

MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

The Urban Internet: Reality, Virtuality, and Urban Social Practice in Internet Cafés

Alison Powell

Dr. Catherine Middleton

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Joint Graduate Program in Communication & Culture
York University-Ryerson University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to begin the examination of the internet as one aspect of everyday life, particularly in an urban context, and to chart the various ways that internet technology facilitates in-person social interactions. Since the commercial launch of the first web browser in 1993, the internet has provoked streams of overwhelming rhetoric from sources ranging from politicians to business people to academics. For a long time, the underlying assumption of this rhetoric seemed to be “the internet will change everything.” Has it? In a way, this is a question of limited relevance, for in most part of the world, and in a significant portion of North America, the internet is not available or is not accessible to most people because of its cost. In fact, the OECD estimates that, even in 2001, only the richest ten to twenty per cent of inhabitants in OECD countries had access to the internet (and then, mainly those inhabitants in urban areas (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2002). However, to say that the “internet changes everything,” even for this fortunate ten per cent may also be the wrong way to think about this technology’s role in our everyday lives. I am thinking here about what the internet provides for the average (if fortunate) North American in terms of connectivity and content. Certainly, some aspects of daily communicative life may be different because of the internet. Some people send e-mail instead of calling on the telephone. Others may have friends and acquaintances whom they have never met in person, but with whom they can communicate over the internet. We transfer funds, pay bills, or buy products on electronic commerce sites. Travellers far from home can book flights, check their itineraries, or send electronic messages home. But, at the same time as they are useful and convenient, these activities in and of themselves are not much

different than similar activities that we perform without the internet. What has the internet changed?

In this project, I focus attention on the role the internet plays in everyday urban life. By doing so, this paper contributes to the debate about what, if anything, the internet has changed for the social lives of urban Canadians and for the ways Canadians might think about their interactions with internet technology. Have the technical capabilities of the internet (its facilitation of instant communication over long distances, its information-storing ability, its visual interface) introduced new practices into culture? New ways of thinking about our everyday culture? As well, how are our activities, and the system of capitalism in which we live, shaping the development of the internet itself? I approach this paper from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on a wide range of theory and thinking from communication studies, sociology, cultural studies, and science studies. This literature assists me in understanding the relationship between internet technologies and everyday culture, particularly our daily social interactions. I also draw significantly on the situationist thinking of sociologist Erving Goffman, whose focus on the situatedness of interaction and social meaning assist in an understanding of the way that internet technology becomes important for a range of specifically-situated interactions. As Carey points out, “Advances in our understanding of culture cannot be secured unless they are tied to a vivid sense of technology and social structure” (Carey 1989 p. 64). Conversely, advances in our understanding of technology must view it as an iteration of culture intimately connected to social structure. The range of theory upon which I draw in this project helps form and inform these connections. In particular, Goffman’s work is helpful because of its focus on the particularity of social interactions and their

relationships to cultural codes and to everyday objects. Therefore, we must consider not just the “effects” of a technology, but also the meanings that we attach to that technology as we shape it and as it becomes part of our culture. We must look also at the social and philosophical qualities of the *adoption* of new technology, and the way that people’s relationships with that technology influence their relationships with others in the social milieu, with the places and spaces they inhabit, and in short with culture in general. Nothing “changes everything.”

Steve Jones writes, in his 1999 guide to doing research on the Internet: “the internet has commanded the public imagination. What this says about us is more important than what it says about the internet” (Jones 1999, p.6). Like many communication technologies, including but not limited to the telephone, the radio, electricity, and the television (Cantril 1935, de la Sola Pool 1977, McCarthy 1992, Meyrowitz 1985, Sconce 2000) the internet has opened up debate and questioning about the relationship between technological change and social change, about the nature of culture and mediation, and about the ways that we live in communities. Part of the internet’s allure as a communication technology is its facilitation of “many-to-many” communication, and the ability for individuals to produce their own content and to connect with others in “online communities.” The reflections produced through examinations of these online worlds have caused researchers to speculate on the one hand that use of the internet would result in an erosion of local community, or would adversely effect the quality of life of internet users (Nie and Ebering 2000), and on the other hand that the internet would radically improve the possibility of creating community without proximity (Calhoun 1998). While these questions of the internet’s effects are important

ones, I argue that is important not merely to look at the effects of a technology once it has become fully integrated into daily life and social practice, but also to examine the process of that integration. Even as a technology or technological practice begins to become “ordinary” or “domesticated,” each person who uses it brings a different interpretation of how it should be used or what significance it might have. These various interpretations reveal things not only about the specific place and culture into which the technology is becoming integrated, but suggest future directions for the development of the technology or technological practice. This project provides interesting insights that not only draw on literature from many disciplines concerned with the intersection between technology and everyday life, but also contributes positively to a body of work in communications studies concerned with overlaps between technology and culture.

2. Research Questions

This paper examines how the practice of internet technology in an internet café becomes integrated into patterns of everyday life in an urban setting. In defining a concept of internet “practice,” I draw from de Certeau’s conception of “practice” as a way for consumers to actively and creatively integrate consumer products into their everyday lives. de Certeau argues that a concept of “practice” provides consumers with a certain amount of agency, for they have the ability to make meaning from the everyday activities they undertake (walking in the city, reading, watching television) (de Certeau 1984). The “practice” of the internet thus refers to the way that individuals make internet technology meaningful for their own lives – the specific ways they manipulate internet technology to make it serve their needs, as opposed to way that the internet might be commodified and sold. Considering such a “practice” requires sensitivity to the various

ways that different individuals make the technology meaningful. Using the concept of interpretive flexibility to characterize the continuing instability of public internet practice, and the concept of domestication of media technologies to describe the ways that technologies and practices are absorbed into everyday life, I explore the following question: how do internet cafés display the process of domestication or normalization of everyday internet practice in public, for different groups of users in different places?

This question begins from the assumption that the everyday practice of using the internet might well be different for different people in different places, and that these differences are key influences on the process of domestication. Furthermore, the presence in the urban milieu of internet cafés raises two related questions. Firstly, what implications does the internet café as a public site of contact with virtual spaces hold for real urban places and spaces? Secondly, how does the networked technology found in internet cafés mediate social interactions and re-illuminate questions of public and private space?

These questions take the examination of internet cafés from general to specific: from a consideration of the process of domestication and commodification of internet café practice, through musings on the intersections between reality and virtuality and finally to a discussion of how virtual elements in internet cafés help to cement real social interactions. The following three sections introduce literature and theory relevant to each of these deepening levels of analysis. A discussion of my methodology follows these sections, and precedes discussion in turn of each of the three embedded questions.

2.1 Research Question #1: Domestication of internet practice in public:

2.1.1 Domestication and Social Shaping of Technology

Technologies do not arrive in our lives fully formed, neither on the level of their technological nor their social parameters. Silverstone and Haddon (1996) adopt the sociology of Anthony Giddens to describe the forces at work in shaping technologies. They use his concepts of structure and agency to reflect upon the delicate push-pull dynamics at work in the creation and adoption of technology, particularly at the level of the everyday lives of the individuals who consume media and information technologies (and who make them not just material but symbolic objects) , a process that Silverstone calls “domestication.” Because of the dual nature of both structure and agency: “structures . . . are both objective and subjective . . . actions are both determined and free” (p. 58), people who use media and communication technologies are not passive consumers, but nor are they fully in control of the design of the technologies they use. Orlikowski notes, “technology is physically constructed by actors working in a given social context, and technology is socially constructed by actors through the different meanings they attach to it and the various features they emphasize and use . . . it is also the case that once developed and deployed, technology tends to become reified and institutionalized, losing its connection with the human agents that constructed it or gave it meaning” (Orlikowski 1992 p. 406) However, within the process of institutionalization and reification, there are still areas in which technology encounters daily practice. In these areas -- where technology starts to be part of daily practice but before it becomes ignored – social construction is still ongoing, and reveals important things about the technology and about the concerns of the “human agents” (the people who use it).

Silverstone and Haddon argue that the process of social construction of media and communication technologies is a process of domestication whereby the consumer, by virtue of the way she or he uses a technology, integrates that technology into her or his everyday life – traditionally, her or his home life. The process of this integration creates a symbolic meaning for the technological artifact, a meaning reflective of its place in domestic and everyday life.. Much of this symbolic meaning is created by the process of integrating a technology into existing patterns of life and the process through which those patterns change and adapt to the new technology. Domestication is also a process of commodification and of consumption. The process of commodification is, as I understand it here, a process of assigning economic value and usefulness to a good produced for mass consumption. For Silverstone and Haddon, this process is intrinsically bound up into the good's integration into the space of the home: "media technologies, at the point at which they become objects of mass consumption, have to be designed as domestic objects, mediating in their aesthetic the tension between the familiar and the strange, desire and unease, which all new technologies embody and stimulate" (p. 48). Thus, the radio, the television, and the personal computer have, through their commodification as consumer goods, gained places in domestic and working space where their symbolic aspects play important roles in the daily lives of their users. The internet is similarly domesticated, and has begun a similar process of becoming commodified.

As a technology constructed by human actors, the internet has already had a long history of change and eventual adoption into established patterns, and most recently as a commodified object. For example, although the internet was designed as a means to share and transfer large files, it soon developed into a means for members of university

and research communities to communicate with one another (Lievrouw 2002). This use soon grew into e-mail, the internet's "killer app" and the main reason that many internet users first purchased "internet access" – the commodified version of access to a network. Commodification of the internet as an information service reached a peak in the 1990's, as North Americans were entreated to join fellow travelers on the "Information Superhighway." Yet the practice of internet technology – the way it is used – has as much or more to do with the creation of a symbolic meaning for the internet as does the commodification of the technology itself. In fact, for internet technology, which acts as both a communication technology facilitating communication between individuals and a media technology that distributes mass media content depending on how each person uses it, understanding individual practice is essential to how it is interpreted symbolically and thus given meaning in ordinary life. Therefore, in considering internet cafés as places where people experience the internet as part of their everyday life (what Silverstone and Haddon would call domestication) I will consider how the internet is *practiced* in internet cafés. That is, how it is used, not just instrumentally but symbolically. For example, the internet can be used instrumentally to communicate with someone else, but it can also be used symbolically as a reference point for an in-person conversation. The public location of an internet café allows consideration of a variety of practices of internet technology, and of how those practices are made ordinary and everyday – one of the essential components of "domestication." Internet cafés are an interesting example of domestication, because they can be used in both "public" and "private" ways: they permit a range of behaviour similar to other locations in public, but they can also create space for individuals to engage privately with both the technology

they are using and the other people within the environment of the internet café.

Therefore, there are more possible interpretations of what the internet might be good for, and how individuals might use it, when we consider the internet as part of their daily patterns outside of the home. As I discuss below, the focus on individuals' relationships with commodified technology outside the home can enrich the study of domestication.

