UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Meeting Online Friends: Personal Relationships in the 21st Century

by

Christine Luft

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY


CALGARY, ALBERTA

NOVEMBER 2007

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate

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in the 21st Century" submitted by Christine Luft in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts.

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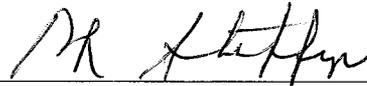
Supervisor, Robert A. Stebbins, Ph.D., Department of Sociology

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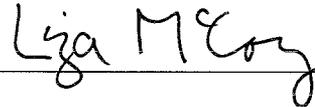
Liza McCoy, Ph.D., Department of Sociology

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Susan Boon, Ph.D., Department of Psychology

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Abstract

There is not yet an extensive body of academic research on how internet friendships move to the realm of face-to-face friendships. This research explores the experiences of people who have met their internet friends in person. It explores how online relationships make the transition to offline relationships, and what the experience of meeting a friend is like for individuals. A grounded theory approach to the phenomenon is used generate rich data from which new ideas concerning internet friendships arise. This thesis explores how individuals engage with a number of discourses surrounding the Internet and internet friendships.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my respondents in this work, without which this thesis would not exist.

I would like to acknowledge the hard work and guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Robert A. Stebbins.

I would like to acknowledge the Department of Sociology, University of Calgary, for offering me a place in their MA program and an opportunity to write this thesis.

I would like to acknowledge the friends and family members who have offered their support and advice during the hard work and struggle that comes along with completing a Master's degree.

Thank you, all.

Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to four women who have been highly influential in my pursuit of higher learning: Inge Lise Luft, Shirley Vickers, and the memory of Elise Hansen and Myrtle Wilma Luft,

Chapter 1:
Why Study the Meetings Of Internet Friends?

At the end of August in 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. Six of my friends were forced to evacuate, as they lived right in the part of the coast which was hit hardest by the hurricane. They evacuated to northern Alabama, eight hours drive away, where they stayed with members of their online World of Warcraft guild. Prior to Katrina, they had never met these friends in person. Because of these internet friendships, they had a safe haven from which to weather out the storm, and in five weeks were safely back home helping rebuild.

Since the mid-1990s, the number of people who have access to the Internet has exploded. In the last decade, the Internet has become more and more relevant to our daily lives, from how we manage our day to day finances, to how we seek information, how we communicate with others, and even the personal relationships we form. There is space online for everyone – the Internet has become a realm where anyone can find information about nearly anything, and where like-minded individuals can create virtual gathering spaces for aficionados with every conceivable interest. Physical distance and nationality are becoming increasingly irrelevant in who can participate in the Internet.

Because of the trans-local nature of the Internet, users have gained the ability to communicate nearly instantaneously with people all over the world, at any time. Increasingly, users are making friends with other users from different parts of the world. These friendships are often based on mutual interests, and some eventually move to the realm of "real life" face-to-face interactions.

Internet meetings are situated within a number of public discourses. One top-of-the mind discourse is the emphasis on the risk of the unknown "other". Internet users are sometimes characterized as aberrant, and there is a popular perception of the Internet as being rife with predators and danger. Despite this, users still form friendships and meet each other in person, and the number of people choosing to meet online friends appears to be growing.

Other discourses surround internet friendships, such as whether or not internet friendships are capable of the same "realness" as face-to-face friendships, and the perceived possibility or impossibility of genuine relationships between internet users. Our culture places a great deal of emphasis on face-to-face relationships, despite the fact that our lives are increasingly mediated by technology which enables and sometimes encourages remote communications. This primacy of face-to-face relationships raises more questions as to how it is that relationships on the Internet are becoming more common and more normalized.

Nevertheless, romances and friendships between internet users do occur, and people do agree and arrange to meet each other. It seems obvious that for some individuals, internet relationships are real enough to act on. Such meetings are academically interesting, because they go against popular understandings of realness and safety.

How users decide to meet, their experiences of actual meetings, and the process involved with meeting are virtually unknown in academic literature. As this is a very new phenomenon, and as there has been so little previous research concerning the meetings of internet friends, a qualitative exploratory approach is highly appropriate. The goal of this thesis is to examine the experiences of individuals who have made and met friends from the Internet, and examine how these individuals interact with the prevailing discourses

surrounding the use of the Internet as a place to make friends. Through the use of interviews I have explored the experiences of 20 individuals, all but one of whom have met friends on the Internet. A number of themes regarding internet friendships and meetings emerged from these accounts. These findings will make up the bulk of this thesis.

Review of the Literature

Research about the Internet has undergone extreme change in the kinds of topics, approaches, and priorities researchers have explored in the last decade. Because the Internet only became widely known and used after 1995, all research concerning the Internet is relatively new.

Wellman, 2004, provides an excellent description of what he calls "The Three Ages of Internet Studies" (Wellman, 2004). Wellman outlines how in the early and mid 90s there was euphoria surrounding the potentials of the Internet. This was matched by supporters of a more dystopian perspective which emphasized the danger and harm to be found in too much net use. There was a tendency to call every interaction on the Internet a community, even when this was not necessarily the case (Wellman, 2004). This was countered by proponents of the idea that no online interaction could ever be considered a community. The dangers of the Internet, especially in terms of sexuality, received a lot of attention in studies by researchers like Freeman-Longo, 2000.

The second age of internet studies Wellman considers as starting around 1998, when the research focus shifted to systematic documentation and a concern over access. Socioeconomic and gender gaps in access and use (Boulianne, 2003; Dittmar, et al, 2004; Jackson, et al, 2001; Wasserman and Richmond-Abbot, 2004 and 2005; Katz, et al, 2001)

were common research foci. Wellman states that the fears of the Internet luring people away from each other seem unfounded: "it seems as if the more people use the Internet, the more they see each other in person (distance permitting) and talk on the telephone" (Wellman, 2004).

Wellman's third age of internet studies moves from documentation into analysis. The kinds of analyses Wellman focuses on are the explorations of relationships and the beginnings of theory. Researchers have moved beyond tales both cautionary and fantastical, and quantitative explorations of who has access to the Internet. More contemporary research has spent a great deal of effort exploring the idea of communities and relationships that form on the Internet (Silverman, 2001; Jordan, 2005; Driskell and Lyon, 2002; Rumbough, 2001; Chan and Cheng, 2004, etc). These relationships and communities are increasingly normalized in the literature. Authors such as Silverman, 2001, cite the changes in academic perception of the Internet, from the aforementioned focus on the Internet as a source of harm in relationships to a focus on how the Internet facilitates the development of relationships.

Friendships are based on relations of mutual trust and knowledge. Zhao and Chen, 2005, adapted Schutz's phenomenological approach to the Internet, further outlining that online interactions are temporally immediate, although they are not necessarily spatially immediate (Zhao and Chen, 2005). These internet friendships may be indicative of a new de-emphasis on the requirement of embodied immediacy in the "realness" of relationships. The formation of a trust relationship has also been linked to the willingness of individuals to represent their "true selves" online (McKenna, et al. 2002).

Other authors cite calls for researchers to make a move to study internet relationships and communities (Rumbough, 2001), but to date, few theories have been explicitly drawn

up for use with these recent phenomena. Most theoretical approaches are adaptations of previous approaches, such as the adaptation of social presence theory used by Chan and Cheng (2004), or the Symbolic Interactionist approach used by Fernback (2007) who found that communities are not constant but evolving phenomena. Others such as Mok, et al (2007) show evidence that distance in relationships and communities has steadily become less of a barrier since the 1970's, well prior to the conception of the Internet, suggesting that the Internet may be the latest in a modern trend in the reduction of the importance of distance in social networks.

The literature on internet relationships is growing, and has become extensive. However, there has been little focus on the kinds of real-life interactions that take place because of internet friendships; and those studies that have investigated real life interactions tend to be focused on the participation of children and child victimization (as found in Drombowski, et al, 2007; and Mitchell, et al. 2005), of adult romantic partners, or of sexual victimization and personal safety. Mesch and Talmud (2007) compared the online and offline relationships of Israeli adolescents, but did not compare adult friendships. Peter and Valkenburg (2007) looked at casual dating on the Internet as it relates to the compensation and recreation hypothesis. Padget (2007) investigated womens' personal safety using online ads aimed at attracting romantic partners. Research focusing on dating sites (Gane, 2005) tends to ignore that friendships both platonic and romantic form on other venues than dating websites alone.

The focus on romances, dating sites, and children has left a gap in our understanding of less emotionally charged phenomena such as the Internet meetings that go on between platonic friends. My research intends to address this gap in the literature, to help understand how relationships evolve from the initial stages of friendship to the eventual meetings and

beyond, and how individuals experience these relationships and the meetings that occur because of them, as well as what distinguishes online romantic relationships from more platonic friendships.

Theory

To a large extent this thesis consists of an inductive, exploratory analysis of my participants' responses. However, there are two theories that me help frame the results of my study in broader scientific context. First, previous personal experience in making friends online suggested that a leisure perspective may be useful in understanding both how friendships form and what people do when they meet friends. To that end, *The Serious Leisure Perspective* (Stebbins, 2006) offers a framework from which to understand aspects of my results. Second, the theories of discourse analysis help understand how participants engage with prevailing beliefs involving the Internet, internet friendships, and online safety.

The serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 2006) holds that mush of leisure is either serious or casual. Casual leisure is the kind of leisure that does not require excessive time or energy commitments outside of actual participation – the "pleasurable, hedonic" (Stebbins 2001c, p 62) activities such as dining out, casual visits with friends, vacationing, and other such forms of leisure. Serious leisure on the other hand involves an intense personal commitment to the leisure activity that sometimes resembles work.

The data in this thesis suggest that leisure, whether serious or casual, can aid the formation of friendships, and the pursuit of activities that friends participate in when they meet. Though this was not the central or sole focus of the investigation, the results did indeed show that leisure plays a role in online friendships. Certainly there are indications of

varying degrees of commitment in internet usage; both Hobbyists and Amateurs are present in online communities. The Serious Leisure Perspective makes a theoretical distinction between the two, with Amateurs being those participants whose work borders on professional, and Hobbyists having similar interest but lacking the specifically professionally oriented commitment.

The Serious Leisure Perspective presents six characteristics that commonly define serious leisure:

> These characteristics are 1) need to persevere at the activity, 2) availability of a leisure career, 3) need to put in effort to gain skill and knowledge, 4) realization of various special benefits, 5) unique ethos and social world, and 6) an attractive personal and social identity. (Stebbins, 2006, pp 11-12)

These characteristics may be present in some of the forms of participation presented in this thesis. As for casual leisure, of its eight types, finding and meeting friends on the Internet exemplify three: play, relaxation, and especially sociable conversation.

Secondly, Gee's (1999) presentation of discourse analysis as both a theory and a method discusses how situated meanings emerge in language. Bell and Garret (1998) discuss media discourse analysis, and how messages are both disseminated by media and received and understood by individuals. Discourse analysis is useful in understanding how individuals engage with prevailing beliefs spread by friends and family, society, and the media. The Internet is situated within a variety of discourses, several of which denigrate internet friendships and the meetings that arise from them. My respondents demonstrated awareness of these discourses, and responded to them in a variety of ways.

The Purpose of this Thesis

Because I perceived a gap in the literature concerning the actual meetings of internet friends, I wrote this thesis, after conducting original qualitative interviews with people who

have participated in making and meeting friends from online. As there is little or no research available on this precise subject and thus, very little theory, it would be inappropriate and possibly even impossible to do a systematic quantitative treatment of the subject. Therefore the reader will not find much in the way of hypothesis testing or statistical models in this thesis. Instead, this thesis will attempt to address the gap in the research by using a grounded theory approach on real people's accounts in order to begin the process of exploring internet friendships and the meetings that arise from them. It is my hope that the beginnings of workable theory may arise from this work. Certainly it may prove a good starting point for further inquiry into this subject.

