Online Belongings

Fantasy, Affect and Web Communities

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Desiring Community

Obsession is the most durable form of intellectual capital.
— EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK, 2003: 2

I began using the Internet in the early 1990s. As for many women workers at this time, my interest in online communities began as a side-effect of the office temping, the dull 'day job' that funded my academic studies: as a result, my access to the Internet was heavily monitored and proscribed. Computers, or 'word processors' as they were still widely known, were a tool for typing memos and doing the books, as well as a convenient scapegoat when something went wrong; the relationship between computer and user being less widely understood than it is today, we would attempt to soothe enraged clients by ensuring them that the error in their monthly bill was simply due to a 'computer error'. The Internet existed as something tantalising, forbidden; at work by the watchful eyes of supervisors and managers, and at home by the exigencies of a primitive dial-up connection and soaring phone bills. As I sat trapped in a stuffy office, the Netscape icon on my desktop, with its distinctive ship's wheel motif (it was that long ago) seemed to represent the potential for travel: a voyage out of my constrained life of graduate student shabby gentility, to a wider world beyond. As the focus of my research shifted, I returned to my original desire to have greater access to the Web. As a 'newbie' who had read a great deal of theory about virtual reality, but had only very limited experience of actually participating in the chat rooms, bulletin boards and Usenet groups described there, I began to be more interested in the Web, traditionally the flashy, vacuous, commercialised younger

sister of 'true' online communities: to wonder how taken-for-granted, everyday online activities might in themselves raise questions of community, belonging and subjectivity. I became increasingly interested in the Web as an area of the Internet that is less widely theorised. I wanted to ask how community might also be at stake in those technologies that require less technical skill on the part of the user: the online shopping sites, institutional and personal homepages, and information sources that I used every day but did not at first consider significant or important.

 I am including this brief autobiographical detail to illustrate the main question that informs this book: how to think through our capacity to be affected by and through technologies, and the stories, interactions and debates that surround them? By posing this question, it is my intention to examine the relationship between technology, belonging, and desire (and I am using desire as a subset of the positive affective response that Silvan Tomkins calls interest: an important distinction, of which more later). I began researching online communities in 1998, at a time when the World Wide Web still felt like a 'new' phenomenon (although it is generally agreed to have originated in 1993, and five years is, as we are constantly reminded, a long time in computing). As a result, my fantasy of a wide world of knowledge on the Web resulted in my being plunged into a set of debates in which just such fantasies were called into question. In the early 1990s, a love of computers was limited to Turkle's hackers, ubergeeks who alone were capable of 'loving the machine for itself' (1984: 196). Cyberculture theory, meanwhile, was polarised between a utopian position which sought to align itself with the geeks, and more critical, feminist and postcolonial accounts of cyberspace which were highly suspicious of technocentrism. It might seem strange, then, that this book aligns itself firmly with feminist and postcolonial theory, but also with an affective attachment to the everyday technologies of the Internet: especially since, as Jonathan Sterne has argued, 'the technophilic position is at least somewhat less acceptable in serious scholarship than it was five years ago' (2006: 17). What I am arguing for in this book, then, is not a return to a technophilic position, but a position which acknowledges our attachment to not just computers, but what they can do: the

attachments, relationships and subjectivities that are made possible by digital technologies.

This book is hence inspired by affect: affect in the sense, not only of my own experience of 'loving the machine' (and what it can do), but of my own ongoing, passionate engagement with scholarly work on emotion, particularly that of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In relation to Silvan Tomkins' work, Sedgwick poses the crucial question: what does it mean to fall in love with a writer (2003: 117)? This book at least partly charts my own falling in love: with the Internet, with Sedgwick's own work and, through her interest, her enthusiasm, with the theory of affect outlined by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins. As a result, it is Tomkins' version of affect that structures this book. Although there are plenty of exceptions, it is fair to say that the critical literature on affect has two main strands, the Deleuzian, and what I think of as the 'queer theory version' based on Tomkins. Whilst I am now in the process of falling in love with the former, too late for this book, it is the latter that first engaged my interest, not least in that the notion of interest itself seems to speak eloquently of the experience of positive affect in a way that does not insist on lack as a motivating factor and hence need not involve a reading of desire as a drive to incorporate the other. Aspects of Tomkins' work, particularly his deterministic view of affect as biological are problematic.[1] Perhaps it is even the resulting sense of annoyance, of 'yes, but', that motivates my ongoing engagement with his work: my love, unlike Sedgwick's, is not a pure one. But, problematic as the experience of reading Tomkins can be, his ideas map elegantly onto the cyberculture research: as a beautifully