Despite the public location of internet cafés, the extent to which they are part of "ordinary life" makes them worthwhile candidates for study within the parameters of

domestication. Silverstone and Haddon's initial discussion of domestication focuses specifically on the household which, they argue, "provides a clearly identifiable case of a situated reality in which the norms of economic and social behaviour are defined, not by abstract principles, but by the particularities of private and personal values" (1996 p. 71).

While acknowledging that the household does indeed represent such a situated reality (particularly with relation to gender and family roles, as discussed by Meyrowitz (1983)),

I would like to argue that it is also important to consider the process of domestication away from the household, where economic and social behaviour are defined by the existing conventions of public consumption and interaction. For example, whereas in the household the internet might provide a point of contact to and thus represent leisure, media consumption, or communication, outside the home it also represents mobility, sociability and in some cases, connection to community. Thus, we can extend the range of symbolic interpretations of the internet by considering it as a domestic object in public space. Examining this wider range of interpretations provides a fuller picture of the practice of the internet and illuminates some of the ways in which this technology might continue to play a role in public social and interactional life. Of course, there are many

public locations in which networked computing can be found (automated teller machines depend on networked infrastructure, as do the computer systems at point-of-sale machines, gas stations, and traffic lights) but internet cafés represent a special case for the question of domestication. Because they are not home-based, and because the manner in which people pay for their access in internet cafés is different than the manner in which they pay for home access, internet cafés present a new way of looking at how internet technology is commodified and practiced. In internet cafés, people perform a wide variety of internet practices. What Silverstone and Haddon would define as the symbolic interpretations of public internet practice are undoubtedly still evolving, although a few key interpretations seem to be emerging: that the internet café is for game playing and socializing; that it is for working, and that it is a place for keeping in touch with distant friends and family. I will discuss these interpretations in detail below, noting that none is so far the dominant interpretation. The existence of these multiple interpretations suggests that the domestication of internet practices in public is still an unstable process, and one that that we can examine by using the theory of interpretive flexibility.

2.1.2 Interpretive Flexibility

The concept of interpretive flexibility, borrowed from the social shaping of technology school of science and technology studies, refers to the way that a single technological artifact can have different meanings for different groups of people or what Bijker (1995) calls different “relevant social groups.” Each of these relevant social groups may have a far different idea of what a technology is all about; and these different ideas contribute to the development and eventual social role of the technology. In Bijker’s discussion of the development of the safety bicycle, he discusses how the same

technology – the standard “ordinary” bicycle of the 1860’s – was considered by different “relevant social groups” to be two different artifacts. For women and older people, he argues, the ordinary was an UNSAFE bicycle, whereas for young adventurous men, the ordinary was a MACHO bicycle. This example serves to illustrate the role of “interpretive flexibility” in the development and stabilization of a new technology. Despite the criticism of Bijker’s bicycle example (by Clayton (2002) for example) the concept of interpretive flexibility remains a powerful means of articulating the way that multiple perceptions about the meaning of a technology can exist at the same time. These multiple perceptions may also lead to multiple uses of the same technology in different ways. Bijker claims that these multiple uses of technology and coexisting perceptions occur in a period of technological instability while an artifact is assuming a more stable form. In the case of communication technology, though, interpretive flexibility may continue even after the physical artifact has taken a stable form. For communication technologies (and in particular for the networked communication system of the internet) interpretive flexibility is more obvious in the uses and perceptions of software applications than it is in uses and perceptions of hardware, although new hardware devices such as portable internet devices continue to develop. What is inside the computer, and how it is made meaningful in everyday life; these are the aspects of interpretive flexibility relevant to people who use desktop networked computing at home or away.

Using the internet is not yet a stable technological practice. Aspects of the internet have become much more stable now that the web has become corporate space

(McChesney 2000), yet many parts of the “internet experience” vary among users.

Although the hype about the internet as an emancipatory technology has died down to a murmur, we may still be at the point of technological solidification that Franklin describes as “eliciting involvement” after which “a technology, together with its supporting infrastructure, becomes institutionalized, [and] users often become captive supporters” (Franklin 1990). That is, the internet may yet be a technology and a technological practice in flux – one that can be flexibly interpreted and practiced by different social groups.

As one of several different sites of internet practice, internet cafés demonstrate some of this interpretive flexibility. Depending on their location, clientele, and the time of day, they can be variously interpreted as places to “work,” “play,” “socialize,” or “pass through.” At some points in my observation of an internet café, different interpretations of what kind of use was appropriate came into direct conflict with one another. As a technological practice, internet access in public at internet cafés is still very much in transition. Bijker stresses the importance of studying technologies in their stage of flux. The internet, and especially the public practice of the internet currently represented by the internet café, continues to be in a state of flux, particularly on the level of ordinary practice. By looking closely at the elements of interpretive flexibility at work in an internet café, we can more clearly understand the process of domestication of this technological practice and its role in the urban milieu. The theory of interpretive flexibility, with its focus on the varying ways in which different groups view and engage with a technology, enriches discussions of domestication, since it acknowledges that there are multiple ways of making a technology “ordinary” – each one specific to one

group of users. By extending Silverstone and Haddon's concept of domestication into spaces outside the home, and by applying the theory of interpretive flexibility advanced by Bijker and Pinch to the many groups of people who frequent internet cafés, I identify the more subtle ways that the internet becomes everyday. By applying both the concept of domestication and the framework of interpretive flexibility, this paper fills gaps in the understanding of what the internet means for the individuals who use it, and particularly those who use it in the urban space of the internet café. The particular nature of urban public space focuses the interrogations of the second research question.

2.2 Research Question #2: Reality, Virtuality, and the City

2.2.1 The Internet in Public Space

My second research question touches on the relationship between the “virtual” technology of the internet, and “real” city space. To begin to consider this question, we must first consider what kinds of things the internet might represent in the context of its use in urban public space. The meanings that we attach to technologies change depending on where we encounter those technologies, and what kinds of practices are typical at those locations. Early social and cultural thinking about the internet stressed the way that the internet facilitated virtual interactions, with the implication that such interactions would render unimportant existing physical and geographical spaces and communities. Jones' (1999) musing on the nature of the internet as a democratic entity invites a consideration of this communication technology in the context of existing space and practices:

“The issue is whether or not the internet is, in fact, a technology of the home, the workplace, or of the street, whether private or public. In public, that burden of respectability, the need to act in particular ways and to conform to particular rules and roles, is lightened, and as it is lightened so are mobility and permeability, for

we are no longer structured and fixed with those rules and roles” (Jones 1999 p. 21).

While Jones is likely referring here to theories of online publicness and privacy, his remarks are also appropriate when considering the internet as a private or public practice. Presently, the internet is a technology of the home, work, and of the street, with different capabilities to reinforce as well as to destabilize existing relationships and social patterns within those contexts. However, it is not as if the internet’s “effects” fundamentally restructure society. As Marvin (1988) writes, “people often imagine that, like Michelangelo chipping away at the block of marble, new technologies will make the world more nearly what it was meant to be all along. Inevitably, both change and the contemplation of change are reciprocal events that expose old ideas to revision from contact with new ones” (p. 235). Therefore, the experience of being an urban dweller, with all its pressures and social possibilities, is newly experienced by daily contact with the internet in a public space. De Certeau offers a compelling framework for considering the importance of everyday actions for city dwellers, describing the city not as a concept but as a “set of practices” similar to the practices of other elements of everyday life (1984). This manner of thinking about urban life provides a framework for consideration of how networked communication technology fits into people’s everyday urban experience.

2.2.2 Internet Cafes in urban culture

Recent writing attempts to negotiate the intersection between distributed, non-centralized network technology (like the internet) and local urban place¹. These concerns that the new technology of the internet will undermine the sense of place and social

¹ By “place” I refer to the local, the specific, and the particular.

interactions possible in local communities, are mirrored historically by fears about the negative social implications of everything from changes in architecture to the introduction of other home media technologies such as the telephone and television. Oldenburg (1989) worries 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. These technologies, although they did alter the habits of city dwellers, also became part of the public spaces of the city. McCarthy (1992) explores the roles television can play in defining public spaces such as Laundromats and taverns. Telephone booths, and now mobile telephones, bring telephony (and also mobility) out on to the street. Of course, a city of mobile telephone talkers looks and sounds very different than a city without telephony, but the fact remains that these technologies, rather than remaining in the private spaces of the home, have instead become parts of street life in cities. However, mobile communications technologies are implicated in a discussion of the spatial fragmentation of cities, and the new ways that we experience urbanity. 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.” He identifies the discourses of “cyberspace” and “hyperreality” as key discourses implicated in the 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. However, there are alternate ways of examining the

relationship between cities and networked communication technology. Sassen (2002) for example, discusses the way that cities, because of their interconnectedness with other cities through telecommunications networks, are less connected to their immediate regions than they are to other “global cities” (p. 15). But instead of reducing the importance of cities, network interconnection increases their importance, in part because they allow for social connectivity in a central location. Sassen argues that an increasingly networked society depends on the increasing physical and social connectivity of elites in cities. 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 “cyberspace” 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 “cyberspace.” Cities, along with “reality,” are disappearing – graceful streetside architecture is being replaced with pedestrian walkways, shopping malls, and parking lots, and “reality” – standing in according to Light for “authenticity, community, public space and an idealized non-commercial realm” (1999 p. 122) – is being replaced with “hyperreality” experienced through the mediated space of the internet. Light lobbies for a more reasoned understanding of cyberspace, one that acknowledges the positive role networked communication can play in enhancing a sense of place. Yet Light, writing as the internet began commercial life,

could not comment on the role of cyberspace *in* place, nor on the overlap that internet cafés provide between “reality” and “virtuality.” Urban public culture has absorbed the internet in much the same way that it absorbed the telephone and television, those other technologies domesticated both at home and in public. Discourses of the end of urbanity represent only one way of thinking about the internet’s influence in urban life. Other discourses, such as those of “community” and mobility are also possible, and illuminate other aspects of the interrelationship between communication technology and urbanity.

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 a “parochial realm,” but more on this later) inhabited by other members of the diaspora. Indeed, this framework could assist in the study of internet cafés, since they are in many cases intimately connected to immigrant communities. As visits to over forty of Toronto’s internet cafés show, some Toronto internet cafés construct themselves as “Korean” or “Chinese” spaces. But other cafés construct themselves as “Portuguese” spaces and still others, as discussed above, are viewed in varying ways by their visitors, despite the efforts of their owners to construct them in certain ways. Overall, internet cafés

demonstrate the possibility of a very specific orientation towards place within the framework of a cosmopolitan location of internet access service. The flexibility of interpretation towards internet cafés as a technological practice means that, as part of globalized cities, they can be simultaneously community centers for neighbourhood communities, cosmopolitan sites of connection for travelers, and sites of access for video game players who meet friends and team-mates in the virtual space of their games. All of these interpretations suggest continuing links between the “virtual” ties promoted by networked internet connections and the complex attributes of urbanity.

