

Space, Place, Reality and Virtuality in Urban Internet Cafés

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Introduction: The Digital City

“The Digital City” proclaims the headline, and the photograph below depicts a digitized image of a street, with shadowy, pixellated figures placed along it. The colours are neon blue, green. It looks very far from the way a real city does. However, the image is a telling one: it speaks to a line of rhetoric that for some time has placed digital or virtual space in opposition to real urban space. In this paper, I attempt to connect the tropes of “virtual space” and “urban space” by describing one context in which they are intimately connected in a specific practiced place – at an urban internet café. Looking closely at this particular place reveals that far from opposing or effacing one another as concepts, urban space and virtual space are deeply relational – especially when they come together at a certain place and time. This paper examines the way that several aspects of urban spaces – cultural spaces, social spaces, and physical spaces – are related to the virtual spaces accessed at internet cafés. Internet cafés, those “places” that Lefebvre argues are “practiced” (1991) – are created in their specificity through the efforts and practices of those who use them. The practices (and there are multiple practices producing multiple and simultaneous interpretations) of an internet café illuminate the many overlaps

and relationalities between several types of urban space and several types of virtual space as well.

Urban spaces, places, and technologies

Cities have always been the loci of overlaps between new social formations, new technologies, and new kinds of geography. Indeed, Sassen and Marvin both comment on the ways that new technologies are built into existing city infrastructure (Sassen 2002, Marvin 1988). The carriage route, the highway, the transport hub, the network node – cities configure their spaces and places with relationship to existing and emerging technologies. However, in the past ten years concern has arisen about the implications of the internet – with its potential for networked communication across space and time and for the development of “virtual spaces” – on existing configurations of urban space and place. A line of scholarly rhetoric has emerged that seems to characterize real urban spaces and virtual spaces as oppositional and perhaps unstable. Worrying questions begin to be posed: Are “virtual” networks a substitute for, or worse, a threat to, the real lived texture of city life? Or have cities, their places and spaces, and the technologies that link them together, developed new relationships that integrate local experience into the global ‘network’? While this is not the only line of rhetoric emerging in discussions of new urban configurations, it, like other ‘moral panics’ about new technologies (such as radio and television), drives the discourse of a certain period. By engaging with this

rhetoric, I believe we come to more fully understand the ways in which different kinds of urban spaces, and virtual and technological space relate in ordinary practice. The practice of ordinary activity is, as de Certeau reminds us, one of the ways that we carve out meaning from life (1984) and the use of internet technology has become increasingly “everyday” (at least for a privileged few). Examining its practice as a public, urban technology may help to illuminate different, more individually-focused ways of thinking about relationships between space, place, and technology.

Toronto’s local internet cafés are examples of local places where very specific relationships have developed between spatial practice, networked technology, and global culture. Internet cafés are simultaneously the local face of globalization and places where the global becomes local – where neighbours connect with each other and with friends and relatives ‘back home.’ They are part of the urban streetscape in cities from Seoul to Vancouver, but everywhere (and especially in Toronto), they demonstrate the unique ways that internet space, public space, and local place are worked out relationally. This paper challenges the notion that ‘virtual space’ and “city space” are opposed by examining in particular three “relational assemblies” integrating internet space and urban place and space. These three examples hint at the complexity of the internet’s relationship to physical space, social space and to placemaking. Firstly, the marking of an internet café as a diasporic public space demonstrates how the integration of ‘virtual’ space both reinforces and extends local diasporic communities; secondly, the development of complex and oppositional

perceptions of the use of space in an internet café suggests that the uses of ‘virtual’ space result in alterations of physical and social space; thirdly, the experience of ‘video game space’ overlaps with the experience of physical space. Overall, these more particular relationships between ‘virtual’ space and the physical and social space of internet cafés helps to articulate the very local, even personal way that networked technology becomes integrated into the places that city dwellers practice.