This is an exploratory thesis, and there is quite a bit to explore. When first faced with the coded transcriptions, I was dismayed at the sheer amount of data. With 20 interviews I certainly did not lack for data from which to draw conclusions. Organizing this data into a coherent form with some semblance of logical flow is the difficult task. My inquiry was layered, and as a result, my data is layered. Yet the boundaries between the layers are blurry and indistinct, and it is not easy to draw clear delineations in the data. Therefore in this write-up there will be overlap. It is difficult to deal with a three dimensional subject in a two dimensional linear space. Nevertheless I will do my best to maintain coherency, though there will doubtless be those who feel that certain sections of the thesis should be moved to other places.

The thesis is organized into five parts. This first part deals with the reason the thesis is being written, other research on similar subjects, how the data was collected, and issues surrounding the actual writing of the thesis. The second part deals with internet friendships in general. This no doubt overlaps with some of the literature, however I am concerned primarily with those friendships which manage to break the "real life" barrier and move to

the face to face stage. I did not extensively inquire as to the differences between those friendships which remain digital and those which move to meetings. This might be something for another researcher to explore.

The third part of this thesis deals with aspects of the meeting, and beyond. This varies from the experiences of the meeting itself for individuals to broader conclusions about a number of different aspects of meetings. This is also the section that discusses internet safety and safety in meetings. The fourth part deals with information I deemed important, but wasn't able to thematically fit into the other two sections, the "errata". Some of this is interesting from a theory standpoint. The rest of this I felt was perhaps not theoretically relevant, but certainly important to include. I have included here some peripherary findings, things that are not central to the thesis yet still important. The final section is the conclusion of the thesis, and my recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2:
Doing the Research

Methods and Sample

Grounded theory is, to paraphrase Glaser and Strauss (1967), theory discovered from data. In this, the researcher analyzes systematically gathered data for the emergence of new themes and theories. Grounded theory lends itself very well to exploration, as Stebbins (2001d) discusses. When there are very few theories or research studies to advise and inform the researcher, grounded theory is an ideal starting point. In this, it is both a theoretical idea and an approach to data collection and analysis.

As a theory, Grounded theory is theory built from the data, and contrasts with confirmatory research where data are used to test theory. In terms of my own study, what this means is that rather than collecting data to use to test existing theory, I am collecting data from which to develop new theories. Considering the relatively unstudied nature of internet friendships, this is entirely appropriate.

As an approach, Grounded theory emphasizes gathering rich and comprehensive data. Care is taken to avoid cutting off or obscuring potential lines of inquiry through researcher presuppositions or bias. Ideally, the goal would be to attain "saturation" in the sample observed and interviewed, where the researcher believes that both the knowledge of the subject and the relevant experiences of the interviewees have been thoroughly explored.

In keeping with my decision to use a grounded theory approach, I conducted 20 qualitative interviews with 20 different individuals. These interviews ranged in length from about 20 minutes to over an hour, and were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by me.

All interviews were conducted face to face and digitally recorded for later transcription. All participation was voluntary, and the respondents had the option of using a pseudonym.

The interviews were semi-structured. For the first interview I used a set of questions developed from my thesis proposal. The results of this first interview helped me to create a group of questions which I then used for the rest of the interviews. Because people's experiences were so vastly different, not all questions were as relevant to all interviews, and different lines of inquiry emerged depending on what respondents told me during the interview. I analyzed the data collected according to the standard coding procedures set out by Glaser (1992), namely, initial coding followed by theoretic coding. This process resulted in the set of concepts and generalizations reported in several of the later chapters of the present thesis.

I used a number of methods to find respondents. Word of mouth and snowball sampling were the most successful, with the "tag on the wall" style advertising following closely. I did get a few respondents through advertising via local print media. Approximately 26 people responded to my advertising and word of mouth, but only 20 people actually completed the interview.

I interviewed people from Calgary and Edmonton and surrounds, as well as several people in the Gulf States (Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama). There were eight women, and twelve men who participated, ranging in age from 18 years old to 35 years old. The mean age was 25.8 years. (This is an estimate, as a digital error caused the age information of one participant to be erased. If memory serves me, this respondent was 23, which would bring the mean to 25.7 years) Levels of education ranged from Grade 8 to Ph.D student, with the majority of participants having some college education. Nine participants were students, two were IT technicians, two worked in sales, two worked in construction, one

was a financial advisor, one a small business owner, one a security guard, and one a homemaker. The occupational information for the first respondent was unfortunately not recorded.

Bear in mind that this is not a systematic quantitative sample which would be expected to be far more representative. Nevertheless, I do believe that my respondents might be considered to be average users of the Internet and average participators in meeting internet friends.

With the exception of one respondent who had not met anyone from online yet, all respondents had met more than one person from online, in more than one separate incident. Each respondent was asked to describe how these friendships had formed and then asked specifically about the first meeting. Then they were asked about subsequent meetings and how those meetings were similar or differed from the first. They were also asked a number of questions about their thoughts and opinions on internet friendships and internet meetings in general, as well as questions about how other people reacted to the idea of meeting internet friends.

All respondents reported enjoying the interview and were quite willing to contribute. At the end of each interview I gave the respondents a chance to give their reactions to the interview or to add anything they felt I might have left out or should be addressed in subsequent interviews. Some took advantage of this, but most chose not to. Rapport was not difficult to establish with anyone, in fact, most respondents were eager to participate and excited about the interview.

The "Joys" of Doing Research

I encountered a number of pitfalls during the data collection phase of this thesis. Foremost of this was the issue of simply finding respondents willing to take the time to complete the interviews. Random encounters on which my thesis subject came up brought about great responses from people, who tended to express interest in the topic, and then proceed to refer me to someone they knew who had had a romantic relationship. This was problematic, as I was looking primarily for platonic friendships. I took this as evidence of the conflation of "meeting people from online" with "meeting romances from online". This was a very difficult conflation to overcome, as people just didn't seem able to separate the romance from online encounters, despite the fact that there are a great number of platonic friendships forming online. This kind of conflation is also seen in the literature with the tendency of researchers to focus on romances and dating sites in particular. Dating sites are particularly popular because they offer easy access to a well defined population to research. Unfortunately, it seems, a large portion of significant interaction goes on in sites that have nothing to do with dating, and these are not always romantic.

The conflation of internet meetings with romances was something I was aware of before I started interviewing. It was one of the reasons I picked friendships as a topic of study; I felt that romances had received enough attention in the literature to the detriment of research on real friendships which were occurring. Because of this conflation, when I designed my advertisements I was very careful to emphasize friendships and avoid using any language that might lead to too many responses from people who had had romances. On the "tag on the wall" advertisement I rejected an illustration of a woman at a computer, travel, and a man at a computer because I knew that people would assume romances with the gendered image. Instead I used an image of two computers "talking", combined with a picture of a globe and suitcases, and finally an image of two women at a café. Despite this,

I sill received responses about romances. Part of the problem, I believe, is that the word "friend" is so very very open to interpretation, and in an internet context *is* often used as a euphemism for a romance, to curb the stigma sometimes associated with internet romances.

Originally I wanted to interview only people who had met friends, and not romances. However as it turned out, a lot of people who had met friends had also met romantic interests, and it also turned out that some of the people who had thought I was doing a thesis on internet romances (this misconception persisted despite all that I did to ensure that people realized I was interested in friendships) also had experiences with friendships. In the end I had enough of both to be able to draw definite thematic distinctions between the two, and this turned out to be fortunate. The inclusion of romances did not drown out the data on friendships, as I had feared. In fact, it has given me an extra dimension of internet relationships to explore.

Another pitfall was the fact that while people were often interested in participating, it was difficult to find the time for them to do so. People tend to (naturally) place their own schedules before interviews, and finding the time to visit people proved problematic. This made the data collection phase a little more time-consuming than I would have desired. I was, however, fortunate to be able to travel while doing data collection, which enabled me to conduct face to face interviews with individuals whom I would otherwise have had to interview via phone or over the net. This eliminated any concerns surrounding text-based interviews or VOIP interviews that would have otherwise arisen. I was thereby able to circumvent the concerns of text interviewing brought up by Davis, et al (2004), from his work involving text-based interviewing. I wanted to avoid text if at all possible, having read Davis's work, and also having had my own experiences using instant messengers and IRC programs for personal use – most individuals simply do not like to type, and will not

give the kind of rich and lengthy responses that we like in qualitative interviewing when they have to type it.

Originally there was going to be a greater serious leisure dimension to this thesis. I had originally intended to use World of Warcraft raiding as an example of a serious leisure connection to the formation of friendships. Unfortunately I was not able to interview more than four World of Warcraft players, which I felt was not enough to draw a strong conclusion in that direction. I did discover that some of my respondents played other MMOs, such as Maple Story and Everquest. Their experiences seemed largely similar to the experiences of the WoW players. While I think a case can be made that this kind of game participation falls under Stebbins' idea of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2001b), the same might be said about many forms of participation on the net. In fact, it's difficult to say for sure that something is or isn't casual leisure (as Stebbins, 2001a, defines the concept) on the net, although it's a little easier to say that some things are obviously serious leisure. MMOs in particular seem prone to becoming a serious leisure endeavor for their players. Why this may be is a topic for another research study, indeed, Mark Silverman's (2006) MA work explores how players become drawn into the game universe of an MMO, from a serious leisure perspective.

I was lucky enough to find a good digital recording software package that also had a transcription program bundled with it. Tapes are becoming more and more obsolete and I didn't want to have to rely on my department's few remaining tape recorders and tape transcribing machines. Instead I was able to use my laptop as a recording device. I rented microphones from the University for some of the interviews until circumstance and timing forced me to use the microphone from the headset I used for gaming. Oddly enough, the sound quality from the headset turned out to be more than good enough for my purposes,

which saved me the expense and headache of renting microphones and returning them in a timely manner. As a result of the use of the laptop, all my recordings and transcriptions were effortlessly digitized and easy to back up. I would recommend using digital recording and transcription solutions to any researcher doing interviews. This method also has the advantage of making the ultimate disposal of the actual interview recordings that much easier. There are no tapes to smash or burn or erase, one can simply delete the file, and if one is concerned, do a Department of Defense level format on the disk where the files were stored and render them literally impossible to retrieve. Digital transcriptions are likewise easier to dispose of, or if desired, retain indefinitely. As long as backups are made in multiple locations, including 3rd party storage, you can securely retain any data indefinitely without worrying about fire or water damage or random theft.

Sampling in an online environment is not as easy as one might suppose. The reader may question the representativeness of geographically clustered samples. I would propose that geographically clustered samples are more likely to reflect general internet use than online sampling. When you gather volunteers from online, you are necessarily gathering them by subgroup and interest. This means that you will always have a bias in your selection, since it is impossible to access every subgroup or interest on the net. With "real world" sampling, you're more likely to get a wider variety of users who use the Internet for a wider variety of reasons. In this respect, I feel that my sample is much more representative than if I had done most of my recruiting online.