Online games, one of the more popular uses of urban internet cafés are perhaps the clearest manifestation of an alternate virtual space similar to the one urban theorists fear will replace geographical, place-based realities and introduce elements of virtuality into everyday urban experiences. However, instead of replacing the real world of urban experiences, online games instead facilitate an overlap between the real city 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. As this example suggests, thoughts about the interplay between globalized cities and technologies must allow for the fact that in places like internet cafés, reality and virtuality are equally accessible, and equally important. Their overlap 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, but they are also highly sociable. While their richly immersive graphics and interactive qualities make them addictive departures from real life, the team-based nature of many computer games makes them social endeavors which define internet cafés as locations of youth subcultures – much like video arcades which acted as part of the urban “underground” for so long. Infused with influences from Asian youth culture, especially the PC Bangs of Korea, internet cafés provide computer gamers with a location of overlap between real and virtual spaces, but also a specific place in which to socialize with their peers. Indeed, social interactions are one of the qualities of internet cafés that are most influenced by their public location. The quality of social interaction in internet cafés and the range of behaviours exhibited by internet café visitors draw out questions about private and public space in the presence of remotely networked communications.

While some thoughts, like those of Soja and Light, characterize the relationship between the virtual “space” of the internet and the real “space” of cities as fraught, real places and virtual spaces need not be placed in opposition to each other. As Appadurai and Sassen suggest, the virtual networks of the internet can serve to connect diasporic communities of individuals, and can make cities into important loci for international connections. Yet none of the above thinkers has considered specific examples of the ways that virtual space might be integrated into real space. Once again, internet cafés are a unique and suggestive example of how the internet, in an urban context, does not detract from real city places by providing a virtual alternative, but instead reinforces real places and communities. As I discuss below, the way in which internet technology in

internet cafés facilitates in-person communication further illustrates how internet cafés integrate real and virtual space.

2.3 Research Question #3: Internet Cafés, Public Space, and Interaction

After reviewing in general the range of interpretations of how one might practice internet use in an internet café and focusing more specifically on the relationship between public internet and public life in cities, it is time to explore in much more detail the influence internet cafés have on notions of public and private space, and especially on social interactions. As Orlikowski writes, “technology is created and changed by human action, yet it is also used to accomplish social action” (Orlikowski 1992 p. 406) While some of the technical properties of the internet have already been shaped, and these properties commodified and consumed by people and institutions (see for example (Abbate 1999, Lievrouw 2002), the social properties of internet communication continue to become integrated into the everyday patterns of North Americans². Interesting work discusses many aspects of this integration, particularly the relationship between internet use and offline social life. Most current research suggests that, contrary to fears about social isolation as a result of internet use, as communicated most poignantly by Nie and Ebering (Nie and Ebering 2000), online interactions have not transcended real-life social interaction, but rather added to it (Kazmer 2001, Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2001). Many projects have investigated the ways that online and offline social spaces intersect (Balka and Peterson 2002, Haddon 2000, Katz and Rice 2002, Laegran 2002, Nie 2001, Silverstone and Haddon 1996, Wellman 2001, Bakardjieva and Smith 2001) but to date

² Not all of the technical properties of the internet have been shaped. For example, the technical development of high-speed internet is ongoing, and debates continue about whether computer networks should be symmetrical or asymmetrical, considering that computer users act not just as content consumers but as content producers (Middleton forthcoming).

only a few projects have considered the role of internet technology as part of a social system outside of the home, and of those, none have conceived of public use in terms of domestication. Studies of use in public include Balka and Peterson's look at how internet use in libraries impacts notions of identity (2002), Wakeford's (1999) study of the production of gender in an internet café looks at the café as a *translation landscape* where internet technology is translated and made meaningful for the consumer and, Laegran's (2002) description of internet cafés as being *technospaces* similar to gas stations or bicycle shops. Lee (1999) discovers that people using internet cafés are not necessarily only those without computer access at home, but also people who were traveling, or who were living in the area for short periods. Holligan (2003) uses interpretation of photographs to determine how people respond to different computing landscapes. Murtagh attempts to understand how the rules of place and the "character of communication" shape mobile phone use on train cars and the way that people negotiate their private lives within this public space (Murtagh 2002).

Most recently, Laegran and Smith (2003) have noted how different sets of players create new spaces within the internet experience, creating local identities within the translocal images of "nerdy, trendy, and healthy" possibilities for the use of the internet. This study alludes to the importance of place, as does Wakeford's (2003) examination of how London internet cafés integrate aspects of global and local into internet culture through their design and the services they provide to their visitors. As well, Liff and Steward (Liff and Steward 2003) argue that internet cafés resemble heterotopias, where different users consider there to be different boundary spaces. These studies reinforce some important assumptions that I have also made about internet cafés: that they are not

stable locations of internet practices, that their public location and network technology makes them a point of contact between local community (place) and global cosmopolitanism (space), as well as between online or virtual experiences and in-person or real ones. These very instabilities as well as important local differences make internet cafés important locations of study.

2.3.1 Public space, interaction, and new technological practices

In internet cafés, a constant tension and interplay emerges in which social practices taking place in on and through the network provided by the computers at the café mirror as well as influence the existing social practices typical of “public space.” The ways in which this tension and interplay work themselves out show how the creation of symbolic meaning – the articulation in culture of the meanings of media and communication technologies – occurs in public. It bears mentioning that internet cafés are not truly public spaces as are parks (Lofland 1973), public plazas (Whyte 1988), or city streets (Jacobs 1961). They are privately-owned, charge fees for service, and can be selective about whom they admit. Lofland (1998) might refer to them as being partly “locations” – bounded locations of a “parochial realm” which are “characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbours who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within ‘communities’” (p. 10) – and partly “locales”, bounded parts of the public realm where the person one is most likely to interact with is a stranger. Observations in an internet café suggest that both of these characterizations are true of internet cafes to a certain measure. Depending on how they have interpreted the practice of the internet in the café, visitors come to work privately in a “third place” away from home or office (Oldenburg 1989), to socialize with their

friends and other people in the “parochial realm” or to leave themselves open to contact with strangers in online or offline public space. In other words, the different groups of people who use internet cafés are trying to create different “places” from the space of the café. This conscious effort, which, according to de Certeau, is what is required to transform a space into a place, is in this case working to create several different places from the same space. The struggle to make a place in a location where access to virtual space is the main event is the subject of much musing, which I discuss below.

As part of public space, internet cafés provide their visitors with the ability to meet and perhaps engage with strangers – that is, to be publicly sociable. Sociability is, according to many thinkers, a spatial practice. Simmel, one of the first sociologists to think about urban life, identifies spatial proximity as the first step towards interaction of any type (1995). Whyte encourages the development of public squares and plazas as a way to facilitate gossip, chatter, and everyday interaction (1988), and Jacobs outlines the many things that one can learn from observing and walking on city streets, including which people to speak with (1961). An internet café provides a similarly open environment partly by virtue of its public location (although this is tempered slightly by the presence of its private aspects) and partly by virtue of its link with the networked possibilities of the internet. However, sociability need not involve interaction. Public space provides not just the ability to interact with other people but also the ability to be invisible and unnoticed. Some refer to this position as being “private-in-public,” but I would argue that it is in fact part of public life.

By virtue of being in a privatized public space, people in internet cafés have the option of inhabiting their space in a variety of ways ranging from invisible anonymity

(which is part of the public realm) to interactions only with friends, to interactions with complete strangers. This is a much wider vision of the way networked communication might operate in public than Lee advances in her study of an internet café, where she argues that internet café users are being “private in public.” Their behavior confounds her expectations of “public” behaviour, which she had expected to include spontaneous social interactions. Yet, public life and interactions in public are not uniformly similar. Like many locales and locations in large cities (including coffee shops, local pubs, and newsstands), internet cafés provide opportunities to participate in the public realm in many different ways, including anonymous “invisibility” as well as spontaneous interaction with strangers. Internet technology acts as a mediator both through its technical capabilities as well as through its physical artifacts. For many who visit internet cafés, the non-physical elements of internet technology -- that is, the network connections -- facilitate their social interactions with distant friends. However, physical artifacts of computer use (keyboards and screens) are also an important and visible representation of the network. These artifacts often act as a foil for offline social interactions in an internet café by providing a common subject and object of conversation.

2.3.2 *Technospace*

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). In addition to internet cafés, other *technospaces* include gas stations, computer shops, or sports stores. As Laegran points out of the internet cafés she studied, “you cannot separate the technology from the social and the spatial” (Laegran

2002) . This linkage is immediately evident in an internet café, where a visitor encounters the physical artifacts of desktop computing – computers, monitors, chairs, webcams, headsets and often posters or decoration depicting computer game characters – often before one encounters another person. These physical artifacts 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. The marking of an internet café as a *technospace* has important implications for the ways that social interactions unfold online and offline in an internet café. Of course, the network connection provided by an internet café facilitates online interactions. But the physical artifacts of internet technology act as a foil for offline interactions as well. In this way, public practice of internet technology both extends and reinforces the existing frameworks for social interaction.

One of the ways that a *technospace* facilitates social interaction is by providing individuals with an increased proximity to one another, an element that Goffman (1963) claims is essential to allowing interactions in public to develop. Goffman's situationism offers clues as to how even the most mundane interactions in public serve both to support the social order and to capitalize on situations in which people leave themselves open to social interactions (Goffman 1963). The situations in which unacquainted individuals are most open to engagements often take place, Goffman argues, in small spaces where it is impossible to ignore each other, or in places where some element can be held in common between strangers. These situations involve some kind of social 'proximity' that the computer terminals and screens that people engage with at internet cafés can provide. Network technology in internet cafés facilitates both anonymous and social responses to

public space. In essence, the capabilities and artifacts of networked technology in internet cafés allow people to negotiate different aspects of public space, from a relative invisibility encouraged by the purported privacy of sitting at an individual screen, to spontaneous interactions with others in the internet café, facilitated by images seen on that very same screen.

While previous studies of internet cafés have yielded important concepts, such as the theory of *technospace*, these projects have not necessarily considered presence of all types of acceptable public behaviour at internet cafés. Rather than being limited to one type of “publicness” social behaviour and particularly social interactions in internet cafés reflects a range of possible acceptable behaviours in public, many of them made easier by the proximity created by the technology in the internet café. These interactions can take place in person or in the virtual space provided by the internet connection. As an example of the most particular way that internet technology becomes integrated into everyday life, the social interactions I observed in an internet café support the notion that the internet, and the connections it provides within its virtual space, is not a technology that undermines or usurps urban social reality, but one that reinforces existing social practices even as it is becoming integrated into certain aspects of urban life.

3 Methodologies

This is a story about ordinary life. More specifically, it is a story of the very particular ways that a certain type of technological practice – the use of a public internet café – becomes part of ordinary life in different locations across one Canadian city. This requires attention to the specific nature of internet cafés, and to the ways that people use and understand them in the Toronto context. Since people often consider

communication technologies to be “personal” (Gant and Kiesler 2001), it is important to follow methods that are sensitive to a range of interpretations. The methods used in this story are qualitative and ethnographic. In particular, the methodology focuses on participant observation as a way of developing ideas about the role of internet cafés in Toronto. These ideas are interesting and illuminating, and even applicable to wider contexts, but they are fundamentally the ideas of a particular city at a particular time in its adoption of a specific technological practice. Ethnographic research aims at capturing the details of a particular aspect of social life, while keeping in mind the researcher’s subjective role in her research setting (Punch 1994). As a result, this paper presents some very interesting ideas, some of which demand further study, perhaps using other research methods. Nonetheless, we begin here by considering important questions about technology and ordinary life, first by looking at many internet cafés across Toronto, and then considering just one.