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1   To say the least. There is a wonderful section in Sedgwick's book where she reproduces a passage from his work, in order to explain why his version of affect has been overlooked within cultural theory (and, I would argue, still is: in the index to Clough and Halley's *The Affective Turn*, for instance, there are only two references to Tomkins). In the short paragraph she cites, the word 'innate' or 'innately' appears five times, while 'neural firing' appears four times. These terms, she says, are likely to produce 'fear, distress and anger' in theory-minded readers, as well as laughter from scientists (2003: 102). As she sums up, 'you don't have to be long out of theory kindergarten to make mincemeat of, let's say, a psychology that depends on ... affects hardwired into the human biological system' (1993: 94).

simple theory that imagines affect in terms of movements across lines of connection, Tomkins' theory seems to anticipate the process of making connections that, as I will argue, underpins research in general and online research in particular. The notion that 'any affect may have any object' (cited in Sedgwick and Frank 2003: 99), in particular, seems to account for the complex webs of feeling that inform users' experience of technology: we may love the machine 'for itself' as well as the others we encounter through the machine, and indeed the possibility of such encounters itself. Tomkins presents affect as a process: suggesting, for example, that identification might begin with a highly determined moment of recognition, but that it continues not only through the repetition of particular practices, but, crucially, through a process of storytelling. The recognition of affect as a process is, therefore, a crucial part of my argument, since it is precisely this that links community and fantasy (which is concerned first and foremost with stories, as we shall see). However, my argument diverges from Tomkins' theory of affect in its account of why one might experience that initial moment of recognition that comes to be articulated as a sense of belonging. Indeed, the word 'sense' is indicative here since it suggests that such an identification might be so strong as to feel biological, even if it is in fact culturally constructed.

If the following chapter is structured around those theorists with whose work I have fallen in love, I must also mention Lisa Nakamura, whose analysis of the 'post-Internet' age in which we are living suggests a new way of looking at the Web. For Nakamura, the term 'Internet' is itself so loaded with theoretical baggage that it is no longer relevant to users' experience: as she argues, 'it is safe to say that we live in a post-Internet age', if 'the Internet' is understood to mean the text-based Internet together with the constellation of grand theoretical claims associated with it (2007a: 2). However, I am not only concerned with what she calls the 'post-2000 popular graphical Internet' (2007a: 4) as a replacement for old, elitist values which privileged textual sites and early experiments in virtual reality as the only authentic sites of online belonging. Instead, I would question whether those values were ever as dangerous as they seemed. The starting point for this book is to suggest that the notion of 'cyberspace' that so enraged feminists, myself included, in the mid-1990s,

bears re-examination in the light of more recent developments in both Internet practice, and critical theory. This is not to deny the difficulties experienced by feminist and postcolonial theorists (though certainly the field has moved on from Zoe Sophia's satirical account of the reaction of virtual reality experts to her research as follows: 'since I am "one of Those" ... (i.e. one who hasn't donned the data glove), I cannot write as an experienced or expert user of VR technology' (1992: 11–12).

As Nakamura points out, virtual reality technologies are no longer considered the benchmark for authority in writing about cyberspace, since 'the Internet is a daily technology, but virtual reality isn't' (2007b: 35). Whether it refers to VR or not, though, the idea of 'immersion' is central in defining who has the right to speak about new technologies. Historically, 'immersion' has been used almost interchangeably with 'disembodiment' (see for example Dibbell 1993, 1998) in ways that implicitly construct a hierarchy between those whose experience of digital cultures is immersive (and hence authentic) and those others who fail at the work of immersion. Most frequently, discussion of offline lived experience, especially of racial or gendered identities, is presented as the moment at which immersion fails: and I discuss this distinction, and the ways in which it works to police some subjects' access to 'authentic' online experience, in Chapter 2 below. Nakamura's invocation of her own sense of immersion is hence a political act. Her argument is a passionate call for a cyberculture studies that is not only aware of difference, but that constitutes 'rigorous academic analysis [of] ... popular cultural forms that established academic disciplines wouldn't address but that people actually used and related to in their daily lives' (2007b: 34–5). Nevertheless, she articulates her own immersion in cyberspace through her experiences as a 'MUD addict':