The View from Above: Cities and Networks

From an abstract perspective, the city – as a site of the consolidation and movement of capital, and the locus of transportation and exchange of goods and service – seems intuitively connected to communication networks. After all, cities have historically been the first to adopt new technological tools that facilitate the exchange of goods, people, and ideas, and to integrate those technologies into city space. But the relationship between “the city” and “technology” has been fraught, as generations of thinkers express concern about the increasing mediation of people’s relationships to one another. Simmel reflects on this in his first sociology of the city, remarking that the city, because of the separation of consumers from the production of goods “is supplied almost entirely by production for the market, that is, for entirely unknown purchasers who never personally enter the producer’s actual field of vision. Through this anonymity the interests of each party acquire an unmerciful matter-of-factness” (Simmel 1995). This concern over the ‘unmerciful’ impersonality of city spaces is extended in

later work by concern about the reconstitution of city space through its relationship to communication technology – the private space that television creates and the virtual “space” of the internet.

Oldenburg (1989) worries that that the introduction of television into the home has eroded the importance of the tavern and café as “third places” where news is exchanged and discussed. This internalization and technologisation of information exchange, he argues, removes the possibility for informal community connection in public space. Instead of creating neighbourhood places such as bars and cafés that provide a location for intimate connection and casual talk, suburbanites retreat into their living rooms to watch television. Arguably, not only has this resulted in the erosion of the value of public places, it has also reconfigured social space and place within the home. Meyrowitz (1985) argues that social relations and domestic space have already been altered by the presence of television, a position mirrored by Putnam with relation to social capital. Similarly, responding to the development of internet technology, Soja argues that cities are shifting and changing with relation to space, and that the spatial aspects of cities are shifting radically away from an experience of a city as a unified space and towards destabilized experiences of “postmetropolises” (2000). The newly minted technological discourses of “virtual space” and “hyperreality” as key to the articulation of this changing view of urbanity. Soja further identifies the internet and the discourses describing the “end of real places” that accompany it as one of the key indicators of a shift in thinking about cities (2000). He claims that the simulated spaces (both visual and social) found

online are one of many destabilizing influences that characterize the end of cities as metropolitan spaces. Virilio calls this a “crisis in the notion of physical dimension,” arguing that “the archaic tyranny of distance gives way to the “tyranny of real time” (1993 p. 7) This rhetoric suggest that physicality and spatiality are at risk of being effaced by the possibility of digital technology.

In opposition to the rhetoric that opposes real places and spaces with virtual ones are examinations of the way that access to virtual spaces through internet connections and networks can shape public spaces and places. Graham makes a convincing argument for a consideration of places, spaces, and technological artifacts as “relational assemblies” that take into account the power relationships that help to shape place and space (1998). His conception provides a powerful challenge to investigate the actual experience of this relationality between place and space. Sassen (2002) takes up the challenge by exploring the interrelationships of five global cities. She finds that instead of reducing the importance of cities, network interconnection increases their importance, in part because they allow for social connectivity in a central location. This argument suggests that cities are sites not just of connection to virtual networks but of important face-to-face connection between individuals. While Sassen’s work refers to high-level figures in international trade and commerce, the same solidification of “virtual” networked communication by “real” face-to-face social communication occurs for ordinary people in internet cafés. Light (1999) also tangles with discourses invoking the end of reality and the triumph of “virtual space” over city space, identifying parallels between concerns

over the decay of public city “space” (mostly as represented by specific elements of architecture and design) and the creation of “virtual space.” Light lobbies for a more reasoned understanding of virtual space, one that acknowledges the positive role networked communication can play in enhancing a sense of place. Yet, her work, published at the beginning of the internet’s public launch, fails to engage with the role of virtual space *in* place, nor on the overlap that internet cafés provide between “reality” and “virtuality.”

We must be wary of participating in rhetoric that associates the development of new technology with radical alterations of social and physical space – such thinking can become divisional and deterministic. By looking closely at the ways cultural, social, and physical spaces relate to the virtual space of the internet we can focus on the actual practice of the internet without being drawn into rhetorical fantasies. Drawing on Graham’s conception of the association of space, place, and technological artifacts (1996), I consider the internet at its everyday local level at the internet café, and in the process hope to encourage the consideration of everyday practice and space in discussions of new technologies. As my observations of internet cafés suggest, not only do internet cafés provide an excellent example of the physical space that internet or “virtual” space inhabits, they also act as an example of how internet access can contribute to the making of a place – like the “third places” that Oldenberg describes -- in a local neighbourhood.