Material used in this paper was collected in part under a Ryerson University research project entitled “Exploring Consumer Demand for Broadband Internet” supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council³. Generally speaking, this paper discusses observations of internet cafés made at two levels: the general and the specific. The Ryerson University research project conducted general observations and short structured interviews at a large number of internet cafés, producing results that illustrate not only the typical characteristics common to all internet cafés, but the significant local variations between individual cafés. In contrast to this wide-ranging but general set of observations, I also use two other sources of material: firstly, two interviews with internet café proprietors conducted as part of the Ryerson research

³ Ethics approval for both levels of research is attached in Appendix 1.

project, and secondly focused observations and informal, unstructured interviews at a neighbourhood internet café that I conducted independently of the research project over a two-week period. These more specific observations reveal the day-to-day patterns of internet café observation, as well as the many different types of use that occur in contrast to the uses imagined by the internet café owners. This double-layered approach of combining general and specific observations balances the results and allows for nuanced interpretations.

3.1 Methodology: Ryerson University Research Project

The research project team visited over forty internet cafés in the greater Toronto area, as well as ten internet cafés in Montreal. In order to collect general information about each internet café's physical space, applications, uses, and typical clientele, the team utilized an observational approach. One researcher visited each internet café, and paid for the services provided. The researcher logged on as a café client at one of the internet café's computers, and completed a standardized observation form (Appendix 1), noting details about the internet café's physical space, equipment, programs, users, and staff. The researchers also conducted a brief structured interview with the employee on duty at the internet café. The visits lasted between a half hour and an hour, and consisted of observations of the café's space, clientele, equipment, and social dynamics. Each researcher took care to observe rather than to disturb the café location, but also to gain as much information as possible about the café's daily patterns, hardware, and business scope from the structured interviews. The data collected during these observations

covers a wide range: some is empirical (such as the number of games installed on a computer system) and some interpretive (such as questions on the quality of the equipment and the changes in dynamics over the course of the visit). Having such a range of data types taken from so many sites means that it is relatively easy to draw conclusions on a variety of levels about not only the similarities between but the variety of internet cafés. In addition, this general information gives clues to the ways that these cafés, as particular places, are interpreted by their owners and managers, as well as (to a certain extent) by the people using them. In sum, this data is highly evocative and taken as a whole, suggests a great range and diversity within Toronto area internet cafés. In order to address issues of interpretive flexibility, I consider a few select questions from this set of data. I examine the descriptions of outdoor advertisements at each location, the programs installed on the computer systems, and the general description of each café's physical space. The responses to these questions highlight a set of interpretations that point to the processes of domestication occurring at different places in the city.

3.2 Methodology: Independent Participant Observation

The observations collected from my independent participant observation focus more specifically on the types of uses and social interactions observable in a neighbourhood internet café. When I began these observations I was interested overall in the "experience" of an internet café: what people did there, how spaces were defined, how social interactions were conducted. I conducted observations over a 2 week period, between the hours of 9:30 am and 2 am at a neighbourhood internet café I call I-Café. Each period of observation lasted between 2 and 4 hours. Although the business is open

24 hours per day, I learned from employees that most patrons leave between two and 4 am so I decided to cease observations at 2 am. I chose this particular internet café for a few reasons: most importantly, the staff was open to the idea of a researcher observing their clients. I-Café is also located near a university, some high-end hotels, and a major pedestrian neighbourhood with a growing number of Korean-owned and -oriented businesses. Because of this, it attracts a wide range of clients, from students at the local high school, to tourists, university students, and members of the local community. This made it a good location to observe social interactions between many different types of people. Nearly every day for two weeks, I visited I-Café, logged on as a member, opened a word processing program and while behaving quite similarly to the other clients, made observations of the activities taking place in I-Cafe. At the beginning of the observation period, I explained to I-Café's owners that I would be using their services and observing their patrons, but without ever identifying the individual patrons or the name of the business. My observations of the other internet café visitors consisted of occasionally glancing at their screens and noting generally what type of program was open: i.e. e-mail, game, chat program and listening to any conversations loud enough to be easily overheard. I also walked around the room to stretch my legs, or visited the bathroom at the back and the snack bar at the front. At various times of the day I sat in various positions around the café. Although I tried as hard as possible to remain inconspicuous during my observations, the very fact that I glanced at other people's screens was perceived by the other people in the café as indicative of either an intrusion or an invitation to conversation.

My method of participant observation, which in my case included unstructured interviews with internet café owners and users, allowed me to observe offline social interactions, and to get a sense of the kinds of online social interactions that were taking place, based on the kinds of programs I saw open on other people's screens. Often, what is visible on-screen acts a foil for offline interactions. Therefore, the observational method assisted me in determining how the public nature of the internet café influenced the types of interactions both on- and off-line. These observations allow me to speculate on the relationship between visitors' use of the internet and their interactions with other visitors. However, there are some limitations to this type of methodology. It was difficult to discern the motivation of any of the other internet café users for visiting this location, nor could I understand their relationship to the other people in the internet café. Neither could my method determine the details of people's online social interactions such as who they were communicating with and what kind of relationship they conducted online. For this project, though, participant observation allowed me to observe the interaction between technology and social interactions, meaning that the limitations of the methodology are not severe. Further qualitative research might well be able to ask more refined questions about the nature of internet café usage, particularly research that could pair data from online ethnography with offline studies such as this one.

4 Findings and Discussion

As the process of domestication unfolds in many different internet café sites, and as internet café visitors display flexible interpretations of the social significance of internet café use, questions not about the relationship between communication

technologies and urban life but also about the role of public and private space arise. The continuing stabilization of the technological and social practices of public internet use illuminates existing aspects of urban life, particularly social interactions. The following sections move from general to specific, drawing on the case of internet cafés in Toronto. In doing so they both respond to each of the three research questions posed above, and provide insight into the use of internet cafés in one local context.

4.1 Research Question #1

4.1.1 Domestication and Commodification

My discussion of findings begins with the most general set of findings: those that relate to the process through which the internet becomes an ordinary part of everyday urban life. Conceptualizing the role of everyday life in the city, especially as it relates to use of technology, is not a simple matter. As de Certeau makes clear, the “creation of a *universal* and anonymous *subject* which is the city itself” presents a unifying concept of “urbanity” that he argues we can rethink only by attending to the practices of the everyday. This insight is a good way to frame the discussion of the many individual ways internet cafés are becoming part of an urban everyday. I will first consider the varying ways that internet cafés owners and managers present what they think are the important aspects of internet cafés through the outdoor advertising and the design of the interior internet café space. These examples show how owners and managers try to package and sell public internet access – in other words, how it is commodified. The wide range of services presented on the advertisements suggests that even owners and managers of internet cafés (whom Bijker might consider one relevant social group)

interpret the uses of their businesses in a variety of ways. In addition, the behaviour of the people who use internet cafés display a similar variety of interpretations of what function an internet café fulfils.

4.1.1 a. Signs

Outdoor advertising marks the presence of a business on a street. It gives passersby a quick sense of what is inside the building, and often tries to lure them in with the promise of special deals, innovative products or other consumer-snatching messages. But outdoor signs also give an insight as to what the people within the stores think they are selling. Signs for internet cafés across Toronto focus on six different aspects of their product, which I could widely define as being access to the internet. Some advertise computer games, others use the phrase “internet café” to describe their product, and still others focus on the services offered, either internet –related or otherwise. On some signs, the business name or slogan takes primary place, while others quote hourly access prices. Outdoor advertising also indicates the expected customer group for its services by virtue of the language in which it is written. In Toronto, signs advertising internet cafés are written in English, in Chinese, in Portuguese, and in Korean. While a few internet cafés feature bilingual signs, for example English and Portuguese, English and Chinese, and English and Korean, for the most part non-English signage are unilingual, indicating that the café caters to members of a specific linguistic or cultural group.

The outdoor signs and programs installed seem to indicate some very different ways of imagining the internet as a commodity. For example, one sign at a downtown internet café close to a university reads: “High speed internet games, sushi bibimbap,

noodles, coffee". The signs give internet games the same importance as popular street food and coffee. This seems to suggest an association of internet access with convenience, or perhaps with "junk food" and other commodities of leisure. In contrast, this sign focuses much more on technology and business process: "Chat, e-mail, Fax, MS Office, Scanning, Software." This one: "Cigarettes, CD copy, Print, fax, scan, Internet lounge, 24 hours" seems to be advertising a print shop that sells cigarettes, except for the inclusion of "internet lounge 24 hours." Can one buy cigarettes during all 24 hours? This small selection of signs suggests that even internet café owners and managers interpret the internet to be commodified in a variety of ways: as an aspect of leisure, as a technology of work, or as one of many conveniences or services provided for urban dwellers on the move. However, an overview of all of the outdoor advertising suggests that perhaps this interpretive flexibility is coming to an end. Roughly forty percent of the 31 signs that the group observed mentioned games in some way. Of these, a few suggested that online games were a significant part of way that business interpreted its meaning. Consider this advertisement, for example: "game station, net, ultra high speed connection." The ultra-high-speed connection means that people can play very large-scale games with many participants without overloading the network. Of course, even businesses that identify games and gaming as important still add other interpretations to their signs: "Internet: Online game, game tournaments, copy/fax/print, ink jet refills." Outdoor advertisements at internet cafés thus suggest a continuing range of interpretations of how an internet café ought to be commodified, although the "internet café as place to play computer games" seems to be emerging as a dominant interpretation.

4.1.1 b Programs

If outdoor advertisements project the owners' and managers' interpretations of how to commodify internet access, then the programs installed on the computers at internet cafés are a result of a negotiation between owners' and visitors' interpretations of what the computers should be used for. Some owners have a very strict policy regarding installation of programs, especially programs downloaded from the internet, whereas others do not seem to pay attention to what visitors installed on the machines. One internet café owner told me that he installs programs on the internet café's system for his clients, depending on their cost. A client at the same café described to me how he brings in software on CDs for the manager to install on "his" computer in the internet café. However, I suspect that such obviously accommodating behaviour on the part of internet café managers is the exception, rather than the rule. Judging from observations from a number of internet cafés, the majority of internet café owners tolerate the downloading and installation of some software (some of it illegal) and a minority exercise very strict control over the programs (and thus also over the range of uses possible for the internet café visitors). The most common programs installed on internet café computers are instant messaging programs (either MSN Messenger, which is often supplied with the computer, or Yahoo messenger, which is downloaded from the internet) and file sharing programs (the most popular by far being KazAa). These programs, which are not available except by download, were found on many computers at internet cafés. Less commonly, research team members have spotted illegal pirated software installed on internet café computers. Whether installed by owners or by visitors, the presence of illegal software suggests a possible connection between internet cafés and underground

or black market activities. I discuss below the internet café's historical connection to the video arcade, which has also implicated in underground activities. In any case, installation of downloaded and illegal software suggests some evidence of a negotiation between varying interpretations of how to use the computers in internet cafés – as out-of-box word-processing and gaming machines, or as evolving systems bearing the marks of the interests of various visitors – some less scrupulous than others.