> People deep in the throes of gaming addiction are maybe not the people you'd expect to find writing meticulously researched, theoretically inclusive academic articles, but ... the kind of personal engagement and detailed knowledge of the interface and interactivity that comes from personal use cannot be feigned. I was a MUD addict for years, and there was no way I could have done my work without that experience (2007b: 35).

Whilst one might argue whether MUDs can truly be opposed to VR as 'everyday technologies' – in retrospect the MUD and the VR helmet seem like the twin pillars that defined the utopian tendency in cyberculture studies[2] – it is instructive to see the notion of 'immersion' transposed from often rather elitist narratives of 'cyberspace' to the more banal and taken-for-granted technologies that increasingly structure our day-to-day experience. In this book, I too am interested in the everyday things that computers can do. Many of these things take place on the Web. Email, blogging and commenting on blogs, shopping, reviewing, homepages, web communities, networking sites and so on are not somehow inferior to, or less immersive than, VR, although the Web has not often been written about in these terms. For example as I show in Chapter 4, shopping for clothes online is not simply a matter of see, point and click: it may involve deep immersion in a number of sites: the practice of finding a particular pair of shoes (and in coming to want those particular shoes in the first place) may involve a level of concentration, tenacity and interest – a central term for this book, and one I shall examine more closely – that renders it indistinguishable, in practical and affective terms, from the preliminary stages of academic research. I do not make this comparison frivolously. What the devoted clothes addict has in common with the academic is a willingness to concentrate, an interest, which is really all that is meant by 'immersion'. Immersion is not a property of certain technologies, but a relation between technologies and users: hence the absurdity of claiming that some activities or technologies are more immersive than others. Taking Nakamura's model to its logical conclusion, we can see that the Web itself is not only an immersive technology, but one that threatens the boundaries of scholarship itself: anyone who 'Googles', as the popular

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2   To be fair, Nakamura's point is that gaming is an everyday technology, and one that is still undertheorised. In this sense one could argue for a re-situating of MUDs in a tradition that leads to hugely popular contemporary games such as the Grand Theft Auto series which, however, do not involve interaction between a global network of players: once again, the movement is away from the textual and networked, to the visual and commercial. Certainly, in my experience, games are immersive whether they involve outside interaction or not.

verb has it, is after all engaged in the work of making connections that underpins all research practice.[3]

Nakamura, then, posits a reading of the Web that is grounded in immersion in online texts, which she sees as part of a longer tradition of studying the popular: her approach is hence grounded in cultural studies, and this book shares a concern with, as it were, putting the 'culture' back into cyberculture studies. For Nakamura, this approach stands in contrast to that of 'critics of postmodernity and technology' (she mentions Baudrillard, Guattari and Žižek among others). Reading these theorists, she says, 'you rarely get the feeling that [they] have been truly immersed in the Internet' (2007b: 35). Certainly I recognise her account of the nightmare of trying to teach students to analyse web pages, using the work of writers who 'appear never to have used the Web, much less stooped to including screenshots in their work to illustrate their points' (2007b: 30).[4] She emphasises the desirability of 'enshrining exercises in form and

3   A colleague recently joked that, unlike other academics who are engaged in empirical and archival research, we in cultural studies 'just Google things and make stuff up'. This (and my enthusiastic agreement) were motivated by false modesty, but this joke hints at a deeper truth. There is a resonance between the act of navigating hypertext, and the work of cultural studies: both are intertextual; both are immersive; both involve the 'making up' of a body of knowledge and experience through the making of connections which may be determined, to some extent, by a pre-existing canon (whether of key theoretical texts or sponsored links) but are also structured through the subject's affective responses to canonical texts. Hence, I suspect, my love of the Web, which is partly a narcissistic projection invoked by the pleasure of – it sometimes seems – seeing one's own worldview as a post-disciplinary cultural studies scholar, writ large.