It is impossible to remain entirely objective in any research endeavor, if only for the simple fact that we research those subjects which are interesting to us and in that interest have a certain degree of inherent bias. I am of the opinion that it is far more harmful to pretend that one is not biased and fail to take this into account than it is to recognize that we

may have certain expectations and guard against researcher created threats to validity. Grounded theory often assumes the researcher approaches with a clean slate, which is, technically speaking, an impossibility. In starting this research, I strove to identify where and what my preconceptions of the subject might be. I took care to attempt to create lines of questioning which would not encourage responses along specific lines. Of course I had my guesses as to what some of my potential findings would be, but I allowed for the unexpected and was not disappointed. While some of my findings were concurrent with what I had anticipated, much of what I discovered I had not expected. It was not so much that they were contrary to any notions I might have had, but that I simply didn't anticipate their presence. These findings are surprising, and pleasing. They are also evidence that, to a large extent, my approach was able to overcome a common research pitfall; that of only discovering the expected results due to an inability to accommodate new information. I feel confident that my findings, while assuredly not "the whole story", are at least valid in the sense that what I discovered exists, and is probably recognizable to many who participate in meeting online friends. No doubt a fresh mind would be able to discover something that I've missed in my transcripts, but I feel confident that I have at least caught the most relevant findings.

Some Notes to the Reader

The Internet is fraught with jargon. Although I have attempted to reduce jargon use in this thesis, it's not possible to eliminate this entirely. In order to ensure that the jargon can be understood, I have included a glossary in the appendix of this thesis. There, the reader will find terms such as "Raiding" "VOIP", and other arcane references described.

Some of my participants are using pseudonyms, which they had the opportunity to choose. I do not indicate in this thesis who is and is not using a pseudonym (although sometimes this may be obvious), in order to leave an extra layer of anonymity between my respondents and their contributions.

I take issue with the term 'real life' to refer to the offline, physical world. It implies that what happens online is not real and does not have real world consequences. Nothing could be further from the truth, what happens online may indeed have very very serious consequences for a person's physical offline life. As we are starting to discover with fraud and impersonation, the online world can affect the offline world. Because of this perception of unreality, when I use the term 'real life', I problematize it by putting it in quotes. I don't have a better term for the offline world, at least not one that isn't cumbersome, so I feel obliged to use "real life". But while the reader reads this thesis, please bear in mind that the online world isn't necessarily any less "real" than the offline world.

I have chosen to use the word 'relationship' in its more broad and general definition. When I use the word relationship, it is as a general term for any kind of online personal relationship, whether a romance or a friendship. The word has started to take on a colloquial definition of romance, however, which is why I wish to make it clear when I use the word 'relationship' I am not referring specifically to romances.

Chapter 3:
Making Internet Friends

When the Internet started to become widely used by a variety of people, a number of fears were raised that people would lose touch with each other and become anti-social because of their internet use. Especially concerning was the fate of the young, who were going to grow up immersed in the medium. However, as time went on, it became apparent that, at least for most of us, the Internet did not create an army of pasty anti-social basement dwellers. As Wellman's (2004) review of internet research shows us, most researchers found that the more we used the net, the more we got involved with each other in "real life" as well. Researchers such as Driskell and Lyon (2002) showed that *some* online groups could be considered communities, even if they didn't fit the classical rooted-in-place definitions of yesteryear. Researchers and laymen began to realize that friendships and communities were indeed possible online.

Although research exists on the practice of making friends online (such as Mok, et al. 2005; Henderson and Gilding, 2004; and McKenna, et al, 2002) I've decided to investigate the friends-making process in this thesis as well. This may touch on other people's work, but I feel it is important, because something made these friendships different enough that they moved to the face-to-face world. This "something" may be an intangible, an indefinable. It may not be possible to identify exactly what makes one friendship have the potential to move to "real life", while another remains entirely online. Yet I feel it is still important to cover in this thesis the friends-making processes that my respondents experienced.

The first issue I'd like to discuss is how people meet. How individuals first met has an impact on their relationships and whether or not they ultimately move towards a face-to-

face friendship or stay online friends. How people meet also reflects why and how they use the Internet. As I will demonstrate, there are differences in the kinds of friendships that arise through different forms of internet use. In addition, I have noticed differences in the way friendships are "done" between romantic and non-romantic friendships. In this next part, I will examine the differences in friendships based on how people meet, and also based on the kind of relationship they form.

How People Meet – Intentional and Unintentional Friendships

The people I interviewed could be drawn into two distinct groups in terms of why they use the Internet. The first, and largest part of my sample, are the individuals who use the Internet for general leisure purposes, such as surfing the web for information and pleasure, participating in hobbies or hobby discussions, game-playing, and the like. The second group uses the Internet specifically to meet people. These are people who use the web predominantly to visit networking or dating sites. They may surf the net for non-interactive content, but they characterize their internet use as being primarily for the purpose of meeting others online. This second population is the population that has received the most attention in the literature, partly because it is easy to get at.

There are problems with this, mainly in the two assumptions that this is the only way people meet, or that other forms of friends-making and meetings are identical to those that derive from dating sites. I have discovered this is not the case. There is a distinct difference in the kinds of friendships that come out of different kinds of meetings, and these differences are rooted in how and why people became friends in the first place.

In this thesis, I have divided friendships into two categories: those that derive out of using the Internet with the intent of making friends, and those that derive through other

means. I call the first group "intentional friends" and the second group "unintentional friends", to reflect the purposeful or serendipitous nature of the friendships.

Four members of my sample reported using the Internet specifically to meet people in the "real world". All four were doing so for romantic purposes. For Danny[1], this was the primary reason he gave for using the Internet. Shane, Ed and Anabahs used the Internet for other reasons such as keeping in contact with existing friends and family, but most of the meetings they reported came out of using the Internet specifically to meet dates. In general, they used services that allowed them to post profiles on the dating site or service containing personal information, and to view the profiles of others. My four participants reported making friends by finding and reading people's profiles and then sending them private emails indicating their interest in getting to know the person better, or having received similar emails from people who read their profiles. This profile reading and emailing was how they initially started the relationships, and is generally understood to be how dating sites work.

From the initial emails expressing interest, the relationships progressed through additional emails, instant messengers, and sometimes even telephone voice communication. Respondents described a mutual process of self-revelation, where rapport was established by gradually revealing and receiving more personal information about each other. This intensive sharing helped build the trust relationship and strengthen the friendship. For some of the respondents, less than satisfactory prior experiences caused them to become more guarded in later relationships, picking and choosing what kind of personal information they would and would not reveal. For Shane, who had a disastrous first meeting, this was

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[1] As previously mentioned, some names are pseudonyms, and some are real by choice of my respondents. I do not reveal which are real and which are created.

especially the case. Shane describes having been very forthcoming about his personal life and secrets in his first online relationship. In the second online relationship, he was far less forthcoming, leaving out a great deal of personal information:

> SHANE: I wasn't sure if that's part of the thing where I had went wrong in the first time. And I felt it wouldn't come into play in this relationship. I didn't get the feeling from this person that they were looking for anything long term, so I didn't feel that my past would ever really become an issue where it needed to be brought up. (Shane)

The respondents also described these exchanges as taking place over a period of time, the exact length varying from a few weeks to a few months or even a year or more. Danny had an interesting account involving the length of time of the relationship before meeting: in his experience women who wanted to meet right away were likely to be prostitutes using the Internet to find johns. After meeting one such woman and realizing quickly that what he had thought was a date was in fact expected to be a business transaction, Danny became leery of individuals who were too quick to propose a face-to-face meeting.

Danny also expressed frustration with women who used dating sites with no intention of ever bringing the relationship to the real world, this frustration was echoed by others. A characterization of this sort of individual, which more than one respondent presented to me, was that of the unhappy housewife, who was missing something in her relationship that she was trying to fill online through online boyfriends. It's interesting to note, that this sort of individual *was* usually characterized as being female and already in a relationship, and that "her" reasons for doing this were psychological. For Danny, the unhappy housewife was someone who would "waste his time", as his whole purpose for being on the net was to meet dates in "real life", and the unhappy housewife will not meet face-to-face. So for Danny, both online relationships that are too short and those that are too long are red flags indicating that the friendship is impossible in the face-to-face world.

From what my respondents indicate, it seems that the relationships that form by using dating sites start out as romantic. This might seem a little bit obvious, however, an examination of most dating sites quickly shows that they have the option for "friends searching for friends". I did not interview anyone who used the dating site for finding platonic friends. These individuals may exist, but they may be difficult to find. It would be interesting to see research comparing people who use dating sites to make platonic friends to people who use those sites specifically for romantic purposes. It is interesting to note, however, that though these friendships started out intending to be romances, if they did not fizzle altogether, they sometimes became platonic friendships. Anabahs describes meeting one of her closest male friends through a dating site. This relationship was supposed to be a romance, yet turned into a deep and lasting friendship. Ed had a similar experience with a romance that turned into a more platonic relationship. Danny maintains friendly contact with a large portion of the people he dates from online. Not all potential romance partners work out as friends, however. My respondents describe a number of friendships that ended with the first meeting. As will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6, what happens during the actual meeting has a lot to do with whether or not friendships will survive *past* the first meeting.

Of those whom I interviewed, the vast majority talked about inadvertently making friends. These friendships were unintentional – presumably neither party set out to join the venue with the express purpose of making friends or meeting people in real life. These kinds of friendships formed in a variety of venues, and the venues themselves have an impact on the ways in which friendships form and persist over time. Almost universally, these friendships formed when my respondents participated in hobbies or subcultures they

were interested in. The original draw to the community was interest based. I will discuss two different kinds of venue – sites on topics of interest, and games.

One of the wonderful aspects of the Internet is the fact that websites can be found devoted to just about everything a person could possibly be interested in. People quickly learn how to find sites on topics they are interested in, and a large proportion of these sites also have member areas where people can log in to discuss whatever it is they are interested in. Often times, forums and chat channels spring into being where people can actively discuss their interests with other, like minded individuals. This is where we find the first kind of unintentional friendship my respondents experienced.

In terms of leisure, these websites are almost always connected to leisure interests. These range from the very casual to the very serious. While I found it difficult to inquire whether or not someone's participation was casual or serious, my respondents did show evidence of participating in serious leisure. Aendrew's annual musical participation with his online friends in his hometown shows evidence of being a form of project-based leisure. Amy's fan site was the focus of a great degree of her time and effort and has become a small business, indicating an Amateur undertaking; and Kirsten's description of the time and effort involved in the "Shipping" fan-fiction writing community suggests that, while it is normally a Hobbyist undertaking, for some individuals it becomes an Amateur pursuit. The mere fact that people seek participation in leisure communities online after discovering them suggests that they have some kind of commitment to that leisure activity. The extent of an individual's commitment to the particular leisure activity – who is an Amateur (or even a Professional), and who is a Hobbyist, may be the focus of additional studies in the future.

As alluded to above, forums and chat channels are the usual methods of communication on interest-based sites. Not all interest-based sites have methods for people to communicate with each other, but those that do often find a community develops on the site around the forum or the chat. The fact that there is a variety of software packages for forums that are free or low cost and easy to manage and develop, has allowed forums to proliferate widely across the net. Literally anyone can create a forum. Chat sites are similar, with a number of simple options for java-based chats or Internet Relay Chat (IRC). This has allowed communities to form up around just about anything under the sun. These communities range in size from a few people to hundreds, even thousands of users. Of all of my respondents, only Danny and Shane had not reported participating in some form or another of online community such as this.

In interviewing my participants, a few patterns formed as to how these relationships develop. The first looks generally like this: at some point during the respondent's general participation in the forum or chat, a discussion will open up between the respondent and another individual, usually based on a further exploration of a specific line of discussion. At some point, the individuals involved will make the decision to continue the conversation, usually on a one-on-one, private level. Forum users report switching to Instant Messengers (IM) or forum mail services, chat users report using IMs or private chat functions. With those individuals that eventually become friends, a rapport develops. Pairs start to exchange personal information in small amounts, and the classic trust relationship of mutual self-revelation builds. This concurs with some of Henderson and Gilding's (2004) findings, and also with McKenna, et all (2002), who found that individuals who disseminate their "true selves" form much deeper attachments online. This trust relationship, as with the romances mentioned earlier before, is almost universal. For most

individuals, it is the condition which *must* exist before the respondent even considers someone a friend. For some individuals this was the point at which the relationship became "real" to them, the point at which the entity on the other end was no longer a random unknown but a real live person.