Although most internet cafés have formed some kind of compromise between the use of their machines as repositories of visitors' favorite software and the needs of café owners to keep their equipment in good repair, some internet cafés have equipment that through its design or maintenance prevents visitors from accessing many computer programs or altering in any way the visual interface. Internet cafés with strict control over programs have several things in common: they tend to run operating system shells that limit the functioning of the computer to those with administrative access, and that sometimes show a menu or blank screen at startup, instead of the familiar "desktop" environment. Visitors to cafés with restrictive interfaces are consuming a type of computer access that is fundamentally different than what they would consume at another location – a commodity that even more than usually restricts the users' ability to interpret for themselves. Because of this these internet cafés seemed to have a quicker than usual level of turnaround – people seemed to visit these cafés to complete very specific tasks, or as a last resort. Nevertheless, the multiple ways in which internet café owners and managers not only determine how to commodify their service but also how to negotiate between their needs and their visitors' software preferences indicate that some kind of interpretive flexibility is at work.

4.1.2 Interpretive Flexibility in Practice

Even owners and managers of internet cafés do not seem to have settled on one interpretation of how an internet café should be commodified. Their signs give an indication of how they expect the space within their business to be used, but when the signs themselves offer flexible interpretations, it is much easier for the people who use internet cafés to interpret them flexibly as well. In my observations at I-Café, I noticed that different groups of people used I-Café in very different ways, sometimes coming into conflict over which use was most appropriate at any time. Time of day is an important factor determining the dominant use – during the mid-afternoon, many people seemed to be “working” at I-Café. They checked their e-mail, wrote, printed, and faxed documents, and spoke on mobile phones. One person described him/herself as being “at work” during a phone conversation. Along with the core of “workers,” another group of mid-afternoon visitors to I-Café were the “ten-minute e-mail checkers.” These people arrived, often carrying school bags or briefcases, and checked e-mail for a very short period of time. I saw many of them more than once, something that suggested that their brief e-mail checking visits were a frequent routine. However, at around 8 pm, I-Café’s demographics and use began to shift. Younger people arrived, and the primary activity changed from e-mail checking to a combination of instant messenger chat and game-playing. More people moved around the café and fewer remained seated. Visitors bought snacks and drinks from the refreshment counter and the café’s music selection switched from classical to hip-hop. During this period, groups of friends arrived together or met at I-Café. The visitors’ use of the internet café suggested a shift in interpretation

from the internet café as a place of work to a place of recreation, game-playing and socializing. It is worth noting at this point that this shift in use at I-Café occurred despite the fact that its owners were not particularly supportive of visitors using their café as a place to play games. One of the owners said that they “tolerate” gamers by purchasing and installing some of the more popular games, but they do not “support” them by providing space for meetings, parties or tournaments. In internet cafés dedicated to gaming gamers can meet team members in person before coordinating online activities, run online game parties or tournaments (often sponsored by software or hardware companies) and play together or individually for long hours. The fact that visitors at I-Café use the café as a place for gaming and socializing despite the lack of support from the owners suggests that these uses are becoming increasingly strongly associated with internet cafés.

What is important about the fact that different groups of people who use internet cafés interpret the cafés in varying ways? First of all, it suggests that the internet as a technology of public space symbolizes many different aspects of cultural and communicative practice, some of which, like the interpretation of an internet café as a place for game playing and socializing, are similar to interpretations of other urban spaces (video arcades for example) and some of which, like the interpretation of an internet café as a place for work or a node in a network of mobile communications, suggest new adaptations for the internet’s role in the city. I will now discuss three dominant interpretations of an internet café: the internet café as an arcade where teenaged gamers gather and play, an “office” for the home-based contract worker, or pit

stop on a daily journey full of networked communications. These roles can be both conventional and revolutionary examples of how technology interacts with the “multiplicity of complex cultural structures” that is urban culture.

4.1.2 a Games

Video arcades take their name from the Parisian arcades in which Benjamin’s *flaneur* walked and glanced. In the nineteenth century, these palaces of glass were the pre-eminent location for conspicuous consumption and display. They were also, in contrast to the “private-in-public” restaurants, pre-eminently public. In fact, one could argue that the Paris arcades were the first shopping centres. Eventually, the word “arcade” (in addition to describing a particular architectural feature) began to describe coin-operated mechanical games found under protective arches at amusement parks. When the pinball machine was invented in the 1940’s, these games moved into the city from the amusement parks. With the commercialization of standalone arcade games by Atari in the early 1970’s, electronic games make their way into public spaces, at first bars and then arcades, pizza parlours, airport lounges and convenience stores (Hunter 2002, Langway 1981). Teenagers and young adults had a great time playing with the machines and hanging out with their friends, but video arcades soon got a reputation as shady places where kids might encounter such dangers as “funny cigarettes” and where middle-aged men escape into techno-solitude (Skow 1982). Home computer games emerged that were cheaper and more flexible than console games, and video arcades waned, and have now nearly, but not completely disappeared.

Game arcades are good places to get away, and to play game against others, something people have done in public for centuries. The games, be they chess, darts, Pachinko, Space Invaders, or Warcraft, vary with the available technology, but they all take place in a public space perceived as dangerous and threatening. The sensation of danger and threat may stem from the fact that young men enjoy playing games, and think they are more fun when adults and authorities are absent. Arcades and internet cafés are places for youth to make technology fun. It is no wonder then that the internet café as gaming palace is beginning to emerge as one of the dominant interpretations of the urban internet café.

However, interpreting an internet café as a gaming arcade implies a commodification of the networked *game* as opposed to the network itself. Players at gaming cafés are not paying for internet connections so much as they are paying for the latest game, supported by super-high speed network connections that allow many players to execute complicated moves at once. This commodification of gaming in public represents a focus on a very small aspect of the internet. As the words on the internet café's outdoor signs suggest, gaming may be emerging as the main interpretation of how to commodify the internet, but it is not yet the only interpretation. From my observations at I-Café, I gathered that for many people, especially during the day, an internet café is a place to work. However, despite many people's interpretation of it as a workplace, people working at internet cafés must still share physical space and resources with other users who might have very different interpretations of what an internet café is for. These multiple interpretations are one manifestation of the negotiations that people make in

many other public spaces, as they attempt to make them into places marked for certain activities.

4.1.2 b Work

In mid-afternoon at I-Café a man in a suit explains to the person on the other end of his cellular phone that his e-mail is not working: could they fax him the document instead? A middle-aged woman sends dozens of e-mails. A young woman frowns as she tries to get the logo on her business cards to match the logo on the CDs she is burning from saved MP3 files. An internet café employee assists a client with the production of a photographic project by scanning and colour correcting photographs. The new technology, not just the internet connection provided at I-Café mean that freelance writers, musicians, and traveling sales representatives can work at I-Café, as well as at other locations around the city. Increasingly, work has become associated with computer technology, especially network technology. Therefore, it is not surprising that work has become one of the interpretations of how internet cafés should be used. However, work in internet cafés must coexist with other uses. At the same time as all the work activity above unfolds, teenagers arrive from the nearby school, and young men play computer games. Despite the fact that the work activities are an important interpretation of how to use I-Café, one incident I observed highlighted the tension in determining just what constituted an appropriate work place. A young woman was complaining to café staff that she could not copy over her CD-R to add more tracks to it. She exclaimed loudly, “just what is the point of a recordable CD if I can’t record on it?” As the employee softly tried to explain the technology, a middle-aged woman who had

been working on a document complained that the first woman's comments were too loud, saying "I mean, this is a place of business, I just think it's really rude." This is an interesting comment considering that ambient noise from computer games and conversations between other café visitors are a normal part of working in the café. As well, the café employees explicitly make themselves available to assist with visitors' questions and concerns. Perhaps the problem came from the outburst as not being acceptable to the standards of I-Café as a place to get work done; a "place of business." These observations suggest that as much some visitors interpret internet cafés as places for recreation and game playing, others interpret them as places to work. This observation links with other insights that highlight the shifting nature of work, especially computer-mediated work. Gant and Kiesler note that cell phones blur the boundary between work and home life because of their facilitation of constant contact (1999). Internet cafés, however, may reflect the increased mobility of work more than an integration of work into home life. People working in internet cafés are without or away from an office, but they still try, with varying levels of success (at least in what I observed), to take advantage of a location for work outside of their home.

4.1.2. c Mobility

Part of the reason that "workplace" is one of the dominant interpretations of an internet café has to do with the increasingly mobile nature of work (Crow 2002). Canadians are working less and less from traditional offices and increasingly from home or elsewhere. Internet cafés are only one part of this trend towards increased mobility, which also includes mobile telephones and personal digital assistants, (PDAs). Mobile

phones and PDAs are associated with mobility partly because of their portability and the way that people use them to communicate with others throughout their days, especially “in transit” – on the street, in public transit, or in the car. However, even the static location of an internet café reflects the importance of mobility in communication. In fact, the internet café as a place of mobile communication emerges as the third important interpretation of urban internet cafés. By far the largest group of people using I-Café (or, in fact, any of the other internet cafés visited in the larger project) was people who stopped in for a brief period to check their e-mail and perform other instrumental communications tasks. The INCITE project at the University of Surrey describes these people as “solitary, task-focused” users and contrasts them with other “social, exploratory” users of internet cafés (INCITE University of Surrey and Sapient 2002 p. 7), describing the way that the first group of users displays an “urgent need” to check the internet. At I-Café, I saw many familiar faces among the ten-minute email checkers. Visiting I-Café was likely a part of their movement through their day, one where they quickly checked in with friends and family on their way home from school or work. As people spend more and more time getting from one place to another, and as coordination of events happens increasingly “on the fly” (Ling and Yttri 2002) the internet café becomes part of daily mobile communication, as well as for mobile work. Checking e-mail messages or sending instant messages can be a way of solidifying social contacts or scheduling in-person meetings. E-mail also acts as a non-confrontational way for students to contact their professors, for employers to contact employees who are out of the office, and for friends to leave messages for each other between meetings. The popularity of instrumental e-mail checking at I-Café suggests that internet cafés are not

necessarily perceived as places to relax or kill time by recreationally surfing the web, but instead places (when not interpreted as workplaces or gaming arcades) where the primary reason for stopping is to satisfy a pressing need to check e-mail. E-mail checkers arrived at I-Café carrying the artifacts of busy lives on the move: groceries, cans of paint, bookbags, and cellular phones. Some of them moved from checking their e-mail messages to checking for messages on their telephones in a seamless play of mobile communications.