4   This polarisation between 'cultural studies' (as something that needs 'illustrating') and 'theory' (which is assumed to speak for itself) is in itself problematic. Although this book is located in the same tradition as Nakamura's, there are no screen grabs in this book. This decision resulted precisely from my suspicion of using images of web pages to 'illustrate one's points'. Partly this arose from my research on trans identity (see Ferreday and Lock 2007). Whilst writing up our research on transvestite homepages for a conference presentation, Simon Lock and I felt that it would be unhelpful to show images of our research participants, thus potentially reproducing the moment of passing (that is, allowing the audience to

obscurity that students can't relate to and that you can't make popular arguments about' (34) will make sense to many who have taught courses in 'cyberculture studies', 'digital culture', and so on. Nevertheless, one of my objectives in this book is to call into question the idea that 'theory' necessarily implies an elitist and utopian reading of cyberculture. Indeed it is by drawing on recent developments in cultural theory, particularly theories of affect, that I argue it is possible to read beyond the impasse in cyberculture studies. The test of theory ought not to be whether it can be 'applied' to web pages or any other media, but where it can take us. This may not always be to a place that feels comfortable. If theory does not 'fit into' an existing political position or worldview, then we need to at least consider whether it is the position, not the theory, that needs to be rethought. Thinking through affect can be a way of doing this: to use Sedgwick and Frank's evocative phrase, affect has the power to disrupt and question 'what theory knows' (2003: 93).

As well as asking what it might mean to read the Web through affect, this book examines how and why the Web came to be excluded from other readings of online community. My argument suggests that it is possible, indeed necessary, to read the Web as a site of community. This is less controversial now that theory has moved on from the distinction between what used to be seen as 'authentically' virtual texts, and those which are considered simply 'commercial' (and hence unworthy of attention). Historically, the theoretical commentaries that accompanied the growth of 'new' technologies and media and which privileged fantasy

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judge the 'authenticity' of online identity performances according to how closely the subjects resembled biological women). This is not to claim that all audiences would have made such a judgment, nor is it perfect as a means of reproducing our online encounters with subjects; nevertheless, it felt important to ask listeners and readers to think through the ways in which we encounter others through research. A static image does not in any way recreate the experience of looking at that page online, let alone the intensity and immersion – or, paradoxically, the banality and casualness – of the activity formerly known as 'surfing the web'. By giving web addresses but excluding screen grabs, this book becomes connected to a network of other sites and other media, but does not attempt to incorporate them as mere 'source material'.

and text-based web communities such as text-based multi user domains (MUDs) and UseNet communities as a site for the creation of 'virtual' selves. This is exemplified in Sherry Turkle's ironic description of online spaces as a 'through the looking glass' world (1995: 9). This led to much critical emphasis being placed on the notion of 'the virtual' as 'different from' the real: from this, much debate ensued about whether such an alternative reality might result in the formation of utopian or dystopian forms of community.

Early theories focussed on two privileged sites of virtual reality: one highly visual (the early experiments in virtual reality environments, which are bearing fruit today in the form of sites like Second Life), and the other entirely textual. In practice, user experience of online spaces has been dominated, not by participation in these over-determined online spaces, but by the World Wide Web. As Nakamura illustrates, the 'text-based Internet' not only no longer dominates theory, but often no longer exists, since many of the textual communities that so preoccupied theorists in the mid-90s have since disappeared (although we should note that some of the most celebrated communities, notably Lambdamoo and the Well, have continued to survive and thrive). As we have seen, for Nakamura, their passing has also meant the end of the Internet as a niche interest or subculture dominated by 'an elite and largely male digerati' (2007a: 1). The increasing commercialisation of online space, together with constant developments in interactive and visual technologies, has led to the Internet increasingly becoming synonymous with the Web (Gill 2002: cited in O'Riordan and Phillips 2007: 5). At the same time, the upsurge in blogging culture, which postdates much of the canonical work on virtual reality, challenges the notion that the potential of online communities lies precisely in their detachment from 'real life'. Indeed, the upsurge in blogging culture, with its integration between online and offline life, calls into question the very notion of the need for a field called 'cyberstudies', since it radically problematises the notion of a discrete, privileged 'cyberculture'. Some have suggested that these changes may suggest the possibility of new critical insights: for example O'Riordan and Phillips argue that 'we can expect different analytic approaches as well as different empirical insights' to arise from these shifts' (2007: 5).