Another pattern that emerged was that of getting to know other members of the chat or forum through open revelations, rather than through revelations in private. Instead of specifically choosing to exchange personal information, these individuals instead post snippets of their personal lives, and others get to know them almost vicariously through these public assertions. This tends to be more gradual and less focused, but it has the same effect for some individuals as private revelations. Rapport grows, and people eventually start seeing the unknown other behind the electron stream as a real person with a real personality. From that point, the relationship may move to a more one-on-one level, and rapport will deepen. This kind of public getting to know one another is more inclusive, in that it creates a circle of friends rather than a pair. A good example of this kind of circle of friends developing is Kirsten's experiences with a TV show fandom forum she was involved in. Over a few years, a rapport grew between the regulars of the forum, eventually culminating in the idea to meet face-to-face.

This is a good point at which to examine the idea of "realness" in online friendships. Upon asking about when online relationships become real, two trends emerged. For a proportion of my respondents, the friendship was real the moment the previously mentioned rapport or trust relationship was established. These individuals often expressed their belief in the idea that internet friendships and real life friendships were not significantly qualitatively different from each other. The other group, however, insisted that

the friendship could not be real until it actually moved to a face-to-face meeting.[2] Members of this group usually expressed a belief that it was not possible to be as close to someone online as it was face-to-face. The term 'friendship', for these individuals, was clearly rooted in physical existence. This group was especially interesting, because it seemed that a form of cognitive dissonance emerged, in that they indicated that they did not believe that "friendship" was possible online, yet they clearly participated in some form of online friend making in order to get to the point of meeting others. Their stated beliefs and practices did not always seem to match. These respondents also resonated with the idea that people online are potential friends until a physical meeting, at which point they may or may not become actual friends. Until that point, the person on the other end could be anyone or anything, but it was not yet a friend.

It might be worthwhile for further research to investigate these two trends, to see how much of the online population ascribes to either, or if there are other trends at work. It would also be interesting to see how deep a correlation exists between the point at which the relationship is defined as being real and the beliefs concerning whether or not internet friendships are comparable to real life friendship. It could be that these two factors are actually different expressions of a single factor.

Friends made via an Online Role Playing Game context were similar in the ways they started, in that they tended to be either one-on-one evolutions of rapport or circle-of-friends evolutions of rapport. However they were qualitatively different in some regards. For one,

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[2] What is another person on the Internet if they are not "real?" My respondents described three kinds of "unreal" person – the robot, a script designed to make automated replies to certain key words, the criminal, someone who is attempting to commit a crime (usually fraud), and the pretender, someone who is pretending to be other than what they are in real life (the classic example given was of the 40-year old, balding, fat, uncleanly, sweaty man who was pretending to be a teenaged girl) for whatever reason.

friends in a game setting almost always had the opportunity to participate *in* something together. The game environment itself offered a chance for rapport in requiring players to work together closely to succeed. Whether serious or casual, leisure is an inextricable part of online game playing. I also would argue that game playing is immersive, far more so than chats or forums. Chats and forums can be easily put down, they can be picked up again later. Especially with forums, individuals can take time to craft responses and decide what to discuss. Chats are somewhat more immersive than forums, but neither are as immersive as Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs, often referred to simply as MMOs), which require that the player be physically present at the keyboard, and proxy or robotic play is not permitted. This means that when players are in the virtual world they are present in an immediate manner, and they are present for the entire duration of play. Interactions occur live, and are structured by the game.

What's more, normally players join associations such as guilds or clubs in which they spend time and communicate with a clearly defined group of people. An online game such as World of Warcraft (WoW) may be played by millions, with thousands of people being on any particular server at a given time. Guilds provide a smaller pool of people to play and associate with. Guildmates have easy access to live, in-game chats and communication shared with other guildmates, and are aware of each other's presence online, no matter where the others may be in the game world. Unlike a friends list, guild chat includes all members of the guild who are online at a time, rather than specific individuals. Guilds come in a number of forms, and different kinds of friendships form from these different forms. My respondents who played games were mostly drawn from raiding guilds, which experience friends making somewhat differently than other kinds of guilds. I have,

however, almost 3 years of direct observation in several different kinds of guilds, and I have observed distinct patterns emerging.

One of the more common forms of guild is the "friends and family" guild. These guilds spring up around a real life network of friends and family who play the same game together. Some of these remain small and close-knit, others expand to include newcomers into the circle of friends. These new friends are made through shared play experiences, and are gradually absorbed into the guild family. Friends of friends often get pulled into these guilds. There is an expectation that everyone in the guild is known by at someone else in the guild, if not everyone else. I actually encountered Leslie through this kind of friend of a friend networking, when I joined the guild she was in in order to play with a real life friend. Although my interview with Leslie did not discuss our relationship, this is anecdotally interesting. I did not interview anyone who had made friends specifically this way, although it is an important question for future research: to see how these kinds of friendships differ from those formed in raiding guilds.

The second kind of guild I would like to discuss is the "megaguild". These are guilds which judge their in-game success based on the sheer number of people in the guild. It is not uncommon for these guilds to reach hundreds of members in size, with some notable ones reaching thousands of members. Megaguilds tend to be huge and impersonal. There are simply too many individuals in the guild actively playing for people to be able to easily form rapport. This is not to say this is impossible, however in my mind it seems far more unlikely than rapports formed in smaller guilds. There seems to be a size at which it becomes difficult to personally know others in the guild. Sociologists who study small groups posit that once group size grows significantly above 20, the number of meaningful ties that can form between members of the group becomes overwhelming (Stebbins, 1987,

p 103-4). Stebbins (1987) also cites Back's definition of a small group as any groups that is "small enough for all members to interact simultaneously… [and has] a minimum conviction of belonging to the group" (Stebbins, 1987, p 104). From my observations, once a guild gets larger than about 60-100 active individuals, it gets exceedingly difficult to form closer bonds with other guildmates. Below that threshold, it is still possible for members to interact closely with each other.

The third kind of guild is the raiding guild. Raiding guilds are created specifically to overcome in-game challenges that cannot be faced with small groups. In WoW, the most successful raiding guilds are those that are *just* large enough to field a full 40 man raid with a few spares – under 60 players with no inactive players or players under the maximum level. These players consider themselves the game-playing elite. Silverman's (2007) thesis on power gaming analyzes the power gaming elite and the transition from "regular player" to power gamer. Competition for entry in the top guilds is fierce, with entrance requirements sometimes being quite similar to those found in the job market of the face-to-face world. The further down the totem pole of raid success one looks, however, the easier it is to get into a guild, since everyone wants to be at the top and the top guilds usually require prior experience before they will permit entry. Membership in raiding guilds tends to center around a fairly static core with a varying degree in player turnaround on the fringes. This more or less solid guild roster, combined with the intense bonding experience of the actual act of raiding itself, helps form deep rapports between players.

Unlike other guilds, which may vary in terms of leisure participation, a raiding guild and the act of raiding is very much a form of serious leisure. Frequent and intensive participation is mandatory or one loses one's position in the guild. Sometimes participation exceeds paid work participation in length of time spent preparing for raids and actually

raiding. Raiding entails a personal commitment far beyond that of other forms of game play. Raiding fits most of the six characteristics of serious leisure (Website): 1. perseverance and practice are vital to raid success, as there is a huge learning curve; 2. One cannot simply go to a raid the first time and expect success, constant character development and skill development are required; 3. special benefits in terms of in-game rewards that are far superior to anything available outside of raids are present, and obtaining these rewards garners the respect of other players; 4. the world of an MMO is necessarily a unique social world, and World of Warcraft is certainly no exception – it has developed its own standards of what "counts" and what is respectable; and 5. participants identify quite strongly with their in-game successes. In addition, it can be argued for some that this participation takes on career proportions, although as yet, World of Warcraft has only existed for close to three years, which makes assessing that somewhat more difficult.

The one-on-one friendship occurs quite readily in a raiding guild, as inevitably a portion of "real life" leaks over to guild life. This is especially the case in a "Hard Core" raid guild, as all absences must be excused and cleared with the guild leaders. Raiders soon learn, for instance, that "Stomper"[3] will not be able to make raids for a while because his six-year old daughter is sick with the flu. Or that "Medica"[2] is getting married in July and going on a two-week honeymoon to Hawaii. A huge amount of personal information leaks into the guild chat in a hard core guild, whether intended or not. It becomes difficult to *avoid* getting to know the other members in the guild. Add to this the fact that these guilds often have required voice participation using Ventrilo (Vent) or Teamspeak (TS), and a culture emerges surrounding the Vent community. Non hard-core guilds differ only in the degree to which this occurs. This kind of constant, intensive interaction tends to produce both one-

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[3] Not the real names of users I have known, created for this illustration.

on-one friendships and the circle of friends seen previously. Three of the four individuals I interviewed who met friends from World of Warcraft were or had been members of hard core guilds. The fourth was a member of a raiding guild which had not yet attained "hard core" status.

In between the friends and family and the raiding guilds are the starter guilds, guilds that wish to *start* raiding but have not yet managed to reach the threshold of players of the right level and character type to start. In my observation, if this kind of guild does not successfully make the transition from friends and family guild to raid guild in a relatively quick amount of time, it tends to fragment as members leave, either to join a more friends and family oriented guild or an already successful raid guild. My guess would be that friendship with members from this guild would probably hinge on whether the members stay in the same groups. Nobody in this kind of guild was included in my analysis, however, so this is speculation.

I have only had direct observational experience in the friends making process in World of Warcraft guilds. In addition, those gamers that I interviewed specifically about their game playing friendships were World of Warcraft players. However, I do know from anecdotal accounts from people who have played World of Warcraft and other MMOs such as Everquest that these kinds of guild experiences do tend to happen in at least some other games. Such games as City of Heroes/Villains, Asheron's Call, Dark Age of Camelot, Starwars Galaxies, Final Fantasy XI, and others are often considered by players to be similar in terms of their guild experiences, although not necessarily by their game play. In fact, World of Warcraft is by far the most "soloable" of the current similar style MMORPGs; most of the others demand constant group play in order to be successful. Thus

I feel confident that the process of making friends with guildmates will not differ drastically from game to game.

Summary

To summarize, two general kinds of unintentional friendships form, the one-on-one friendship that is both a part of the greater community yet detachable from it, and the circle-of-friends friendship which is created by the greater community and not necessarily detachable from it. Of course, romances also form, but these generally stem from one-on-one contact. Both the romances and the platonic friendships of unintentional friendships differ significantly from the more purposeful romances and friendships discussed earlier in this thesis. Those participants who engaged in intentional relationships on the web indicated an understanding that the relationships formed would eventually move to real life. This was the purpose of the involvement in the dating sites and online dating scene: to meet someone in real life. In the case of the unintentional friendship, my participants did not set out to make friends, in many cases it "just happened". While some of these friendships did move eventually to the face-to-face stage, this is not necessarily expected of all friendships. Indeed, my respondents occasionally mentioned people that they had no desire to meet. Not all friends are people they wish to meet in real life. Some stand out from the pack. From the accounts of my respondents, what causes someone else to stand out is largely personal and varies by individual, but usually has something to do with the notion of "clicking", of making a strong and good connection with the other. In chapter 5, I will begin to discuss more about the actual meetings that take place based on these friendships.