Another important aspect of mobility is the ability to remain connected even when far away from home. On several occasions, when I glanced over the shoulders of the other people working at I-Café, I noticed that they were using e-mail clients from universities and organizations far away from Ontario, as well as checking news sites from communities outside of Toronto. As well, some internet cafés cater to cosmopolitan, mobile populations more than they catered to local residents. Internet cafés aimed at tourists are often larger than neighbourhood cafés, and they frequently sell other types of products such as phone cards or hot snacks. They are quieter, less social, and more uniform in terms of decoration and floor-plan (long rows of computers, few posters, plain wall and floor covers), but attract a very wide range of visitors, since not only tourists but local residents and passersby visit these locations. This was one indication to me of just how important internet cafés are in the global sense of mobility. Now that long distance travel has become a much more ordinary phenomenon, internet cafés have developed into important communication nodes for maintaining business and communication contacts. When Lee (1999) investigated a Brighton internet café, she discovered that many of the people there were away from home, and therefore not using the internet as a “window on

the world” from a stable home, but as a way of connecting to stable networks of home and family through internet technology accessed in public. She theorizes their behavior in this way: “the internet user who is away from home emails family and friends abroad, reads the local newspaper online and generally seeks out a temporary connection with their home which is profoundly pleasurable and comforting to them.” (1999, p. 358).

While I am not sure about the extent to which emailing family and reading local newspapers might be “profoundly pleasurable” it is clear that the cosmopolitan aspect of an internet café that allows it, through the connections it provides to network technology, to be “anywhere” is an attractive aspect to travelers. Travelers expect to see internet cafés in large cities, making them a cosmopolitan location (like a Hard Rock Café or a suburban shopping mall). In addition, though, internet cafés allow travel itself to be more cosmopolitan by providing constant contact.

Increased mobility means not just being away from one’s house, apartment, or workplace during the course of a day but also being away from one’s home city or country for periods of time. The internet café provides the ability to continue familiar patterns of communication despite being far away. The instrumental e-mail checkers who use webmail services from foreign institutions are able to access familiar interfaces and go through familiar patterns of daily communication despite being in a possibly unfamiliar place. The standardized internet café environment, with its rows of machines, Windows interface, and illusion of private space, may provide a comforting sameness to café visitors who miss the familiarity of their homes. My observations on this matter parallel Wakeford’s (2003) observations of a similar division between large, chain internet cafés in central London and smaller cafés that serve neighbourhood populations.

The dual roles of the internet café as both part of a local community and part of a cosmopolitan discourse of mobility parallel the ways that cities operate both as places to live and as tourist attractions. As part of a daily experience of mobility on the local or global scale, the internet café provides a place of connection to other places and people. Below, I discuss the way that the internet café's position as a site of mobility influences but does not diminish its role as a real urban place providing access to virtual networks of people and places.

4.2 Research Question 2: Reality and Virtuality

It seems that the difficulty in determining exactly what an internet café is and how different groups should interpret it may in some ways stem from the difficulty of determining just what internet technology provides to public users. Does it provide connections to virtual offices and colleagues? Or does it open up the virtual worlds of video games? Interpreted as part of the mobile communications network, internet cafés become part of discussions of virtuality, for as we make communication a mobile phenomenon we also make it much easier for people to be “in two places at once.” Therefore, internet cafés, no matter how they are interpreted, need to be considered as important examples of the contact between reality and virtuality in urban space. Already interpreted as sites for electronic game-playing and for participation in mobile communication, internet cafés are physical sites where the “virtual city” of interconnected individuals and virtual worlds contact the real space of the city. Soja's argument that the city is becoming spatially reorganized away from “urbanity” identifies the discourse of “cyberspace” as one manifestation of the waning importance of

traditional city space. But a closer look at urban internet cafés suggests that the discourse of “cyberspace” as an alternative to real space is not borne up in the ways that internet cafés function as real places within Toronto’s urban fabric.

4.2.1 Locality

Some people call Toronto a “city of neighbourhoods” as opposed to a city where public cultural and social activities take place mainly in a central downtown area. The distribution of the city’s internet cafés reflects this neighbourhood quality. The metropolitan area has over forty internet cafés, many of them concentrated in the downtown area but a number found in commercial strips in midtown and suburban neighbourhoods. Internet cafés are normally street-level businesses, because they depend on passing traffic, although at least one is in an Asian marketplace mall. Generally speaking, one finds internet cafés in many of the same places as one might find convenience stores: on heavily-travelled pedestrian strips downtown, in midtown business areas, and in suburban shopping plazas or commercial strips. With only two exceptions, one a series of coin-operated terminals and the other, in a book store, requiring internet café visitors to walk to another level of the store and purchase an access card from bookstore staff, all of the internet cafés the Ryerson project visited employ people to work on the internet café floor. These employees are present to supervise, receive payment, and in many cases to troubleshoot problems. They are the human contacts for both first-time café visitors and regular users, and their presence comes in contrast to reports from the UK that many internet cafés no longer hire regular daily employees(Wakeford 2003). In Toronto, employees also sell other products or

services to the internet café clientele. These products and services include everything from sushi to instant noodles to fax and printing service to lamination and rubber stamp production to comic books to cigarettes and cell phone cards, as evidenced by the signage I discuss above. One internet café owner explained to me that since there was no way of predicting the demand for his internet services, he felt that diversifying into printing and lamination services might sustain the business during slow periods. Another owner explained that he had imagined that demand for the cell phones he sold in his internet café would account for 50% of his sales but that, in fact, these devices accounted for a very small proportion of his sales, and that he was going to remove them. On average in Toronto, internet cafés charge around \$3 per hour for computer use, although some charge as little as \$1.50 per hour and one charges \$6 per hour. The low price paid by internet café users and the relatively high fixed costs of running an internet café mean that café owners need to strike a delicate balance between the price of their services, the number of people who are visiting their internet café, and the costs of running their business. Perhaps this is why many internet café owners also sell other products with high markups: cigarettes, phone cards, or snacks and drinks. Nevertheless, the choice of extra products on sale at internet cafés is not consistent from one location to another.

In comparison to internet cafés in other major cities like London (Wakeford 2003), Toronto does not have a dominant chain of internet cafés. Instead, the businesses are independent, or franchises of small local chains. They are also difficult businesses to locate, since most do not advertise at all, and only 23 of the over 40 businesses we visited have numbers listed under “internet cafés” in the telephone directory. Of those who advertise, the majority are internet cafés located in tourist areas of the downtown.

Independent local internet cafés sometimes advertise in their local area using flyers or handbills. The lack of major internet café chains in the Canadian context means that internet cafés, although they share many design characteristics, are more likely to be very different from one another than they are likely to be very similar to one another. While some aspects of design and decoration are common to many of the internet cafés, such as low lighting and some kind of separation between the computer stations, other aspects vary significantly. For example, while separation between computing stations is common to many cafés, this can consist of: low walls, bead curtains, army netting, artificial trees, smoked glass, booths, or French doors, depending on the location. While some of the area franchises receive standardized equipment and decoration materials, franchises still have specific differences, some having to do with new fads (such as one café that sells “bubble tea”) or others that seem to reflect owners’ whims, like a selection of beaded hair decorations on sale at one internet café.

4.2.2 Cultural Influences

Toronto is well-known as being a successfully “multicultural” city. While multiculturalism is a debated term and concept, it is one way of describing the demographic and cultural characteristics of a globalized city in which members of different diasporic ethnic and cultural groups, as well as established immigrant communities, live together in a large metropolitan area. One of the ways that this coexistence is made possible is through the separation of space into culturally marked areas – parts of the city in which 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. Signs in various languages mark some of these internet cafés, and seem to indicate a willingness to accommodate another language and culture. Appadurai would probably describe the presence of internet cafés in ethnic communities as an example of a “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). Two of Toronto’s internet cafés stand out as examples of locations of mediated imaginings and of contact, in one way or another, with other members of a diasporic community. One is in the heart of Chinatown, and the other in a predominantly, but not completely Portuguese neighbourhood. In Chinatown, young men fill the internet café, chatting and smoking while watching television programs in Chinese disseminated over the internet. 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, acts as a place for young people to contact and embrace their Chinese-ness, as well as to meet up with friends in a central place. At the internet café in Rua Azores (the Portuguese and Azorean neighbourhood), youth of all backgrounds check e-mail and play games on some computers, while older Portuguese men play online dominoes. The internet café acts as a warm (in midwinter) electronic version of the bar or plaza where men play dominoes away from their families. This was one of the few cafés I visited where older men form a significant part of the clientele. In the Portuguese community the internet café seems to act not only as a community meeting place for young people, but as a technologically-mediated “third place” for older men who might otherwise be left out of public experience of the internet.

Another important cultural factor for the Toronto internet café industry is the large Korean cultural influence in the city. The city is home to a large number of Korean immigrants, some of whom choose to open internet cafés, in part due to their familiarity with these businesses, which are very popular in Korea. Many internet cafe locations, especially in neighbourhoods dominated by Korean Canadians, appear to cater to Korean-speaking clientele because of their Korean-language advertising, and their focus on internet gaming. 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 descendent 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 part of the ordinary experience of the city, whether in Seoul or Toronto. However, some Korean internet café owners want to take their businesses outside of the Korean community. Two café owners I spoke to indicated that it was more important for their businesses to be in neighbourhoods that could support and sustain the business than to operate within the Korean community. Clearly, the Toronto internet café is transcending its Korean cultural history and becoming established as a neighbourhood

business that also plays a role in the cultural life of a particular part of the city. For example, I-Café, the location of my most detailed observations, is in a part of Toronto where a Korean neighbourhood borders a university community, and is near several large hotels. It thus straddles both the local and the cosmopolitan visions of the internet café.

The neighbourhood internet cafés in Chinese and Portuguese areas that I discuss above are good examples of how local characteristics are an important part of the internet café experience. As well, contrary to the way that early cybercafés in London self-consciously decorated their interiors with “cyber” elements including futuristic shapes and brushed metal (Wakeford, 1999), Toronto internet cafés are more often strictly utilitarian, although some place posters with images of computer game characters on their walls. For the most part, they contain only computer terminals, a front desk, and occasionally a display of packaged snacks. In many ways, the closest these locations come to being “cafés” is their name. Because the internet cafés are for the most part independent, their interiors reflect their owners’ whims. These concessions to the individual characters of the owners and customers are one way that the physical “real” space of an internet café remains embedded in the local, at least with respect to interior design. However, as I allude to above, the presence of networked technology in an internet café also provides a symbolic connection to “elsewhere” – that is, to the information networks that Sassen argues link together remote centres of power. These linkages are undoubtedly important for people moving from one cosmopolitan city to another, but could they not also be destabilizing influences on the creation of a local place within an internet cafe? Perhaps, but several other influences are at work as well. Internet cafés are cosmopolitan spaces, yes, but they are also local places. In addition, as

I discuss below with relation to my third research question, the artifacts of networked technology – the monitors and computers – found in internet cafés do not just encourage people to interact with others remotely: they promote in-person interactions as well. One can therefore consider internet cafés as points of contact for what Appadurai calls “virtual neighbourhoods” and, in addition, fixtures in real neighbourhoods. That they successfully balance both elements indicates that they are as much implicated in “real” everyday life as “virtual” life.