In the Neighbourhood: *mediascapes* and Local Internet Experience in Space

On the level of local practice, virtual space and physical space often come together to form practiced places with their own social logic. The next part of this discussion focuses on the integration of internet technology into neighbourhood spaces around the city of Toronto. The reflections in this paper are taken partly from research conducted at Ryerson University's Broadband Research Group, with funding assistance from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Over a period of several months, the Research Group visited twenty internet cafés in the Greater Toronto area, to conduct observations. We paid for internet service, used the computers along with the other clients, and composed field notes that described the space and activities that took place within the internet café in a web-based form accessed at the café. The wide range of internet café spaces and the particular ways that they related to their local neighbourhoods focused this investigation. In addition, another set of observations, this time drawn from a two-week period of participant observation at one neighbourhood internet café, round out the raw material for this examination.

Taken together, these observations provide a sense of both the range and the particularity of internet café experiences in one Canadian city. Insights drawn from these observations highlight the relationships between the internet's 'virtual' spaces, and urban spaces, as played out through ordinary practice in an internet café's place or places. Below, I examine the relational assemblies of virtual space with three different types of urban space. Firstly, I consider how, as 'places' internet cafés have the potential to be interpreted diasporic social

spaces. Secondly, I describe in detail how the presence of the potential virtual spaces reconfigures the internet's physical spaces, and how those reconfigured spaces are practiced socially. Finally, I look at online video games played in internet cafés as specific examples of how social practice occurs simultaneously in physical and virtual space.

Diasporic Space

Like all communication technologies, the internet facilitates participation in globalized movements of media and technology, which Appadurai characterizes as *mediascapes* and *technoscapes* respectively (1996). This might suggest that internet cafés, as locations of access for the internet, are merely sites of placeless cosmopolitanism unconnected to a specific and unique place. After all, travelers, transients, and students are among the core users of internet cafés, which provide a place for connections to home and to distant family members. However, as Appadurai (1990) reminds us, at the same time these *scapes* provide the opportunity for diasporic communities to create tiny public spheres (what Lofland (1998) might call "parochial realms") inhabited by other members of the diaspora. Many of Toronto's internet cafés are located in immigrant neighbourhoods, and the process of 'localizing' the internet often means integrating it into a specific space, place, and context. Laegran and Stewart describe this integration as being a process of adapting "translocal images" into local practice when they observe it at several European internet cafés (Laegran and Stewart 2003). Similarly, Wakeford (2003) reveals how local culture, and consequently space for local cultural practice, is supported in two independent

London internet cafés. In Toronto, though, the kinds of culturally marked spaces produced at internet cafés vary. Some internet cafés construct “Korean” or “Chinese” spaces, but others are less clearly connected to an ethnic group but contain elements of diasporic experience all the same.

A Chinese Space, A Portuguese Space, a Korean Space?

The physical spaces of cities allow for the consolidation of diaspora: space is organized into culturally marked areas where the essential staples of a cultural heritage can be found: imported grocery staples for making food from home, books and films in languages other than English, and increasingly, internet cafés for making contact with faraway friends and family. At the internet cafés in immigrant neighbourhoods, the virtual space of networked computing is deliberately implicated into the act of place-making: as much as the physical space is marked as “Chinese” or “Korean” so too is the virtual space glimpsed on the computer screens, to varying degrees. The presence of internet technology in internet cafés allows them to become “diasporic public sphere” where media and communication technologies extend our capability of imagining the world, and make possible a re-thinking of diaspora as something neither small nor marginal (Appadurai 1996). Instead of remaining a “parochial realm” (Lofland 1998) bounded by a finite social network and making a claim on behalf of that network on the space, the internet café provides the potential, through the network connections it provides and sells, to tap into a larger scale of interaction and connection.