Chapter 4:
The Internet as a Place to Make Friends

In the previous chapter I discussed something of the hows and whys of internet friendships. In this chapter, I intend to discuss the Internet itself as a place to make friends. It is important to remember that everything that exists on the Internet is there because someone put it there. This may seem obvious, but it has an implication that is often forgotten. All things that exist on the Internet are owned, either by a person or group of people, or by corporations or governments. There is someone ultimately responsible for the content of a particular website, or for the administration of communication websites or of games, or of other online programs. There is no true "Third Space," or public property, on the Internet. Some entity has absolute control over what is or is not allowed on its particular property.

Internet as Mediated Space

In this thesis, I am using the term "mediated space" to refer to the ways in which our actions and communications are shaped and channeled, either purposefully or accidentally, by the venues we use to communicate. This is similar to the environmental design notion of mediated spaces, where physical or non-physical space itself can be specifically created to encourage certain forms of interaction or behaviour and discourage others. On the Internet, some of these forms of mediated space are intentional, such as those found in game worlds or on moderated forums and chats, others are unintentional, or even a product of the Internet itself. The fact that no part of the Internet is truly public property means that all portions of the Internet are necessarily some form of mediated space.

Mediated spaces are important in the discussion of internet friendships because they have an impact on whether friendships form and persist over time. They represent the portion of a friendship's success that is external to the individuals involved, the mechanical facts that permit people to meet and communicate in the first place, or which push people apart. These are things that are mostly outside of the "click", or emotional equation, and individuals may not have much control over them. Yet they still exert some influence over friendships.

The Internet itself is a mediated space, one that both permits certain interactions and makes impossible others. For one, in order to use the Internet, an individual must have access to a computer capable of accessing the Internet and to a connection to the Internet. This automatically disqualifies billions of people who live without what we North Americans take for granted, such as electricity or access to even a library with a public use computer. A certain degree of computer literacy is also required to access the Internet, as well as a high degree of language literacy – most of the Internet requires that a person is able to read in order to participate. Lack of these things exclude individuals from ever participating in the Internet and thus making internet friends.

Once on the Internet, it helps to share a common language with others who use the Internet. The "World Internet Usage Statistics" give English and Chinese users both at 31.7% of the Internet each, and Spanish users as the next most populous at 8.8% (*Internet World Stats*, June 30, 2007). Therefore knowledge of English or Chinese would permit an individual the most access to content on the Internet, and those who do not speak English or Chinese at all are at a disadvantage in terms of the size of the online community and accordingly, the proportion of the Internet available to them in their native tongue.

In addition, a person's nation of citizenship may have an impact on what that person can access due to legal restrictions or government censorship. For instances, it is common knowledge at the time of this writing that the People's Republic of China has sought to prevent any individual residing within China from accessing any and all information on certain subjects. This policy has garnered a large amount of criticism from other nations. More acceptable in world opinion is the attempt to shut down child pornography on the Internet, also commonly known to be a goal of many countries at the time of this writing.

The above illustrates how the Internet can prevent users from interacting. Yet for those who manage to get online and who share a common tongue, the Internet can also provide opportunities for interaction that would otherwise be impossible. Because real time interactions can occur simultaneously, distance and time zone are often irrelevant. Of course the simple fact of the need for sleep would make it difficult for all internet users everywhere in the world to be able to talk simultaneously to each other, however enough people keep odd schedules that interactions do occur between markedly different time zones.

Non-real time interactions, such as email or forum participation, are of course still available. In decades and centuries previous, it was necessary for individuals to occupy the same physical space, to physically meet each other, in order to form friendships, with the relatively uncommon exception being carried out via written communication – pen-pal correspondence. With the advent of the Internet, people could now easily contact people with whom they had never and might never share physical space with, and this was not restricted to the small number of people who had pen-pals. There are similarities between pen-pal friendships and internet friendships, including the fact that both friendships tend to be organized according to interest and can transcend great distances and time zones.

Internet friendships are simply faster. Indeed, several of my respondents also drew a link between their internet friendships and pen-pals they have had or known about.

When it comes to individual venues on the net, there are a myriad of ways space can be mediated. Some sites require members to pay membership fees, which restricts who can and will be a part of them. Many online games also have monthly user fees, and require credit cards to access. Financial reasons may thus prevent some users from accessing things they are interested in. Forums and chats are often moderated, with specific rules allowing and disallowing certain kinds of interactions. People who break these rules are often removed and may not be permitted to return. On a forum or chat where there is no way to send a private message and posting personal information such as email addresses or IM addresses is not allowed, individuals or circles may never have the means by which to contact each other for more intimate conversation. The rules and how they are enforced will have an impact on who has access to the community and what they can say. In addition, cliques form on the Internet as readily as they form in the real world, and individuals may be drummed out for not "toeing the party line". Kirsten described an event similar to this, where she had been a dissenting voice in a circle of friends, and then was made to feel unwelcome, which eventually led to her leaving the venue entirely.

When people leave the venue, friendships often dissolve with the leave-taking, especially if the main or sole form of communication was via the venue. Unless both parties make an effort (and it must be an active effort) to maintain ties to each other, leaving a venue can be a death sentence to a nascent friendship. Communication may decline in frequency. This has happened to a lot of my respondents, who described losing contact with people and having their lives change so much that it was difficult to keep up with each other. If, at a later date, someone who has vanished makes contact again, my

respondents were usually quite happy to get into contact with the former friend or potential friend. However sometimes they discovered that one or both of them have outgrown the friendships; life has changed and they may no longer share interests and opinions.

The state of "falling off the Internet" or "falling off the face of the Internet" was raised by several respondents, both local and non-local, who had experienced the sudden, mysterious cessation of communication with a friend. These were terms used both spontaneously by my respondents and by myself, which suggests that "falling off the Internet" has become a term that is commonly understood to mean the mysterious or unplanned disappearance of a friend. This kind of disappearance is disruptive to friendships, and often leaves friends worrying about each other. Did the other lose access, have a major life change, get injured, or even die? Sometimes the reason for disappearance is simply that the other got bored and went elsewhere, but internet users often feel a degree of discomfort at the thought that a friend might die or suffer an injury or medical problem and they would never know. This was a fear that was echoed by my respondents, along with the fear that if something happened to them, they would be unable to get word out to their online friends.

Because we are generally cautioned not to share passwords or user IDs with others, next of kin may have no way of contacting online friends to inform them of the death of an internet user. Anecdotally, one of my relatives discovered a year and a half after the fact that an internet friend she had, had passed away. It was a sad and shocking revelation for her, and the idea that she could go a year and a half without knowing a friend had died was not comforting. The death of friends is upsetting at the best of times; the feeling of having being ignorant of such a major event and thus not able to grieve at the "proper time" adds even more distress and discomfort to the incident.

An Illustration

World of Warcraft is an excellent study in how game environments can shape and even dissolve online friendships. Firstly, World of Warcraft is divided into two different factions, Alliance and Horde, neither of which can talk to each other in any way, shape, or form while in game, as there is no shared language and only a small number of default "emotes" or actions, which are intelligible to others. Nor can members of opposing factions see if members of the other faction are online. In addition, World of Warcraft players tend to strongly identify with their factions. There is an artificial enmity created between the Horde and the Alliance, and it is considered to be appropriate, even laudable, to hinder members of the other faction where possible. Since this game can be highly competitive, especially on Player versus Player (PVP) servers, this can sometimes evolve into online vendettas. This makes it difficult for cross-faction friendships to form, although not impossible for the demographic which enjoys playing both factions. Faction both restricts access to other individuals, and applies pressure to individuals to act in the interests of their faction, which has been constructed by the game creators as inimical to the other.

On Role Playing (RP) servers there is another barrier to friendships – the expectation to be "in character" at all times. Because players are encouraged to create personas, it may be difficult or impossible to have discussions involving personal, "out of character" information. Also, people who play too true to their personas may alienate others. For instance, a person playing an Undead Rogue may create a persona of an unpleasant criminal who cares nothing for others and is motivated by selfishness and greed. Or a person playing a Human Paladin may give that character the persona of a religious zealot who hates anyone who isn't as zealous as he or she is. Neither of this kind of persona

would be likely to attract friends. It might be difficult in an RP context to break through the persona to discover the real human player controlling it. Nevertheless friendships *do* develop on RP servers, but may be restricted to guild contexts or contexts where there is less pressure to stay in character all the time. However, there are fewer users in RP servers in World of Warcraft than in the servers that do not require players to create and maintain personas.

The game is structured around activities, most notably around quests, instances, and raids. Most quests can be done solo, however all quests are easier with other players. Instances and raids require parties of between 5 and 40 characters of the right level. In addition to guild friendships (which I have discussed previously), my respondents relate friendships forming with people whom they habitually form parties with. Once people find others with whom partying is easy and enjoyable, they tend to wish to party with those people again where possible. As in guilds, length of exposure leads to a certain degree of familiarity with the others and their real lives. Sometimes these party friends go on to join each other's guilds in order to be closer to each other and have more to do with each other. These may be the first steps in the creation of a deeper friendship. Almost certainly, individuals like these would add each other to their in-game "friends list", and joining another's guild is interpreted as a move towards deeper friendship. Guilds often use Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) services such as Ventrilo and Teamspeak, which allow members to communicate via real time voice chat. The World of Warcraft players I interviewed all used Vent or TS and all felt that these methods of communication helped add to the feelings of intimacy with their online friends. Sometimes party friends are invited into a guild's Vent or TS server to party, and VOIP friendships start to form. Partying, raiding, and VOIP participation are all activities that help strengthen the bonds

between players, and this can often eventuate in friendships forming between players and circles of players.

World of Warcraft's faction and guild based structuring can also make players more distant from each other, if a player changes guilds or factions. Once a player leaves a guild, it may be harder to include that player in the kinds of activities which encourage bonding. They become less known to other guild members, and may grow more distant. As with leaving the venue in other forms of internet communication, effort must be taken to maintain communications. Once someone leaves a faction, this becomes even more difficult, especially if the player does not disclose his or her new name on the opposite faction. If a player goes to another faction, it is almost a requirement that another form of communication, such as IM or VOIP, be maintained in order to maintain the relationship. An outright server change is even more drastic. And should a player quit the game entirely, it may be very difficult indeed to maintain contact, and thus, the relationship.

Summary

As illustrated by World of Warcraft, games can be an excellent example of a mediated space that has been designed to encourage certain types of interaction and discourage others. Faction systems and in-game languages are intentional methods of controlling player interactions. These are of course more extreme forms of mediated space. In non-game venues, participant mediation usually comes in the form of rules that are enforced by individuals, rather than by restrictive mechanics of the venue. The Internet, as a mediated space or a collection of mediated spaces, has an impact on the kinds and duration of friendships that form within its scope.

Chapter 5:
Moving Friendships into "Real Life"

In some online friendships there comes a point where friends decide to meet in "real life". In the cases of intentional friendships, that the relationship would eventually lead to a face-to-face meeting was expected. However in unintentional friendships, this is not necessarily a forgone conclusion. Many friends stay simply online friends and never meet face-to-face. What is different about these friendships? And what happens in a face-to-face meeting? What impact do these meetings have on friendships? And how does the discourse of meetings intersect with other discourses surrounding Internet relationship? These questions will be discussed in the following chapters.