Others argue that in practice, whilst the field has expanded to incorporate a wide range of theoretical insights from various disciplines, it has generated few new theoretical approaches of its own: these are still to come (Silver 2006: 5).

Whilst not wishing to detract from the importance of these studies, we might want to question why, as scholars familiar with the exigencies as well as the excitement of interdisciplinarity, we in the field of cyberstudies are so committed to the idea of a 'new theory' (or at least a new theoretical canon). What is at stake in the desire, the longing, for 'a canon'? In a sense, the *imprimateur* of interdisciplinary scholarship has always been its ability to generate new formations, new insights, by *using* existing theory, by bringing together existing theories and practices in unexpected ways. As for Freud's child who dreams of angels (1991: 168), it is the juxtaposition of familiar elements in unexpected ways (human body + wings), that is uncanny, and it is this uncanniness that unsettles the subject and that (potentially) generates new ways of seeing. Theory, like the unconscious, cannot imagine an entirely new thought, though, perhaps haunted by the grand 'discoveries' of science, it may dream of such a possibility. Instead, newness lies in the making of connections, the juxtaposition of elements in uncanny and unsettling ways. The Internet, that vast and expanding field of knowledge, stories, exchanges, arguments, revelations and lies, constantly being re-constituted through pathways of desire, is inherently concerned with the making of just such connections. The Internet calls into question the relative status of researcher and subject, since often new formations, new connections are already being made. New theoretical insights are not 'made' by scholars: instead, they surface through the reader's relationship with the text, coming into being through textual encounters.

I use the terms 'text' and 'reading' deliberately, here. Although some (but not all) studies of cyberculture have privileged the notion of online experience as encounter, in this book I am sceptical of the notion of encountering the Other in online 'space', for reasons that will become clear. Instead of thinking of the Web simply 'as' a space, I want to pay attention to the practices and politics of reading in structuring notions of online encounters. If as I have suggested interdisciplinarity is the outcome of

a kind of scholarly restlessness, a fascination for what lies beyond disciplinary boundaries, then it intrinsically mirrors the practice of wide and voracious reading which, for many of us, is what got us into this profession in the first place. Interdisciplinary thus arguably finds its ideal archive in cyberspace. It is perhaps unfashionable, at this point in the field's history, to sing the praises of hypertext, but nevertheless there is something about the process of finding one's way through the overwhelming mass of data that constitutes the Internet, guided only by one's own concerns and curiosities, one's capacity to be affected and 'interested' (or not), that speaks particularly powerfully to practices of interdisciplinary scholarship. The ability to make connections, arbitrarily, serendipitously and on the spot, is what matters. Researchers have always worked in this way, making connections between ideas, theories, subjects, hopefully in new and startling ways to create new constellations of knowledge. The broad and diverse field known as 'cyberstudies' is such a new formation, yet as scholars we long for more, for a 'new theory' which cannot presently be imagined. Before we berate ourselves for not having achieved this, I am suggesting that Internet scholars might rethink this question of 'the new' in two ways. One is to think about what cyberculture studies might gain by engaging with wider debates in cultural theory (an strategy of which the approach I take in this book, which draws on theories of fantasy and affect, is only one possible interpretation). This would avoid the fault line that ran through earlier attempts to form a canon, namely that some of the debates that were 'live' and generating the most exciting theoretical development of the time – especially in feminist and postcolonial theory – were seen as 'not new enough' and even as actively outmoded, although the critical interventions of feminist and postcolonial scholars, as well as the gulf between theory and actual Internet practice that quickly became evident, means that this has begun to change in recent years (Silver 2006: 3). It needs to be recognised, then, that the call for new theoretical insights does not mean that cyberculture studies needs to stand alone, or that it cannot work with existing theory.