In Chinatown, a basement-level internet café draws visitors with its Chinese-only signs, and decor featuring posters for recently-released Chinese films. Young men fill the internet café, chatting and smoking while watching television programs in Chinese disseminated over the internet. Groups of youth gather around terminals to watch these programs, or to participate in ongoing instant messenger chats in Chinese. I am the only non-Chinese person in the room. Even the operating system, although it resembles a standard Windows operating system, is a “shell” coded in Chinese, and displaying icons labelled only with Chinese characters. Far from contributing to disconnection or placelessness, the presence of the internet technology at the café reinforces the sense of it being a Chinese place. The internet café is also an important local place: one woman calls a friend and says in English, “meet me tomorrow at the internet café.” The internet café, with its links to media produced in Chinese and for Chinese audiences, has, through practice, become a place for young people to connect with each other in the context of their Chinese-ness, as well as forming a central meeting point in the heart of the physical space of Chinatown itself.

At the internet café in Rua Azores (the Portuguese and Azorean neighbourhood), the diasporic space has been constructed differently. Instead of unilingual, non-English service and signage, information is provided in English and Portuguese. Youth of all backgrounds check e-mail and play games on some computers, while older Portuguese men play online dominoes. Rather than developing as a monolithic space where only one “diaspora” is present, this

internet café provides several ways of interpreting its space – for the younger Canadian youth it can become one kind of place, based on what aspects of the internet space they choose to visit, and for the older men, the internet café acts as another type of space: a warm (in midwinter) electronic version of the outdoor bar or plaza where men play dominoes and take time away from their families. By choosing to focus on a different use of the internet, the Portuguese men constructed a different kind technologically-mediated diasporic “third place.”

The Toronto Korean community’s translation of the Korean PC Bang into the Canadian internet café offers an example of a different type of engagement with diaspora, and with internet technology. In South Korea, the local version of the internet café, the PC Bang, is credited in part with giving that country the highest rate of usage of high-speed internet in the world (Brunel University International Technology Services Mission to South Korea 2002). PC Bangs feature super-high-speed internet connections and host incredibly popular game tournaments televised on national networks. Recently, they have attracted interest for their role in Korean youth culture, since Korean teenagers spend hours playing games, chatting online, and even flirting online and meeting offline at the café (Herz 2002). In Korean neighbourhoods in Toronto, the descendents of PC Bangs line the streets, advertising high-speed games and staying open 24 hours. Their advertisements are primarily in Korean, and many of their computers run internet café management software programs written in Korean. For the Korean diasporic community, internet cafés are an expected feature of city space – they are as visible in the streetscape of Toronto’s Korean

neighbourhoods as they must be in Seoul. However, two Korean internet café owners I spoke to felt it was necessary to redefine their businesses as being “neighbourhood” businesses rather than “Korean” businesses. They wanted internet cafés with high speed connections and new equipment to be interpreted as belonging to a local Toronto place, as opposed to being interpreted as necessarily “Korean” spaces.

This movement has resulted in the development of numerous ‘hybrid’ internet café spaces, most notably the internet café I call “I-Cafe” where I conducted my most detailed observations, and where the café’s social and physical space was often interpreted very differently by different groups of people using the café. This hybridity of interpretation of the kind of place the internet café might be, and how its spaces should be used, results in complex everyday negotiations that highlight the physical and social responses to the integration of ‘virtual’ space into city space. People who use internet cafés can define their social positions in two spaces – the real social space of the café and the “virtual” social space accessible through the internet.

Spatial negotiations: What kind of a place is an internet café?