4.2.3 Applications – Virtual points of contact

Some internet applications have already inspired discussions of the overlap of real and virtual. Ihde discusses both e-mail and computer games as “epistemology engines” that act as guides to how to think about reality, virtuality, and embodiment (Ihde 2002). He sees these two technologies as exposing the ways in which virtual embodiment (whether through text conversation or eye-hand maneuvering) create epistemologies of virtuality. These epistemologies, rather than suggesting that virtual experiences correspond to real ones, suggest that virtual experiences spur the development of new and multiple roles. There is thus no “corresponding” virtual self to a real self. Instead, each individual can play many roles in both real and virtual environments. While Ihde claims that there is very little movement from the virtual world to the real, my observations at I-Café suggest that the real and virtual, at least for some visitors to internet cafés, overlap. Teenaged girls send instant messages to one another while they carried on an in-person conversation. Friends play online games as teammates or opponents. 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 Ihde might suggest, at least not during the time when people are actively engaged both in virtual space.

Online game players have rich social lives in both real space and virtual space. 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. As such, they seamlessly inhabited online and offline social space without appearing to make distinctions between it, even in their conversations. Manninen describes the way that networked games provide, through the realistic responses and well-designed spaces of virtual environments (VEs), a location for several types of communicative actions (Manninen 2000). These communicative actions define the VE as a communicative space, even if the interactions themselves lack the subtlety of face-to-face conversations. Manninen argues that as VEs become better developed, communicative possibility may even expand (Manninen 2001). Many gamers seemed to be simultaneously in game space and in real space, sometimes leaping out of their seats when something exciting occurred on-screen, a kinaesthetic response that Newman comments on as an example of the “realness” of game space (Newman 2002). The gamers also talked to each other,

mixing real and virtual physical and worlds in their exchanges. One evening I heard this conversation:

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."

The seamless way these players integrate their real-life friendship into a virtual teamwork relationship shows how the internet café allows for an overlap of real and virtual experiences. The players' online worlds provided them with a high level of interactivity in that they could quickly respond to each other online and be provided with stimulations to a variety of senses (Biocca, 1996). This interactivity, as well as the relatively realistic environments they play in, means that gamers can experience a high level of interactivity and visual responsiveness called "telepresence" (Downes and McMillan 2000). They are present to one another in both on- and off-line space, and as such, they experience each other's presence in both real and mediated ways. This layering of presence and telepresence demands a focus on the screen, which signals the point of contact between the world in the game and the world in the café. Gaming, the most social and the most technologically sophisticated activity I observed at I-Café, took full advantage of the offline social space of the café while taking advantage of all of the mediating capabilities of the network, both the technical capabilities that facilitate telepresence possible and the symbolic mediating capabilities of the screen. 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.

4.3 Research Question #3: Social interactions

I conclude the discussion of my findings by examining my third research question: how does the presence of the internet in public space mediate social interactions and re-illuminate questions of public and private space? I address this question by focusing closely on the observable social interactions at I-Café, paying attention to the way that the physical artifacts of internet technology not only provide new ways of thinking about public and private space, but also act as mediating influences for social interactions. The presence of a network connection in an internet café facilitates as well as mediates interactions within the café. Thought about another way, the presence of virtual space (as represented by the screen) within real space invites interactions both on-line and off-line. Internet cafés are also places where a range of orientations towards private and public space are possible – some of them occurring simultaneously in real and virtual space. In a sense, internet café users inhabit two parallel continua stretching between relative invisibility and relative sociability: one real and one virtual. The interactions between and along these continua illustrate the ways in which the internet, as a tool for virtual communication, maps on to and overlaps existing communication practices in “real” public places. It is possible for people who use internet cafés to “disappear” into public space without having to speak to anyone else, to use the technology within the café to mediate their communications with friends, or to speak to

strangers, again using the artifacts of computer technology. In addition, the technology continues to provide the option of social interactions on a similar continuum in virtual space. These overlapping continua suggest that public space, at least in internet cafés, can be both real and virtual, and provide the ability to be as invisible or as sociable as each individual desires.

4.3.1 Invisibility: Civil Inattention

The orientation of most café visitors towards their screens might suggest a partitioning of public space into private areas staked out by individual belongings (Goffman 1971), as might the café's layout. I-Café has short rows of machines in the main room, a separate back room (mostly used by adolescents and game players) and three "private" booths with windows separating them from each other and glass doors separating them from the rest of the internet café space. But any privacy here is illusory. 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, most daytime visitors to I-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). As at a restaurant where no one is supposed to look at another's dinner (but we all do . . .), no one is

supposed to look at someone else's screen in an internet café (but many do). What is important is not the actual privacy that civil inattention provides, but the act of performing civil inattention, and the illusion of privacy that the performance allows.

My position as a researcher also showed me the clear rules regarding civil inattention through my observations at I-Café. When I looked around the room to observe the other visitors, people often glared at me or changed seats to move away. Clearly, I had transgressed the appropriate level of looking. While other café visitors occasionally glanced at others' screens, they were most often walking past the computer stations as opposed to glancing around while seated at a computer station. Karp, Stone and Yoels write that "urbanites seek to *minimize involvement and to maximize social order*" (Karp, *et al.* 1991 89, emphasis in original). People accomplish this maximization of order in part by according others the appropriate level of public privacy. This public privacy provides a certain level of anonymity – a function that I saw a few people at I-Café take advantage of, particularly patrons who were engaging in practices that were not necessarily socially acceptable, such as looking at pornography. When I looked at others' screens, I too obviously entered their private space and thus drew extra attention to myself. Lofland argues that even in public, we need to imagine having private space. She writes, "when we speak of norms like 'civil inattention' we are speaking about a mutual willingness to concede that there is a thin layer of private space around the bodies of the people with whom we are sharing a non-private space" (Lofland 1998). Such private "bubbles" permit complex negotiation between public and private, even if the private is illusory. At I-Café, individual computers seem to delineate even more clearly

the boundaries of private space, but they, like the windowed “private” areas, provide only an illusion of anonymity or privacy.

To a certain extent, this illusion of private space extends to online space, too. As many, most notably Turkle (Turkle 1995) have noted, the network provides numerous opportunities for “real” identities to be kept anonymous, or even for online identities to act as “lurkers” on the network. In addition to these possibilities for anonymity in virtual social space, the internet café adds another: by virtue of being on a public network, users are less easily located. Although I-Café has a membership system in which the programs opened and sites visited by each logged-in member were displayed on the main administration computer, little attention was paid to these by employees, and people without membership cards were not tracked at all. Karp, Stone and Yoels describe the way that people in certain spaces where activities are morally suspect (such as pornographic bookstores and “no-tell motels”) follow codes designed to maintain the privacy of those others (Karp, *et al.* 1991). Not only the anonymity of the public network but the “blind eye” of the network administrators allowed people to access pornography or other “morally suspect” content without interference. These people could be anonymous offline and online.

4.3.2 Interacting with Strangers: the Role of the Screen

Most of the time, people at I-Café closely followed the codes of civil inattention. However, from time to time the routine of “public privacy” was broken and users who were strangers to one another struck up conversations. Usually, these interactions occurred when someone was placed in what Goffman calls an “exposed position” – that is, when a physical, verbal or technological anomaly opens up the possibility for a social

interaction (Goffman 1963). In these cases, what was visible on people's screens became the central focus of conversation, whether between visitors to the café or between visitors and employees. For strangers interacting with one another at I-Café, the image of networked computer use presented by the screen acted as a useful facilitator for offline conversation.

There were two striking examples at I-Café of the way that on-screen images acted as primary conversational topics between strangers at I-Cafe. In the first, the woman who had just finished complaining to an employee about the loud speaking voice of the other café visitor turned to the man next to her, who was in the process of playing a popular "shoot-em-up" game and said, as she glanced at his screen, "and here you are bombing Iraq." He replied, "I'm not bombing Iraq, I'm just sitting here." They laughed. Since the woman had already made a public announcement to the employee of the internet café, which her neighbour supported by nodding at her words, her passing glance at her neighbour's screen was not perceived as threatening, and allowed her to open up a exchange with him (albeit one of unclear intent – was she drawing attention to the militarism of his computer game or expressing a political position?). Another striking example of how screen images facilitate conversation occurred one night at 1:30 am. I had been glancing around the room periodically, while also checking an online news site. A young man who had been playing video games behind me got up as if to leave, and then sat next to me. He asked me if I came often to I-Café, to which I responded, "no, I'm just starting a school project on internet cafés." He then asked me what I was doing, and looked at my screen to confirm what it was. Seeing that the image on my screen was a news site, he began to talk about how he enjoyed checking CNN for news. After

talking for a few minutes, it was clear to me that this young man was trying to pick me up. I believe that he misinterpreted my occasional glances at his screen as interest, and thus perceived a comment on my screen as being an acceptable introductory topic of conversation. The screen, as the most visible aspect of the internet café's *technospace*, acts as a point of reference for offline conversations, which themselves reiterate the importance of technology as social mediator in an internet café.

Screen images were also key to interactions between visitors and staff, which for the most part consisted of demands for "help" or complaints that programs did not run properly. In all of these situations, visitors would seek out staff, and bring them over to the computer in question, and show them the screen while providing some kind of explanation of how the image on the screen came to appear. The employees could then occupy the physical space in front of the screen to "fix" a problem, or lean over behind the internet café visitor to "help" with the application on their screen. The verbal request for "help" permitted the employee to look at the screen, and based on the images on that screen, to begin a discussion with the visitor. Although most visitors to the café waited for the employee to finish "working" on the computer (as evidenced by the images on their screen) and then thanked them and returned to the content presented on-screen, some visitors took advantage of the possibilities for interaction opened up by the images on their screen to continue a conversation with the employee, especially if they knew the employee.

As these examples demonstrate, a certain amount of "civil inattention" provides the illusion of anonymity for many internet café users, but once one person places themselves in an "exposed position", the civil inattention is broken. A glance at another

person's screen can then be used as a starting point for an exchange, whether short or long. The interactions I saw, although they were mainly short discussions, sometimes unfolded into longer conversations like the one I had. The screen, which acts as a visual representation of the network, carries with it a marker for the possibility of social interaction. In internet cafés, communication is the main use of the network. Thus, referring to the network's physical artifact – the screen -- in an internet café signals "communication." This practice recalls not only the internet café's status as *technospace* but also its function as a "translation landscape" (Wakeford 1999). By using what was on-screen as an aid to in-person social interaction, some I-Café visitors translated the internet's facilitation of online social interaction into offline social interactions with strangers.