Meeting Face-to-Face

My respondents gave several reasons why they wanted to meet friends face-to-face. Most indicated that meeting an online friend in the "real world" was a method of cementing the relationship. It was presented as an ideal, something that "real" friends should strive for. As mentioned before, a certain proportion of my respondent felt that these relationships could not really be considered friendships until such a face-to-face meeting had occurred. Meeting face-to-face is a way of proving an online friendship. Of course, for most of my respondents, not just anyone was a candidate for a face-to-face meeting. The friendship must have progressed to a point where both individuals felt comfortable with the idea of meeting face-to-face, and that feeling of "clicking" was a requirement. There are also red flags that respondents mentioned that would reduce the desire of wanting to meet – someone who was a little *too* eager to meet, someone who did not also participate in self-

revelation, or someone who was caught in a lie were generally not people my respondents wanted to meet.

The length of the online relationship prior to the idea to meet varied. For some, this could be as short as days or weeks, for others, months or years. The length of a relationship prior to meeting in "real life" may be normative; my respondents certainly indicated a generally understood belief that a longer online relationship was appropriate before meeting, although they did not always follow this advice themselves. For Michelle, the participant who had not met a friend from online, the ideal length of time of a relationship was a year or more. Those who actually participated in meeting online friends often did not have relationships that long, although this was again held as an ideal. This one-year period of getting to know each other might be a cultural ideal, and understood as such – something to be aspired to, yes, but not necessarily a requirement.

Certainly my respondents did not indicate that the length of their relationships pre-meeting had anything to do with the quality of the friendship that did or did not continue. Indeed, for Eric, making and meeting friends from online has become almost a lifestyle, and he told me that he sometimes meets (local) friends the same day he first talks to them. For Eric this has become the normal mode of social interaction, and he did not report that the quality of the friendships derived this way differed from those that came about in the more traditional ways. Meeting Internet friends is a highly normalized activity for Eric, although he was the only one in my sample for whom this was a very frequent and normal occurrence.

At some point in these friendships, a decision to meet arose. The circumstances this occurs under varies between individuals and may be unique to each relationship. Once the decision to meet has been reached, arrangements for the meeting must be made. Because

friendships may cross massive distances, sometimes even borders and continents, the act of meeting may be no small logistical feat. Even local meetings have their share of pitfalls. So one of the tasks for friends is therefore to make the decision of when and where to meet.

Both parties typically participated equally in the decision about who would be going where, although a few of my respondents left it mostly up to the other. The process usually focused around practical details such as who had time off, who could afford to travel, and where and when the meeting should occur. Usually a great deal of planning occurs, however there are cases where the decision to meet is made quite abruptly or unexpectedly. For example, Travis and Jason first met a number of their friends when they were forced to flee Hurricane Katrina and their friends (who lived several hours north and out of the hurricane's path) offered them a safe place. This kind of abrupt occurrence was unusual however, for most of my respondents reported having put a lot more planning into meetings. Most of my respondents were not fleeing hurricanes.

In some cases the meetings were group meetings. Amy, Kirsten and William all talked about meeting groups of friends at conferences. Amy and Kirsten both pointed out the similarities between experiences they had had with conference friends and with online friends. This can be taken as evidence that, similar to pen-pal friendships, at least some online friendships have analogues in the pre-internet conference friendships that would form surrounding these events. Conferences were a unique kind of meeting, because they were by definition group meetings and events. Conferences almost always require travel by all parties, and cost money, which preclude some friends from attending, but once a person makes it to a conference there is a lot to do. Usually conferences have a variety of activities and panels to take part in, so people who meet internet friends at conferences have the option of participating in a number of activities, which makes an excellent ice breaker and

offers an acceptable "out" if an individual feels uncomfortable. From my respondents' experiences, conferences seem like an ideal place to finally meet online friends.

Solo meetings that involved distance were somewhat more complicated. As mentioned before, there are a myriad number of practical considerations to be taken into account before a meeting can occur. And for most there is an ever-present concern of personal safety, something that the group setting of a conference tended to mitigate. There is the matter of territorial comfort, some respondents told me that they would not be comfortable going to an unfamiliar city, others felt they would not be comfortable having someone stay with them, but they would not mind if the other stayed in the same city. The notion of "home territory" was relevant to the comfort level of Amy, who preferred not to travel because she did not want to be in an unfamiliar area. Travel is typically a major undertaking, at least if the travel involves more than just a few hours in a car. All of my respondents who had distant friendships cited travel as an issue of major relevance in planning a meeting. For some, finances were the most relevant barrier to traveling, for others time off was a greater concern. Still others, such as Dylan, simply do not enjoy traveling.

For some of my respondents, meeting friends was a perfect excuse for a vacation. Travis and Jason conducted a lengthy road trip in which they circled the United States, even venturing into Canada twice, visiting online friends along the way. Though sightseeing was also a major aim in their road trip, the visits to online friends were an important aspect for both young men. Both individuals told me they love traveling, and their trips to visit friends are often spontaneously decided when they decide that it has been enough time since they last traveled and it is time for another trip; as both young men seem to be enjoying a healthy case of wanderlust. Eric considers visiting online friends an

excellent "excuse for [a] road trip" (Eric). For several of my respondents who traveled, the meeting is an opportunity to engage in other aspects of travel and vacationing at the same time. While in Las Vegas for her conference, for instance, Kirsten also took the time to participate in some "normal" tourist activities such as visiting parks and other attractions, and sightseeing along the strip.

Meetings involving travel tended to involve a lot more preparation than local meetings, and the times scales were also a lot larger. Planning (in most cases, Jason and Travis seem to be exceptions to this) took place months or weeks in advance. With local meetings, travel considerations are generally limited to getting about town, and the time scale tends to be considerably shorter – days instead of months. Planning then takes place around weekly schedules and places to meet inside the city. While this is a lot less complex than a major travel event, it still required a degree of logistics, especially if one or both individuals did not own a car. Local meetings also typically occurred in places such as coffee shops or restaurants, so the issue of being able to afford to eat out or participate in other activities was sometimes a consideration.

Despite the fact that meeting a local friend may be in many ways "easier" than meeting a distant friend, both types of meetings were still major events for my respondents, with the possible exception of Eric, for whom this was an everyday occurrence. For most of my respondents, online friendships were still relatively novel, that is, they were still very different from the face-to-face traditional friendships they had formed. Meeting internet friends was something that required more consideration and planning than meeting an existing friend. There was the spectre of the unknown to be overcome – even people who felt that relationships were real prior to an actual meeting seemed to feel a degree of this. Respondents were very aware that they were meeting someone they had previously known

only in an internet context, and they modified their behaviour because of this. As mentioned before, the most popular places to meet seemed to be coffee shops and restaurants; my respondents told me that these venues were chosen because they were public, and therefore, more likely to prevent untoward behaviour by the other during the ice-breaking process.

Barriers to Meeting Face-to-Face

When asked about things that stood in the way or made it more difficult to meet friends from online, individuals mentioned a variety of things. For those who had long distance friends, travel and finances were often common barriers. It is interesting to note that these particular stumbling blocks seemed to be taken for granted as present by some – when asked about barriers these individuals replied that they felt there were none, yet later in the interview they would usually discuss travel and finances as limiting factors. Time was another common barrier – the ability to get time off or arrange a busy schedule to meet someone. These were the logistical barriers, barriers which seem somewhat commonsensical. These logistical barriers may be compounded by the fact that the members of my sample were generally quite young and possibly not as well established financially, or as well traveled as members of older generations may be.

Other barriers my respondents reported encountering were their own fears and trepidations surrounding meeting "strangers", and the reactions of close friends and family. The question of how well one really knows an internet friend was cited as a barrier by several. Questions of how truthful and honest the online relationship was were brought up to me. Dylan and Danny mentioned that the barrier of delay could be a red flag – people who delay meeting too much meeting others may be doing so because their intentions are

not genuine. Several people mentioned what Danny called "the scourge of the Internet"; people who pretend to be what they are not.

The Meeting as a Social Activity

Eventually the actual meeting would occur. For most of my participants, the meeting itself was a social activity, and often served as a chance to have fun. These were viewed positively, as a chance to go out and have fun with another person or with a group, or a chance to show a visitor (or be shown as a visitor) the sights and attractions of the locale. Most of my participants chose to centre their meetings around an activity or series of activities. Making an activity the focus of a meeting served a number of functions. It "broke the ice"; creating an opportunity for people to overcome the initial awkwardness of any meeting by providing an distracting outlet, it offered individuals the opportunity to observe the other for any warning signs that this person may not be suitable to take to one's private residence, it allowed these interactions to occur in a public place (perceived as "safe"), and finally, it was fun – if the other person turned out to be a slob or bore, at least there was some entertainment provided by the meeting place itself.

Some respondents chose not to meet people through activities. Instead they met in airports or houses, and activities were not the focus of the meeting. These respondents reported feeling somewhat more apprehensive during the meetings. They felt a worry – what if this person turned out to be unlikable, rude, or abusive? If the first contact they have with the other is picking them up (or being picked up), and the expectation is to return to a private home, there may be little opportunity to discover unpleasantness and even less opportunity to *escape* it. The first time Shane met an online friend, he had flown to Montreal (and he spoke very little French) to meet a potential romance, who picked him up

at the airport and drove him to her place. He ended up spending a week on a pig farm in a remote area, with very little to do, in a state of constant alertness, as the woman he met turned out to be frighteningly different from the woman he thought he *knew*. It is possible that if they had participated in other activities before leaving Montreal, Shane would have discovered that the person he was visiting had not been honest and was not a good person to stay with.

For group meetings, such as the ones that Kirsten and William took part in, meeting through an activity was probably the easiest way to ensure that most of the group was able to make it. Kirsten's group meeting took place in Las Vegas, a venue chosen for its relationship to the "Crime Scene Investigations" (CSI) fandom her forum was a part of. Las Vegas was a travel destination for everyone. When they arrived, the group planned to meet over food, and had also planned a television viewing of episodes. As a group, they also participated in other activities, such as walking on the strip, visiting shops, and seeing shows. Kirsten mentioned that the walk especially offered her an opportunity to bond with two of the members she had previously not been close to. For William, the chat room meetings took place in a local restaurant. The meetings were serial, so if an individual missed one, they could always return to the next. Attending these meetings became a regular occurrence, and offered an opportunity for members of the group to bond.

Even though the friendships may have started due to serious leisure interests, the kinds of activities people chose to participate in when they actually met were often casual leisure pursuits. These may be ideal for "ice-breaking" (Stebbins, 2006, p 42), as they do not demand that an individual prove his or her proficiency at a leisure pursuit, and they are also almost universally perceived as "fun". There is no pressure to excel or perform other than what is typically expected in a social situation. Thus these opportunities offer a chance to

relax, to let one's guard lower as necessary, and to enjoy the company of others. Certainly these kinds of casual leisure activities – dining out, watching movies, and participating in other fun activities together, seemed to aid in helping my respondents grow accustomed to their newly-met friends.

I believe that it is no coincidence that these meetings tend to occur over food. Meetings where food was involved came up frequently. The ritual of eating food together is an ancient human ritual, and it is unsurprising that it becomes one of our first choices of activities when meeting someone for the first time. For Jason and Travis, the two young men who had the road trip, the frequency of this trend was outlined very dramatically. Since no one else had this kind of serial meeting, it may have been less noticeable. Nevertheless, Jason and Travis both noticed it, and Jason commented extensively on it:

> JASON: Whenever you meet someone. This happened almost, almost 100% of each meeting on our road trip. Whenever you meet someone, they will always be like 'I know a great place to eat, you guys want to go eat?' so we would ALWAYS always wait to eat if we knew we were going to be arriving at our destination that day.
>
> CHRISTINE: why do you think, why do you think it is that people do that?
>
> JASON: I guess that's you're basic get to know type function, is that you go somewhere and you eat with someone. You have a good dinner and you guys chat, drink Coke, drink a beer, eat a steak, etc.
>
> CHRISTINE: do you think that helps uh helps people get to know each other?
>
> JASON: Initially. 'Cuz it's something to go do. And it lets you get a little taste of what that person is like, you know. Like, 'well I can invite these guys home to go play games with me now. They'll go play Uno with me.' It seems kind of awkward first I suppose, it's like 'hey, welcome guys, want to go play such and such card game?' 'Cuz you know they might be like 'no....'
>
> CHRISTINE: so it's an ice breaker?
>
> JASON: yes. (Jason, emphasis in original)

The pair learned to come hungry, because it would be almost guaranteed that they would be fed upon arriving in the next town. The experiences of others seem to support Jason's assertion that eating with the other was a way of assessing the social acceptability of the other.