Once inside an internet café, another level of spatial integration between the ‘virtual’ spaces accessible through the internet and the physical spaces of the café is evident. An internet café consists of a physical space (a room or rooms), a set of defined social spaces, and the ‘virtual’ space accessible through the internet. The physical artifacts of computer use (keyboards and screens) are an important and visible representation of the network’s ‘virtual’ space. They signal

the possibility for social interaction in two types of space: in the virtual as well as physical social space. Indeed, physical artifacts often act as a foil for in-person social interactions in an internet café by providing a common subject and object of conversation. The centrality of technology to an internet café marks it as a “*technospace*” according to Laegran – that is, a space which is defined by and given meaning by technology (Laegran 2002). The physical artifacts present in an internet café indicate to people who enter the café that most activities in the internet café center around use of or engagement with these technologies: either their network capabilities or their physical artifacts. However, different groups of people who use internet cafés permit different levels of engagement within the social space defined by the physical artifacts. At I-Café, I noticed that the physical space of the café was divided based on the type of activities people were conducting on the computers, and that this separation influenced the type of in-person interactions they had. In essence, people’s orientation towards ‘virtual’ space altered their orientation towards physical space and social space. I-Café’s users demonstrated a range of negotiations between the anonymous and social potential of the ‘real’ physical and social space of the café, and the anonymous and social ‘virtual’ space present on the computers.

The spatial negotiations begin at the level of physical space. I-Café’s physical space consists of a main room with two short ‘aisles’ of computers located close to the administration desk, where visitors check in and out, pay for service, do printing and faxing (see Image 3). Longer rows of terminals extend around two sides of the room. Behind this main room is a smaller alcove

containing eight computers, separated from the main area by a set of French doors. By design and by universal consent, adolescents playing games with their friends are the primary users of this room. Computers closer to this area also have some games installed, but those further away from the back alcove and closer to the front desk had no games installed, and instead offer access to graphic design and photo manipulation software. In the back corner of the café, near the alcove, are three so-called 'private' booths – webcam-equipped workstations separated from the main area by glass doors and from each other by windows. Like the rest of the café, these private booths provide only the illusion of anonymity, for anyone passing behind them can see exactly what is happening on the screen. Despite this, I saw more 'private' activities (such as webcam chats or surfing pornography) taking place in the booths than in the rest of the café. The distribution of physical space at I-Café constructs in advance the orientation of people physically located in the café towards the virtual space they will experience. As such, it also influences the kind of social space they will construct – either virtually or in person.

The different physical spaces of I-Café define different types of social spaces within which people have different relationships to the virtual space provided by the internet. In all of these social spaces, virtual space is represented by the images visible on computer screens, and in-person social interactions are often instigated through a reference to the images on the screen of another person. However, these references vary depending on which part of the café people were located in. In the front part of the café, people conducted

'work' activities like e-mail checking and graphic design. Particularly during the daytime, people in this part of the café behave as if they were carefully ignoring each other. This studied ignorance, which Goffman calls "civil inattention"(Goffman 1971) provides the illusion of anonymity and is key to maintaining individual distance in public social situations. When practicing civil inattention "one gives to another enough visual attention to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present, while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him [or her] so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design" (Goffman 1963 84). For example, one afternoon I witnessed a busy executive who was clearly entranced by the video game being played next to him, but who never interacted with the player, as the executive was sitting in a nominally "work" space of the café. Karp, Stone and Yoels write that "urbanites seek to *minimize involvement and to maximize social order*" (Karp, *et al.* 1991 89, emphasis in original). For people 'working' in the front space of I-Café, the maximization of social order results in the development of an anonymous social space within the internet café, mirrored by the instrumental activities (e-mailing, information-searching) occurring in virtual space.

A different kind of anonymous social space develops around the 'private' spaces at the back of I-Café. Despite the fact that the booths provide only the illusion of any physical privacy in public because of their glass windows and doors, the people who use them benefit from anonymity both socially and virtually. The "civil inattention" at work in the front café spaces is amplified here into a knowing ignorance of what is taking place on the screens within the

booths. According to Karp, Stone and Yoels, this is similar to the behaviour of adult video store owners and “no-tell motels” who protect the anonymity of the clients by ‘seeing nothing (1991)’ In an internet café there is another level of anonymity at work as well – the virtual level. Because internet café users are logged on to a public network, they leave no ‘cyber’ trace as they undertake their online activities. For those users in the ‘private’ booths who were looking at pornography, this anonymity in virtual space augmented that in social space, even if their physical privacy was largely illusory.