4.3.3 The Artifact as Translator of Offline Relationships

These offline social interactions were striking because of the way they "translated" into offline space the most common use of the internet's social space – socializing online. The artifacts of network technology, particularly the images on other people's screens, facilitated conversations with strangers. But the physical artifacts of computing also allowed visitors who already knew one another to interact not only offline in the café, but also online. These people used the internet café's social space to its utmost, engaging not just with the physical aspects of computer technology, but taking advantage of the communicative possibilities of the network as well. They usually arrived in groups and sat down at the same or an adjacent computer. As a group, they created e-mails or posted to chat rooms or instant messages. For some visitors, these activities seemed to be the focus of their social energies, despite the fact that they had

arrived with a friend. In fact, going to the internet café with a friend seemed to be a social occasion for some people. After the nearby high school let out for the afternoon, teenagers arrived in pairs and groups, talking to each other constantly as they messaged one another and their friends. Computer gamers also exhibited the same kinds of behaviour, although largely due to the immersive nature of their activities, something I will discuss below.

Consistent with research that suggests that people use the internet to reinforce real-life social ties (Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2001, Wellman, *et al.* 2002), this observation suggests that for some young visitors, keeping in touch *simultaneously* verbally and over the internet has important social value. Some of the conversations I overheard suggested that some teenagers conceived of their online interactions differently than their offline ones. At one point one of a group of boys typing together on a chat program exclaimed, “This is so annoying. I’m not going to talk to anyone.” Despite the fact that he was talking to his friends, this boy still thought of his online activities as “talk.” In addition to high schoolers, families and groups of older people also sat together while writing e-mail and chatting online. Their behaviour seemed not only to be social, but to act as a translation of network technology for some visitors who did not have much experience with them. Lee (Lee 1999) and Wakeford (1999) both describe seeing similar behaviour. Friends meeting each other at the internet café, seemed to reinforce even long-term offline friendships and relationships by integrating aspects of online contact. In essence, the network technology available at I-Café reinforced even established offline social relationships, according them the higher value that some people associated with online communication.

Therefore, the very particular ways that I saw people interact with each other at I-Café suggest that internet technology, despite its possibility to separate people spatially and temporally from each other through networked communication, presents opportunities for interaction between strangers and for new ways to connect to friends in the same place. As much as some young visitors to I-Café seemed to consider their interactions online as more important than those offline, they still visited the internet café together and sat next to one another. At least in public internet cafés, internet technology acts to solidify or make possible relationships in real space and time (although it also does what other objects do in public space; that is, provide the illusion of privacy). These observations suggest that not only has the internet been integrated into everyday public life in a variety of significant ways, but that many of the things the internet allows us to do in internet cafés are things that people have associated with public (and parochial) urban space for a long time. Not surprisingly, ten years of research on the role of the internet in society is revealing not a “brave new cyber-world” but a world in which people (as consumers, but also as individuals) are grudgingly, reluctantly, or excitedly fitting internet technology in to and around their other ordinary practices.

5 Conclusions

5.1 The Internet in Public – Three Levels of Analysis

This paper began with a question about what the internet has changed, especially at the level of ordinary practice. My investigation has discussed the role of the internet in urban public space by focusing on the role of internet cafés within urban space at three levels of deepening detail: the abstract level that describes different interpretations of what the role of an internet café might be; the more detailed consideration of the

implications of “virtual” contact within “real” city space and social space in Toronto; and finally a close examination of the way that internet café technology provides new ways of engaging with existing conventions of interaction in public space, as experienced at one particular Toronto internet café. The spiraling inward of this line of questioning has provided the opportunity to examine the internet’s integration into society in abstract and concrete ways, from its philosophical implications to the various ways that people practice the internet in one city and at one particular location of internet use. In order to draw conclusions about “what the internet changes” I will discuss some of the general patterns that have emerged with relation to each level of analysis and research question.

Broadly speaking, the general conclusions of the first research question indicate that inasmuch as there continue to be multiple interpretations of what internet cafés are, especially in the Toronto context, one of the dominant interpretations that emerges based on observations within the city is that internet cafés are good places to play computer games. This connects them to video arcades and other public and technological amusements. What the internet changes in this context is the ability for video games to be a social experience, because of the network’s capability to permit large numbers of players to participate in the same game at the same time. It also attracts friends to play games together in internet cafés, and community members to claim internet cafés as meeting places in both real and virtual neighbourhoods, and to use them places of connection with other community members within and outside of Toronto. This observation prefigures the main conclusion from the second research question, that internet cafés, as least as they operate in the city of Toronto, are for the most part integrated into their local communities. Within these communities, which include both

local and global (real and virtual) neighbourhoods, internet cafés do not threaten the real social networks and “places” of the city, but instead bring network technology into the everyday lives of ordinary people, whether they do not have computers at home, are travelling, or need to access the internet in transit. In fact, real and virtual worlds can sometimes overlap, as suggested by observation of computer gamers at I-Café. For considerations of reality and virtuality, what the internet changes is obvious – its presence in our everyday life opens up questions about the very nature of reality and about the virtual elements we now engage with on a daily basis. Some more specific observations about the ways that internet technologies facilitate behaviours that are already typical in public space lead to conclusions about the third research question: internet technologies contribute to the illusion of private space in public, as well as facilitating interaction between people who are physically present to one another. In addition, the public, social character of the internet café influences not merely interactions in real space but in virtual space as well, as visitors are able to connect with distant friends and family. Real and virtual experiences overlap for friends and companions who interact with each other simultaneously in both real and virtual space. These conclusions suggest that the internet that people use in public at internet cafés extends public space not just through its network capacity, but also through the mediating aspects of what people can see on screen. At all levels of analysis, the urban internet cafe provides new ways of thinking about or enacting behaviours and patterns that previously existed and continue to be important – playing games with friends, working, moving through the city, interacting with strangers, keeping in touch. These behaviours and patterns are thus enacted both in real space and in virtual space, in a seamless manner.

5.2 Contributions

This research clearly advances the understanding of the role of the internet in everyday life, especially through its extension of the concept of domestication to a public but “ordinary” location, and its acknowledgement of the internet as a place for social interactions, both real and virtual. Before this project, theorists conceptualized the integration of a technology into everyday life as being a process that chiefly occurred at home, or as an event that had already occurred (prompting scholars to divide periods as “before” and “after” the internet). This project, with its focus on the many different ways that internet cafés are interpreted in one particular city, clearly illuminates the process through which the internet is being made meaningful for users in public places. Furthermore, the full extent of the impact of the internet on everyday life emerges clearly from the observations presented in this research, indicating that interactions in virtual space, rather than usurping the possibility for interactions in real, local places, instead expanding the possibilities for those interactions. The specific observations I made at I-Café beautifully illustrate the kinds of interactions made possible by the overlap between real public social space and the virtual space that now makes up part of our experience of everyday life, including interactions in public

What has the internet changed? In my opinion, the conclusions presented above suggest that the internet has not introduced a new world order where bodies are abandoned in favour of networks, and where transfer of information trumps face-to-face interaction. Instead, the internet has extended and expanded the ways in which we can interact socially, as well as the range of people with whom we can interact in these ways. It has made the city both more cosmopolitan by providing connections to other cities and

people, and more local by reinforcing diasporic communities. Public internet access, including internet café access, has also provided increased amounts of information to more people. However, the internet has also made possible more sophisticated surveillance methods, and remains unavailable to many. In conclusion, the internet has changed the approach to a discrete number of things (work, mobility, entertainment) for a small number of people, as we can see from the Toronto experience. As it becomes more fully part of the everyday life of more ordinary people, the internet will continue to tell us more about ourselves and our society than it tells us about itself.

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RYERSON UNIVERSITY

Research Ethics Board

To: Dr. Catherine Middleton
School of Information Technology Management

From: Alexander Karabanow on behalf of
Robert Rinkoff, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board
c/o Early Childhood Education

Re: REB 2003 – 011: Investigating Consumer Usage of New Media Technologies:
Understanding Demand for Broadband and Wireless Applications and Services

Date: April 15, 2003

Dear Dr. Middleton,

The review of your protocol REB File #2003-011 is now complete.

The project has been approved for a one year period, subject to full REB ratification at the REB's next scheduled meeting. The study may proceed.

The approval may be extended after one year upon request.

Please note that REB approval policies require that you adhere strictly to the protocol as last reviewed by the REB and that any modifications must be approved by the Board before they can be implemented. Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication from the Principal Investigator how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the continuation of the protocol.

Finally, if research subjects are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

Please quote your REB file number (REB-2003-011) on future correspondence.

Congratulations and best of luck in conducting your research.



for Robert F. Rinkoff, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Appendix 2: Data Collection Form

Date	
Time of Visit	
Researcher	
Business name	
Street address	
Intersection	
Postal code	
telephone	
URL	
e-mail?	
Pricing	
▪ hourly price	
▪ membership offered? (yes/no)	
▪ membership details	
Layout/Physical space	
▪ number of machines	
▪ description of space	
▪ music? (yes/no)	
▪ type of music (describe)	
▪ lighting (describe)	
▪ private spaces? (describe)	
Users	
▪ number of users	
▪ demographics	
○ age range	
○ ethnicity	
○ number of males (number)	
○ number of females (number)	
Description of business	
▪ internet café only (yes/no)	
○ sells other products?	
○ laundry (yes/no)	
○ bar (yes/no)	
○ snack food & drinks (yes/no)	
○ cigarettes (yes/no)	
○ phone cards (yes/no)	
○ copies, faxing, printing	
• type of advertising on street (text) – i.e. what does the sign outside the café say? what services does it promote?	
• hours of business? (8-10 hours daily, 12-16 hours daily (specify	

closing time), open 24 hours)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses of computers? (list of options: games, web surfing, off line activities, e.g. word processing, e-mail, chat) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> main use – select one from list above 	
User Interface/Desktop	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> language of operating system (select one) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> English Korean other (specify) (text) icons on desktop (describe) Programs available <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word processing File transfer programs Music sharing programs Music editing or playback programs Video or multimedia editing programs Photo editing programs Graphic design programs (pagemaker, Quark) Messenger programs (ICQ, Yahoo or Microsoft Messenger) Office software (powerpoint, database programs, spreadsheet) Games (# of: 0-5, 5-10, more than 10). Comments on programs sign in necessary on computer? (yes/no) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> if yes, what does the start up screen say? (text) quality of equipment (check list, e.g. screen size, CD or DVD burners, headsets, processor speed etc.) network speed 	
Social Interactions of Users	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> users talking to each other? (yes/no; 	

comments)	
○ users talking on internet phones?	
○ users using cell phones? voice? text messaging	
○ users playing games with other people in café? (yes/no; text field for comments)	
○ users playing games with other people not in café? (yes/no; comments)	
Changes to café while observing?	
○ in the time that you've been in this café, have the dynamics changed? (text)	
Questions for Employees	
• How does the network work? (text)	
• Usage patterns over the day? (text) – e.g. what are the busiest and least busy times, are the patterns consistent, or do they vary a lot?	
• What's the main focus for the business? (text) (e.g. what do most users do, why do users come to this place)	
• How long has the café been in business?	
General Comments	