A different approach might be to question why the idea of 'the new' is so central, and so affecting, for Internet scholarship. In early theories of cyberculture, there was much debate about whether the Internet could

be studied using the tools of existing disciplines, or whether 'cyberculture studies' constituted a new field. In an interview given in 2002, David Silver recalls a keen desire to establish a 'canon' for cyberculture studies:

> There was this professor in Maryland, and I love this guy, but he said, 'You can't have a field, you don't have a canon. You can't have a canon when you don't have any books. I turned around and this was in 1996 when maybe there were only two shelves of books in my office. Now there's this,' Silver said, pointing to no less than 10 shelves packed side to side and up and down with books. 'This is all cyberculture studies ...' (Silver cited in Hill 2002).

The interviewer goes on to note that Silver's longing for a 'canon' was not only motivated by visions of academic respectability, but also out of a feeling of isolation as an Internet scholar: as he puts it, 'I wanted a community' (Hill 2002). This longing to be part of a community of scholars, and the anxiety about whether this can be achieved, underpins much early writing in the field. I wonder now whether this anxiety was perhaps heightened by the very experience of studying online communities, particularly the text-based communities and multi-user games that formed the basis for much (though not all) research at that time. Certainly there was a sense of a vast, complex communities already forming, at such a pace that academic research could not keep up. At the same time, an academic community was beginning to form, but this community often seemed to be in schism: divided between researchers and practitioners; between those with technological and humanities backgrounds; and (especially) between theorists who took a positive, optimistic view of the potentialities of new media, and those who took a more cautious and critical position. With the exception of the various positions inspired by the germinal work of Donna Haraway and generally grouped together as 'cyberfeminist', some of whom argued for what Faith Wilding calls a 'utopian vision' as well as 'a repudiation of old-style feminism' (Haraway 1991, 1995, 1997, Wilding 1998: 6), the latter position was often associated with feminism. A familiar story thus began to emerge: of a cyber-theory presented as masculine, exploratory and daring, versus the constraining maternal voices counselling caution. The field felt polarised, especially between those theorists who were invested in the Internet as a site of

liberation from fixed identity categories, and those who argued that this position would only lead to offline power relations becoming reified in cyberspace, increasing the marginalisation of already marginalised subjects.

Whilst this book is concerned with these issues, it does not seek to argue definitively for one position. Instead, it argues that cyberculture studies needs to pay attention to the importance of power, as well as the continuities and connections between online and offline life (and indeed, this is the direction the field appears to be taking in the early twenty-first century, as we shall see). However, by paying attention to the affectivity of texts and examining the ways in which online texts work to produce a sense of belonging, my argument goes beyond this, intervening in debates around virtual community by challenging the hegemony of the term 'virtual reality' itself. I use the concept of fantasy to examine how 'the virtual' has come to be accepted as the dominant theoretical concept for thinking through the ways in which new technologies are used to create a sense of community. I ask to what extent theories of virtuality work to constitute a fantasy community: I also ask what it might mean to question that dominant status. So, whilst my argument suggests that the category of virtual community be extended to include the Web, it goes on to propose that, if a text can be read as virtual, it can also be read as fantastic. In a sense, virtuality works in a similar way to fantasy in that it represents a means of making connections that bridge the gaps between 'the real' and 'the imagined'.[5] However, in the following chapter, I ask what it might mean to read 'the virtual' as a fantasy, and to ask what fantasies are at stake in theories of virtual reality. Such a reading, I argue, allows us to account for the ways in which 'virtuality' works to reproduce an oppositional relationship between the real and the imagined, and how such a relationship conceals the extent to which they are mutually constitutive. Further, by reading online community through fantasy, my research pays attention

5   For helping me to clarify the notion of 'connections' and 'gaps', as for much else in this chapter, I am indebted to conversations with Rebecca Coleman. For a much more articulate account of the notion of 'gaps', see her book, *The Becoming of Bodies*, forthcoming from Manchester University Press.

to the process by which theories of virtuality have worked to construct 'the virtual' as inherently liberating and have hence tended to obscure the ways in which online communities may exclude some subjects. What is more, it asks how such exclusions work in practice: how do websites and associated texts work to produce and maintain boundaries, and how do these boundaries marginalise some users whilst simultaneously producing a sense of belonging in others?