The back section of I-Café physically demarcates a very different kind of social space – one where friends play games together, send instant messages to each other while carrying on a conversation, and where it a glance at someone else’s screen is considered less inappropriate. Especially in the evening, the back section attracts young people, who arrive in groups or meet up with friends. To varying degrees, they treat the virtual space of the internet connection as an extension of their social interactions with their friends – I once saw two girls send messages to one another while continuing a conversation. Conversations and interactions fluidly moved between in-person and online media. The most startling overlaps of interaction occur between video game players, who seem to inhabit two kinds of physical space, and to interact socially in both of them simultaneously.

Video Game Space: Simultaneous real and virtual space experience

The negotiations that define physical and social spaces at internet cafés as “gaming” spaces are not the only ways that online video games – arguably the

clearest manifestations of 'virtual space' in everyday urban experience—facilitate an overlap between the city's physical and social spaces and their virtual spaces. For gamers, there are two overlapping cities – the city where friends meet in physical space, and the city of friends and teammates accessed online. Internet cafés act as the place to access both of these communities of friends, since teammates can meet in the internet café and then find other friends online. This continuing overlap between real and virtual space brings forward issues of mediation and distraction, along with the challenges of what Gergen calls “absent presence” (2002). Computer games, especially as played in internet cafés, are one of many examples of overlap between real and virtual elements that city dwellers experience in their everyday lives. Others include mobile telephone calls (Gant and Kiesler 2001), public television and video screens (McCarthy 1992), and movie theatres (Moore 2002). Of these, computer games are the most richly interactive and visual, in addition to being highly social. In fact, their interactivity and visuality creates a commanding virtual space from within a social space develops that is both physical and virtual – and at its most evident at urban internet cafés.

My observations at I-Café suggest that the real and virtual, especially for computer gamers playing in internet cafés, overlap. Friends play online games as teammates or opponents, locating themselves in both virtual and physical space. For the most part, rather than alienating these people's real physical presence or social relationships, the experiences in virtual space, whether text-based or graphical, seem to add another level to real experience. Certainly,

people play different roles in virtual space than in real space. None of the boys and men (and it was mostly boys and men) I saw playing computer games were likely real life spacecraft drivers or antiterrorist agents. But they spoke about and moved within the space of the internet café as if there were no difference between it and the actions taking place on the screen. This suggests to me that the boundaries between real and virtual space are not as firm as many might suggest, at least not during the time when people play both in virtual space and in physical and social spaces.

The interactive aspect of video games makes them an especially engaging example of the overlap between real social space and “virtual” space. Interactivity most often refers to the potential for computer media to facilitate interactions similar to interpersonal communication. Video games facilitate several different types of these simulated interactions. While some games, especially first-person shooter games like Counterstrike do not simulate *verbal* face-to-face interaction, interaction occurs between players on a team, both on the screen and as team members physically connect with each other. Kiousis defines an interactive system as one that allows users to “*perceive* their experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence” (Kiousis 2002 372). Kiousis’ notion of interactivity as a perception of a simulation rather than a simulation is key: whether or not the computer system *simulates* something that appears in “reality” is less important than whether the person using that system *perceives* it as such. Interactive video games therefore invoke perception on a variety of levels not limited to the

visual. In video games, when a player changes something in the environment, the responses that result not only stimulate visual, auditory, and other senses but also operate within the internal limits of space and time intrinsic to the game. By invoking a variety of senses as well as operating within its own “sensory and practico-perceptive space” and its own time, the networked video game extends perception far beyond the visual.

Internet cafés have emerged as a place to play networked computer games in groups, so that team members who play together on-line can spend time with each other face-to-face. The networked environment makes a video game happen in real time, and in the presence of other people. Teammates playing together in the same real space are in the unusual situation of being physically present with people to whom they are also telepresent, or present through the mediation of visual, networked technology (Steuer 1995). At I-Café, game players constantly make verbal reference to their positions in the game and to the actions they take in its virtual space. Although they are all in the same physical space, verbal reflections on telepresence seem to take precedence over discussion about what is happening “real” space. For these gamers, their friends were as present in the video game space as they were in the room. Consider the following exchange:

1: “whoah, we’re online”

2: “where are we getting shot at from? They got tanks behind; big problem. You got any ideas?”

