]	Ronald Reagan	{:-)	hair parted in the middle
8 :-)	Wizard	:(	sad
8(:-)	Mousketeer	:)	midget smiley
8)	Frog	:*	kisses
8-#	Death	:*)	drunk
8-)	Sunglasses	:-#	punched in the mouth
8-)	wide-eyed	]:->	The Devil
8-*	just ate a hot pepper	:-\$	uncertainty
8-o	Mr. Bill	:-%	smiley banker
8:-)	glasses on forehead	:-&	tongue-tied
8:]	Gorilla	}:-)	wearing toupee in an updraft
8=:-)	Galloping Gourmet	:-[	particularly angry
:###)	Jimmy	o== or *==	flame on!!!
:\$)	Donald Trump	==	a doused candle (to end a flame)
:%)	an accountant	-(	always should wear safety glasses, especially in the laser
:!-)	crying with happiness	%-)	after staring at the terminal for 36 hours
.-]	User has one eye	B-	User is wearing cheap sunglasses
:-}	User wears lipstick	B-)	Horn-rims
:-)	Humour (or smiley)	8:]	Normal smiling face except that User is a gorilla
:-v	Talking head Smiley	8-#	Death
:-c	Bummed out Smiley	8-	Suspense
:-x	"my lips are sealed" Smiley	8	Infinity
:-@	User's beard has permanent wave *or* was drawn by Picasso	8-)	User wears glasses

:	Normal day smiley	8:-)	Glasses on forehead
:e	Disappointed Smiley	0-)	User wearing scuba mask
:<	Real sad Smiley	-P	Yuk
:I	Hmm	-)	User is asleep (boredom)
:-(	Boo hoo	-D	Ho ho
:-8(	Condescending stare	-)	Hee hee
:-#	User's lips are sealed.	-O	Birth
:-O	Uh oh	@:I	Turban
:-Q	Smoker	@-)	Person submitting is Cyclops
::-)	User wears glasses	:%)%	User has acne
:<	User attends an Ivy League school	:>)	User has a big nose
:>	Midget Smiley	:=)	User has two noses
'-)	accidentally shaved off one of his eyebrows this morning	:-) ... :-( ... :-) ... :-( ...	manic depressive
:-(-	punk rocker	[: ]	User is a robot
[:-)	User is listening to Walkman radio	:-F	bucktoothed vampire with one tooth missing
#-)	User partied all night	%-)	User is cross-eyed
%-^	User is Picasso	>:<	Mad
>-	Female	=:-)	Smiley punk-rocker
=:#}	Smiley punk with a moustache	< -)=	User is Chinese
=:-)	User is a hosehead	<:I	Dunce
*< :-)	User is Santa Claus	*< :-)	User is Santa Claus
*:o)	User is a Bozo	*:o)	User is a Bozo
*-(	Cyclops got poked in the eye	,-}	Wry and winking
+:-)	Smiley priest	+:-(-)	User is the pope
{(:-).	User is wearing toupee	{:-)	Smiley with its hair parted
)8-)	Scuba Smiley big-face	):-(-	UnSmiley big-face
(:-)	User likes to scuba dive	(:I	Egghead
(:-(-	UnSmiley frowning	:~)	User's face needs a nosejob, no explanation necessary
;-)	Winking Smiley	(:-)	Smiley big-face
(-)	User needing a haircut	(:-	User is left-handed
:u)	User with funny- looking left nose	:n)	User with funny-looking right nose
'-)	User only has a left eye, which is closed	;-\ '-)	Popeye gets his lights punched out

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