However, fantasy is not a fixed category which simply provides the theoretical background for my research. Instead, I take advantage of the fact that fantasy is itself a contested term, using fantasy in a number of ways, as a thread that runs through my reading of online communities. In Chapter 2, I go on to look more closely at some of the concerns I have raised in this section, by asking how theories of virtual community have tended to reproduce a particular fantasy of liberation through creating new identities. Whilst this question is central, subsequent chapters continue to problematise the term 'fantasy' by reading the ways in which different websites use fantasy in a variety of ways to create a sense of belonging.

Conclusion and Guide to Chapters

Whilst my desire to read the Internet reflexively stems from an earlier engagement with feminist methodology and epistemology, I have stated that it is also informed by my early experiences of engaging with online communities as a 'newbie', that is a novice or amateur. What does it mean to be a 'newbie'? Traditionally, this term represents a use of language to reinforce a sense of community: hence it may be read as a form of resistance, a deliberate attempt to resist comprehension by the dominant culture. The term 'newbie', besides simply describing a state of being at a certain point in time, has an implied pejorative import:

Newbie

Think adolescent: awkward, clueless, even annoying. That's what you feel like
when you're new to the Web. It can be quite overwhelming at first. Certain online
environments are more tolerant of newbies – like America Online, for example.
If you're a newbie, be patient with yourself. Even the most notorious hacker and
the most eloquent nethead were newbies once! (Young 1998)

The newbie is thus constructed as a figure to be tolerated at best. Such
attitudes of grudging 'tolerance' construct a power relationship between
newcomers and long-time users which threatens to become oppressive.
Despite the designation of her glossary as 'Kinder, Gentler' – (in itself
an ironic play on the language of advertising and thus, perhaps, imply-
ing an acknowledgement of the Internet's place within consumerism, as
a by-product of global capitalism) – Young's insider's view of the newbie
as a barely tolerated annoyance positions the new user as vulnerable and
powerless. This powerlessness of the individual is, in fact, a recurring
trope in the language of the Internet. For example, the expression 'to surf
the Web' tends to naturalise the idea of the Internet as a place, drawing
upon the perception of the sea as a massive and only partially knowable
force of nature. The image of the surfer calls to mind the frailty of the
human subject, and especially the unreliability of human technologies in
establishing mastery over the forces of nature; it also makes all too clear
the distinction between the skilled subject who avoids dangerous immer-
sions, and the novice who places herself in constant danger. As Sherry
Turkle has pointed out, one of the most persistent arguments against the
liberating value of digital culture is the insistence upon the belief in an
autonomous ego which implies investment in the post-Enlightenment
model of the self as capable of, and defined through, such acts of mas-
tery (Turkle 1995: 178). In this discourse, the Internet's constant refusal
to be mastered, is experienced as threatening. The condition of being a
newbie, then, is always presented as precarious and even dangerous, and
in this respect it is related to the position of newcomers or outsiders in
other types of community. In cyberspace, the technologies for excluding
strangers take new forms, principally because the identification of the
outsiders occurs through a reading of text rather than by means of visual

acts of (mis)recognition. Boundaries do not simply exist in a fixed form: rather, they are formed through reading.

In choosing to become a newbie, a greater personal investment is clearly implied than in (for example) simply learning to use a new software package or play an interactive computer game, and this investment is problematic for the researcher. Although many academics have experience of using the Internet as a tool or series of tools (for personal and professional e-mail, for looking up books in library catalogues, for registering for conferences, or as a news service, and so on) without ever coming across terms such as 'newbie', what is at stake here is the right of entry into the paradigm of Internet-as-space, the virtual community of cyberpunk fiction (and postmodern theory). Like all new users, the researcher is positioned within a self-development trope, inscribed in the language of self-help culture, in which use of the Web becomes a personal progression from newbie to nethead, in the process becoming set apart from 'the masses' whose grasp of Internet culture and language is supposed to be inaccurate and inauthentic. For example, the glossary cited above defines the term 'cyberpunk' as 'somewhat out-dated', concluding that 'Hollywood hasn't figured out the term ... and continues to pedal it to the masses in ridiculous movies about cyberspace' (Young 1998).