1” “I’m right behind you”

2: “see this?”

2: “yeah, that’s where I’ll take it”

1: “look for me on the screen. I’m usually a blue dot all by itself”

2: “there’s one, there’s a sniper, a German sniper. Get down the trench.”

Both Heim and Hillis have criticized the value of telepresence, arguing on the one hand that it is too visual, leading to detachment (Heim 1993 128) and on the other that that telepresence is inadequate because it “collapses real-time manipulation of virtual images of physically distant material objects with the objects themselves” (Hillis 1999 180). I would counter these criticisms by arguing that the new element that telepresence provides to the experience is not visually created, nor is it based on the objects or images one encounters. What telepresence adds to perception is the perception of *other people* – in other words, the feeling of being present simultaneously in a convincing space with others. The video gamers that I watched at the internet café were not remarking to each other about what objects they encountered, they were remarking on their *relationship* to each other and to those objects. The experience of telepresence through networked video games thus extends perception of a created space by marking that space as one in which contact and communication is possible. The game is not just interactive; it acts as a concrete, if imaginary, space in which one can make contact with others.

Online gaming as placemaking

Online game players have rich social lives in both real space and virtual space – lives inextricably bound up in the experience of the internet café as a place for gaming. The computer gamers I observed at I-Café seemed to often be friends or romantic partners who arrived at the café together and played games with one another. They continued their social connection in virtual space by playing

together as teammates. These connections were possible not merely because of the high connection speed or well-developed visual displays on their computers – they were made possible by the way that gaming activity marked the internet café as a particular kind of place. At many of Toronto’s internet cafés (not just at I-Café), gamers gather at specific times during the week to socialize and to build their teams and ‘tribes’ – and of course to play against other teams and ‘tribes.’ Even though it is the most technologically sophisticated and visually immersive activity undertaken at internet cafés, gaming is likely the most dependent on the creation of a *place* for gaming. Despite the immersive virtual environments and aspects of telepresence, playing an online video game is still more fun when it occurs in a specific place. At I-Café, gaming takes full advantage of the social space of the café as well as the physical division of the gaming space from the other spaces of the café. For these reasons, it is an activity that depends largely on the sense of the internet café as place. The practice of online gaming allows socializing to take place in virtual and physical space simultaneously, and at the same time forms the space of the internet café into a place marked for gaming (and for social interactions). Especially at I-Café, where the space for gaming demarcates a place for gaming, the fluid interactions occurring in “virtual space” and in physical space have a firm orientation to a socially demarcated place. The seamlessly integrated real and virtual interactions of computer gamers suggests that the introduction of virtual space into real public space does not necessarily fundamentally destabilize the experience of reality, especially since the friendships and social connections of the video gamers are extended on to

the screen from the social space of the internet café, and take place where virtuality and physicality are expected (and even encouraged) to overlap. Like arcade games before them, online video games have a specific position in the social and spatial terrain of the city, contributing to the development of places for youth and fun. Their virtual elements are a new, but not necessarily a completely destabilizing influence.

Conclusions

City space, and the places carved out of it, are intrinsically linked together and to the technologies that are part of them. Internet cafés are only one example of the ways that virtual technologies influence social and physical space, and how their presence contributes to the making of a place. Because of their unique capabilities, such as the ability to facilitate communication across space and time, and the spatial displays that characterize online video games, internet and virtual technologies have perhaps a more significant role to play in the interrelationships between urban place and space. However, this role is not as destabilizing as some theorists may have assumed in the first blush of critical thinking about the internet. Instead, as a focus on the internet's particular practice demonstrates, this new kind of spatial technology is made ordinary in quiet yet significant ways. As our public relationships with networked technology evolve, yet more complicated spatial relations may well emerge. The "Digital City" need not necessarily exist solely in opposition to the physical, social city of cultural, social, and physical places and spaces.

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