Jason and Travis's experiences also outline another aspect of meeting: that we are *eager* to show each other the notable sights of our locations. When travel was involved, usually people were shown aspects of the location that would appeal to tourists or were personally interesting to the host. Anecdotally, when I was traveling to visit friends, this happened constantly. Someone would say something along the lines of "Hey, Christine hasn't seen _____. Let's go show Christine _____," and I would be shown whatever attraction was deemed to be interesting for me. From what I could tell, my hosts also enjoyed the opportunity to see the attractions themselves. I have likewise indulged in showing others the attractions of my city and region when I have hosted visitors. This is not something unique to internet friendships, I believe that this is a fairly universal trait of hospitality, at least among Westerners.

Despite the fact that this is not unique to internet friendships, as mentioned previously it *does* have the effect of allowing individuals some assessment time. This is a vitally important part of the meeting, since my respondents were all universally aware that the person they talked to online *could* be different from the person they were going to meet. The activity meeting allowed a safe venue from which to break the ice, and if all else fails, a conversation piece or distraction should the other prove reticent.

Comparing Offline and Online Friendships

It seems obvious that there must be advantages to online friendships, or my respondents would not have them. I inquired specifically into both the advantages and disadvantages of online friendships, as well as how they compare to more traditional face-to-face friendships. In the early days of the Internet, the public discourse surrounding internet use included an argument that we were raising a generation of antisocial basement-dwellers

who would never interact with real people. When it became obvious that people were using the Internet to be social, the argument shifted tone. It became an argument that we would forsake "real life" (and therefore better and more genuine) friendships in favour of online (and therefore worse, and possibly illusionary or false) friendships. The comparisons my respondents made between offline and online friendships often respond to this discourse in varying ways.

Cited as the main advantage of an online friendship was the fact that a person could be friends with anyone, no matter what time zone they lived in or how far away. My respondents could vicariously learn about other places and cultures through their online friends. Online friends are also seen as potential hosts for travel – the idea that one might have a place to stay in many different areas of the world due to online friendships was brought up several times. Whether this works out in reality is hard to say, but it was definitely seen as one of the advantages of having online friends.

In addition, for some of my respondents it was an opportunity to interact without having to see "faces of censure", the inhibiting facial expressions of the other. Jennifer brought this concept up – for her, online communication was a way to avoid seeing potentially inhibiting reactions. According to Jennifer:

> JENNIFER: Because I'm not looking at that person, I'm not seeing their facial reactions, I'm not seeing their body language towards me. I can put aside all of that. I just have the emoticons and the text to go with, and I don't have to see that reaction so that I can't be hurt as easily. So if somebody says something to insult me, it's not as harsh as it would be to see them, to see them in front of me and hear them insulting me and see the look in their eye of the insult and the body language and things like that. (Jennifer)

For the shy and the socially awkward, online friends may be preferable to friends in "real life". The faceless environment makes it easy to exchange confidences without having to fear these faces of censure, and several people told me it was easier to talk to people online than off, for this reason. Some of my respondents used online friends as confidants and

advice givers; because online friends are distant from one's real life conflicts and problems, they are often seen as able to give a more objective view on one's problems. Physical world friends may be in the thick of the problem or too close to the issue to speak objectively, but online friends, due to their lack of physical involvement, are seen as outside the issue and thus able to give advice.

Also cited as an advantage was the fact that communication could be halted easily when needed – it is as simple as turning off the computer. When people did not feel like being social, they did not have to turn on the instant messenger or log into the game, or otherwise connect. It seems to be tacitly understood that everyone an individual talks to online has a potentially busy life, and absences are usually understood. So-and-so just didn't log in today, that person must have been busy. The flip side to this, my respondents told me, is that sometimes one might log in, feeling lonely and looking to talk to someone else, and there is no one there. When all of a person's friends are busy, both online and off, it can be lonely.

Another advantage was the fact that if a friendship did not work out after meeting in real life, it could be cut off more easily. Though some, such as Amy, felt pressure to maintain ties to people they had met, it was tacitly understood by people who met that the person may not be the way they were online, and if someone was too different or unpleasant, it was likewise understood that the friendship could end. And it may be easier, both in terms of emotion and technical ability, to end a friendship that originated online.

The biggest disadvantage that was presented to me was the fact that my respondents could not be physically part of their friends' lives. They could not be involved in things like birthday parties, weddings, or major events, could not give physical support in times of disaster or injury, could not be there at the hospital if a friend was injured, and could not

even hug their friend. Not being able to hug and the lack of caring touch were cited over and over as a major disadvantage. However, being unable to attend the major social events of online friends was occasionally cited as an advantage, due to the fact that it offered a way to politely escape events that my respondents might otherwise feel obligated to attend yet not really want to go to, like a child's first birthday party. The lack of obligations could be liberating to some individuals.

The inability to participate in physical activities together was also a major disadvantage. Experiences such as going for a beer, or going out to a movie or to a restaurant were not possible over the electron stream, and my respondents missed them, as this quote demonstrates:

> TRAVIS: Well there's a lot of things. Yeah. Lets say some new movie comes out, and I'll get on "Hey have you seen Borat" for example, that was a big new craze everybody's been talking about these past couple of weeks. And we can talk about it online but we can't go see it together and share the experience that way. So there's definitely some things that you miss out on. You can relate your own experiences to the other people, but you can't really experience it together, unless it's through the Game. (Travis)

The lack of physical social interaction may be why people were so eager to participate in these kinds of activities when they finally met. These interviews highlight the fact that physically participating in leisure activities together remains an important aspect of friendships. Individuals put a great deal of emphasis on "doing" things together, and sorely miss the ability to "do stuff" with their online friends. This remained one of the most commonly repeated disadvantages to online friendships.

Any fears that our society is forsaking the "real world" in favour of an online world can be allayed; it is clear from these interviews that people still put a high degree of primacy on physical interaction and the face-to-face world. My respondents were eager to bring to the face-to-face world those friendships that attained the required degree of intimacy. Real life meeting and involvement was considered to be a goal to be striven for in a "true"

friendship; if one considers the friendship to be "true", then effort can and should be made to bring it into the real world. Whether this primacy of the physical world will persist over time is something other researchers may be interested in studying, but at the time of this writing it was still present.

Summary

The actual meeting of friends is a multilayered activity. It is at once both an opportunity for some fun, as this chapter details, and a trail of the friendship itself, as the next chapter shows. It is not always easy to meet an online friend. Even in local relationships there may be difficulties and barriers to overcome, and long distance relationships see many more of these. Despite the fact that online relationships are becoming more and more prevalent, we still desire physical contact with one another, and go to great lengths to have it.

Chaper 6:
Meetings and Friendships

Meetings are an important aspect of internet friendships. It is clear to me from the comments and attitudes of my respondents that the meeting and moving towards a face-to-face friendship is largely held out as an ideal to be strove for in a "true" friendship. It appears as though most of us consider it the logical next step of a close online friendship, and it swiftly becomes a goal for the individuals involved. For my respondents, the meeting played the role of a crucible – from the meeting would emerge either a true face-to-face friendship or ashes; my respondents were quick to tell me that not all meetings resulted in long term friendships – some meetings demonstrated very clearly the fact that the friendship could not and would not last past the first meeting. A disappointing experience in the meeting would generally preclude further friendship with that individual. An experience that is disappointing enough may even preclude further online friendships with anyone, as is the case with Shane.

However, a positive meeting can create the potential for a long and lasting friendship. This is not automatic; as with any long distance friendship, both individuals must put energy into maintaining the friendship or it *will* drift apart. Yet a successful meeting does offer individuals a rationale for maintaining ties. It is interesting to note that sometimes a meeting may inspire the feeling of being *obliged* to keep in contact or maintain friendly ties with another – Amy, who also went to a convention where others from the online venue would be present, relates this:

> AMY: They were people I didn't know as well … this one that I met was a guy and his brother that was on our website. And I don't ever talk to him, and I didn't really talk to him before, but every so often he'll log on, like every two or three months. And I feel compelled to speak to him, because I know him. (Amy)

So for some the meeting itself may be the glue that binds, Dan, who met friends from WoW, maintained ties with the people he met, even after they left the guild. For him, the meeting was enough to serve as an impetus to maintain contact. He reported having visited his friends since they had initially come to visit, and planning to do so again.

Yet meetings do not force individuals to maintain contact. Kirsten told me that her involvement with the forum was waning by the time the meeting happened – the meeting itself did not rejuvenate her participation. She still drifted away and lost contact with the people she met. Others also described drifting apart as little or no effort was taken to maintain a commonality, or to maintain contact. But a meeting, at least, offers the opportunity to form those deep face-to-face relationships. These relationships do not always endure, but they at least have the *potential* to.

What is Disappointment?

If it is a disappointing experience that destroys these relationships, what then, exactly, makes an experience disappointing? It was far more difficult to elucidate what made an experience successful – this seemed to be personal and dependent on the individuals involved. However, what made an experience disappointing was far more universal. There were two things generally described to me as disappointing. The first was misrepresentation, whether deliberate or inadvertent. Related to that was the second, mismatching expectations about what the relationship *was.*

Deliberate misrepresentation was a much bigger "sin" than inadvertent misrepresentation. Deliberate misrepresentation is interpreted as being deliberately lied to, and some of my respondents considered this evidence that the other was capable of lying about other things. When it came to lying about things like weight and appearance, the

respondents who experienced this kind of dishonesty tended to insist that they would have been accepting of the other if the other had told the truth. There was an undercurrent of "why couldn't they trust me with this information?" in their responses. Honesty is *hugely* important in whether or not a friendship will be successful. Eric discusses how dishonesty affects his desire to continue relations with the other, while Anabahs discusses how dishonesty about appearances casts doubt into other aspects of the individual:

> ERIC: Because every individual is different, and this goes to a theory of mine, if any relationship,. whether it's intimate or just purely social, whether it's online or offline, it all depends on how honest you are, in participating in your discussions. If a person has misrepresented themselves online, and they come to a small meet with just you or another friend, and they are not only how they've described themselves but as of a different persona than you've expected, that tends to make me not want to meet with those individuals again because they have not been honest with me. Now, there've been instances where they have acted poorly online and have been much better in person, but those are few and far between. Its usually the other way around. Uh.. what else... It all depends on how the individual acts when I'm with them to how I'm going to relate or evaluate them in my own strange ways. (Eric)

> ANABAHS: Cuz if you're going to lie about something like that, something you can't even hide, (Christine: yeah!) like really, it's like wow! … what else are you willing to, you know, stretch the truth? (Anabahs)

As my respondents tell me, relationships are predicated on trust, which is predicated on honesty. Without this honesty the trust relationship is destroyed, and may be difficult or even impossible to regain afterwards.