Whilst I do not want to under-emphasise my own privilege when reflecting on my relationship with the online texts I read here, this prevalence of an exclusionary rhetoric of authenticity raised interesting questions concerning the role of the researcher. Although there is no single feminist methodology, one of the concerns shared by many feminist epistemologists is the importance of reflexivity. Yet, as I will explain further in the following chapter, my argument hinges on a reading of online interaction as reading: I engage with websites not as spaces of encounter, but as texts. Although the online text may be autobiographical and may allow the self to be made intelligible in various ways (as in the case of blogs), my engagement with that text is primarily as a reader. To reflect on the role of the researcher is hence to open up a wider reflection on what it means to read and how reading might be performative. Reflexivity in feminist research has often been discussed in terms of a need to 'put oneself in the text', in order partially to deconstruct the traditional power

relation between subject (researcher) and object (researched) (Skeggs 1995, Reinharz 1992, Fonow and Cook 1991, Stanley and Wise 1990). Of course, not all Internet researchers are newbies. However, when the researcher does approach the Web as a beginner, the traditional power relationship between researcher and subject is already implicitly deconstructed to a certain extent, since the researcher may be in a position of vulnerability in relation to her subject. This tension between deliberately making oneself accountable – for example, by attempting to make the finished research available to the subject – and the vulnerability associated with being a newbie, constitutes both a source of anxiety and an opportunity to work through ethical questions which would otherwise, perhaps, be consigned (in the finished book) to the relatively safe text of the methodology chapter and assumed to have been resolved and stabilised. The study of the Internet rejects such a fantasy of stability. The 'self' that the researcher 'puts into' the text becomes decentred as a result of the tension between the privileged role of academic, and the subordinate positioning of the 'newbie'.

However, as I write this I am aware that I can no longer be said to occupy such a position. This movement between earlier and present reality is, again, a point at which fantasies of the researcher's relationship with her material come into play. By thinking back to my experiences as a newbie, I am aware that I may seem to be claiming a marginality that no longer speaks to my real position as an experienced researcher. By claiming in some sense to speak for the newbie, I am attempting to take up a position that implies certain privileges (not least of which is the privilege of making mistakes), as well as disadvantages. For many feminist theorists, the Internet has great potential to transform lives in a positive way. This potential is often represented as an almost mystical sense of liberation, particularly in relation to gender. So, for example, Sadie Plant has stated that there is a long-standing link between information technology and women's liberation, to the extent that, 'Just as machines get more intelligent, so women get more liberated' (quoted in Cross 1996), whilst other feminist theorists have more cautiously embraced the potential offered by the Web as a means of forming feminist communities (Spender 1995, Smith and Balka 1988).

I have attempted to show here how my argument, which is concerned with mapping the ways in which boundary policing works in the context of online communities, was informed by my early experiences as a new user feeling excluded from communities, and how my original resistance came to be modified through a growing affective attachment to those communities based on an increasing familiarity. However, this is not to claim that such processes are unique to virtual cultures. What is more, it is important to note that the FAQs and glossaries I cite here are provided with the intention of easing the user's progress from the marginality of 'newbie' status to full participation. However, it should also be noted that just as one ideally becomes inducted into the community through the reiteration of certain acts (such as logging on, reading posts, and so on), those very processes might also work to reinforce a sense of not-belonging, of exclusion. An example of this would be where the FAQ pages for a particular community were worded so as to produce a narrative of whiteness or heterosexuality as the norm: this is an ongoing problem of online communities and one that generates activism and resistance.[6] It is important, then, to distinguish between the sense of marginality that derives simply from being a newbie (and which gradually dissipates as one comes to develop a 'sense of belonging') from that occurs as a result of conditions that constantly perpetuate the inclusion of some subjects at the expense of others: indeed, the need to identify specific practices of inclusion and exclusion is a crucial aspect of my argument. Whilst it was my experiences as a newbie that first made me aware of the ways in which a 'sense of belonging' might fail, it is with less contingent and temporary forms of marginality that this book is concerned.

6   For example, there is currently a campaign to protest against Facebook's policy of
     forcing users to select 'male' or 'female' gender identities. At the time of writing,
     the petition launched by the group Campaign for Facebook to have other gender
     options (and to use the word 'gender' rather than 'sex'), has over 9,000 members:
     see http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=2247153069&ref=mf,
     accessed 28 November 2008. This is only one of a growing number of groups call-
     ing for Facebook and other social networking groups to adopt more inclusive and
     queer-positive membership policies.