This study was not designed to assess the personal honesty of my respondents. I have no way of finding out whether or not my respondents are always scrupulous about accurately representing themselves. Only Leslie volunteered this information, as well as her rationale behind a conscious choice to misrepresent herself. In Leslie's case, she altered details of her life to protect her privacy and the privacy of her family. She did not do this when talking with people she intended to meet; the persona she created was used specifically while in a game world, to act as a barrier between her and others. It was a method of keeping intrusive strangers out of her private life.

The question of why others were dishonest is not easily answered. My respondents had theories – they offered a number of potential reasons: fear of judgment in the case of someone who was not an "ideal" physical specimen, chronic or pathological lying, omission of details because they 'just didn't think of it', ignorance of social norms and mores, the desire to become what the other wanted, or the intent to deceive in order to later victimize. Leslie may be an example of another reason – the desire to protect one's private life from outsiders.

In Shane's case, the first person he met went to incredible lengths to deliberately misrepresent herself. Shane told me of discovering hundreds of doctored photos, careful lighting and positioning of webcams, of the woman's children informing him of the lengths to which their mother went to deceive potential suitors. Such deliberate deception was not only guaranteed to end any potential relationship but was also a truly frightening experience for Shane. It is reassuring to note, however, that this kind of manipulative and systematic deception does not seem to typify internet relationships; it is far more likely that this is a phenomenon isolated to a small minority of individuals. Although this is not a representative sample, the majority of my respondent's experiences were reassuringly "normal". I hypothesize, therefore, that if other researchers were to systematically and quantitatively explore online friendships in the real world, they would find that the dangerous and frightening experiences are the minority of experiences. In all actuality, the majority of experiences are probably neither terrifyingly disastrous nor earth-shatteringly wonderful.

Oddly enough, misrepresentation was far more serious in romances. My respondents told me that they would have been more willing to let small misrepresentations slide if it had been a platonic friendship (and McKenna, et all, 2002, suggests that we *are* more

forgiving of personal flaws in our internet friendships), however, when it came to romance any misrepresentation was out of the question. Weight was generally mentioned as a major issue – my respondents were careful to insist that it did not matter, but they would have liked to have known. When asked why these little omissions and shadings of the truth would have been "ok" in a friendship, my respondents told me that romances, even more than friendships, relied on absolute trust and truth, as we can see in Katarina's example:

> CHRISTINE: would dishonesty or inadvertent misrepresentation, would it be as serious if it's a friendship?
> …
> KATARINA: no it would not be as serious
>
> CHRISTINE: why not?
>
> KATARINA: well in a relationship you're expected to be honest. Totally, no matter how stupidly or silly it makes you look. In a friendship it's a little bit more open to mistakes. (Katarina)

It appears that people involved in romances are considering potentially the rest of their lives, spent in intimate contact with the other, whereas a friendship is not necessarily expected to last for the rest of one's life or even to spend a great deal of time physically close in the case of long distance friendships. Therefore any kind of dishonesty can kill the relationship. This puts a curious pressure on individuals involved in romances; they are under pressure to appear an ideal romance partner – so there is pressure to lie about things that the other cannot verify, such as appearance, yet if it moves face-to-face, that lie could break the relationship.

Leslie related a particular kind of disappointing experience:

> LESLIE: The people themselves can be very disappointing.
>
> CHRISTINE: Can you clarify that?
>
> LESLIE: (laughs) Well, they'll send you a picture, or sound like they're smart, or at least moderately intelligent. And then you meet them, and they smell funny and they can't form a proper sentence. And it looks like they haven't bathed or changed their clothes in months, and they don't see it as anything being wrong, so the person themselves can be disappointing. Very disappointing. (Leslie)

These are perhaps some of the most disconcerting misrepresentations for my respondents – the failure to adhere to commonly held notions of hygiene and making one's self presentable, and the utter inability to converse, especially when compared to one's loquacity online. The norm of making an effort to look good, especially for a first meeting, seems to be very much internalized. And it is shocking for people to discover that someone who had seemed intelligent online could be so radically different in real life:

> ED: … there's also room to be disappointed as well, when you realize that people can write well, but that's only if they take the time. And then you meet them in the real world and they're dumb as a truck. And you're like "oh my god, I thought you could speak, I thought you were articulate." And if every other word out of their mouth is "um like," they're not articulate. (Ed)

These kinds of misrepresentations shock us to the core, and in general destroy the hope of continuing the relationships. Potentially, it can be assumed that table manners are likewise important for those who choose to meet at a place where food is present, given that one of the stated reasons my respondents gave me for choosing those venues was a chance to assess the other's acceptability for other forms of polite contact. This is reminiscent of Elias's theory of the civilizing process, in which he demonstrated that table manners, among other forms of manners, became a marker of civilized company (Elias, 1994).

Tied to the notion of misrepresentation is the concept of mismatching expectations. This is when people go into a meeting with very different ideas of what the relationship will result in. Most commonly, this is an ostensibly platonic friendship where one individual expects a romance to develop from it. Interestingly enough, it was the women in my study who reported being on the receiving end of this kind of mismatched expectation. Leslie in particular was plagued by this, even after informing others that she was (happily) married and a mother, she was still inundated by men who wanted romances. She is no "desperate housewife", as her internet use is typically via online MMOs rather than through

IMs or dating sites, and she is there to play, not to meet people. In fact, she told me that lately, she goes out of her way to avoid making contact with too many new people, due to the problems she has had in the past.

With mismatched expectations, however, there was certainly an element of learning involved. My respondents told me that the first time they met someone from the Internet was the biggest incident of mismatched representations. In subsequent relationships, those respondents who had discovered the problem of mismatched expectations were careful to clearly state what it was they were expecting. Generally this would also prompt the other to define what they expected to "get" out of the relationship. With much clearer communication, these friendships were typically more successful, barring other pitfalls such as deliberate misrepresentation. Experience in general gave individuals a clearer idea of how to go about meeting others; my respondents often typified their first experiences as born of naivety, with further experiences becoming more and more practiced and easy.

Creating the Fantasized Other

A theme arose throughout the interviews that deserves attention; the idea that we create a fantasized other during our online interactions. This came up numerous times from numerous individuals, and was offered as an explanation for why some misrepresentations and mismatched expectations occur.

Most online interactions are done via some form of text communication. Voice and video are becoming more common, but at the time of this writing are still well in the minority of interactions online. The issue with text is that it leaves a lot out – my respondents often mentioned the limitations of text when it comes to knowing others; creating deep bonds, interacting with the other as an embodied person, catching nuance in

writing, and transmitting and receiving emotion. These are extremely difficult to do via text. A common problem was identified: since most people are not extensively trained in the finer points of textual communication, it is easy to misread a great deal of what others say. So much fails to come across via text. How we type is often very different than how we speak. Some of us are far more articulate via text than we are when we speak; others cannot type well at all yet are fully capable of articulate speech. We cannot display body language via text. Intricacies of tone are lost unless the writer is highly skilled. All of this adds up to a significant reduction of information about the other.

We create the fantasized other when we fill in that dearth of information with assumptions about what the other looks like, acts like, sounds like, and moves like – we form mental images of the other person prior to actually meeting him or her. My respondents accepted this as a generally natural and inevitable aspect of online relationships – it is something everyone does, and in itself is not necessarily disastrous. Usually, the other does not match the mental image, but most individuals do not expect the mental image to match the reality. We are generally aware of the fact that what we have created is merely a possibility, and that the reality is bound to be different. Even giving descriptions of oneself does not necessarily aid in preventing this – Anabahs gives a very good example:

> ANABAHS: [H]is description wasn't wrong, you know. Um, there was a few points that he left out, and you know, and whatnot, but I personified something in my head through my imagination to be different than what I actually saw in reality. (Anabahs)

Physical identifiers can take on a number of different forms in people's minds. If I were to tell others online that I have short dark blonde hair, am overweight, have grey eyes, and a nice smile, the mental image that would form would differ (perhaps drastically) from one person to the next. And giving out photographs can help, though not always, since these are

often out of date or out of context. Or in Shane's case, they bordered on being completely falsified.

The other we create is often idealized. William phrased this exquisitely:

> WILLIAM: after meeting, I've, I discovered that, you know, that the model that I'd built up, the expectations that I had built up, the you know, the image of her as a person, the uh, the personality that I had come to know online was, it didn't quite live up to the expectations. I guess it's, it was the uh, you know, the anticipation of tends to be glossy and glittery, and very very Hollywood-ish. And yet, at the same time, in the actual practical side of life, it you know, things never quite work out like they do in the movies. (William)

The reality rarely has the luster that our minds add; the majority of us are fairly normal, and normal people do not sparkle in the sun. Possibly the creations of our mind glitter so due to the ever-pervasiveness of media images portraying only the beautiful and perfect. Most people seem to take the less shining reality of each other in stride. We *are* aware of the fact that Hollywood is not reality and that most of us are not from Hollywood. And in general, the worst exercise in creating the fantasy other comes the first time someone meets another from online – after that we learn that we have a tendency to create a mental image very different from reality, and we come to expect the real life person to differ from our mental imaging.

Creating the fantasized other can be far more serious when it becomes a form of escapism; when people prefer the potentially perfect other visualized in online contact to the world of real humans with flaws and imperfections. And there are individuals who will attempt to *become* whatever they think the other person wants. The desire for acceptance and fear of rejection is well known. People will attempt to become a reflection of the other whom they admire:

> DYLAN: Sometimes you can see if people are either illusioned themselves or trying to illusion you. One I guess is more, I tend to attribute more towards personal problems, personal issues, whereas the latter of the two is, trying to be manipulative. And I just, I generally have a very low tolerance for people being manipulative. I'd rather be, I could make friends with somebody who as a person I didn't like who was honest about how they were and I couldn't agree with their values. … Versus somebody who tried to be per se a clone of myself just by mimicking my likes and dislikes. Of then,

> you know, going and saying "hey, you know I like this movie" "Oh I love this movie too!" and they may have absolutely no interest in the movie, they may just try to paint a picture to conform themselves to my standards or likings. (Dylan)

Of course this can happen in the face-to-face world as well: most people have met someone who attempts to mimic the personalities of everyone they admire, to the detriment of their own. It is, however, extremely easy to do online. It is flattering, and the unwary often do not realize that what they are seeing is not a reality but what they want to see. We humans are very good at seeing only what we want to see, and the Internet makes this even easier.

Romances seem to be more prone to creating the fantasized other than platonic friendships, and the resulting reassertion of reality seems to be more drastic. Again, there is more pressure on potential romantic partners to appear ideal to each other, and this is coupled with the requirement for absolute honesty and truth. Even as we try to portray ourselves in the best possible light, we idealize the other; here is where William's glossy Hollywood image becomes most evident. When the face-to-face meeting occurs, the images are shattered and the romance may be lost, although it is possible that a friendship may still remain:

> ED: I think in meeting we realized that a connection we had in that friendship we had, based in the end, maybe in the Internet, allowed us to create personas and fantasies about the other - at least in my mind, fantasies about the other person, and projected the image into my mind about who she was. And when I met her, that shattered, and so that disconnect there for a while, but eventually, again, 'cuz of the, uh, the ease at which I could communicate it over the net and at work and at home, allowed us to continue talking and then eventually we overcame those issues and instead of a dating friendship we just built up a platonic friendship which has been amazing. (Ed)

Ed also viewed this kind of mutual fantasy creation as something particular to romances, it was not present in his platonic relationships:

> ED: Um, most of the others are based on interests, say either running events or any of my other hobbies, and so, that, this is, the disconnect doesn't really exist with anybody else. That's perhaps because I haven't taken the time to create a persona or a fantasy of that other person. Because the interest wasn't in a sexual or a dating context. It was more of a platonic mutual interest, or an area of interest. (Ed)

In a platonic friendship there is simply not the same amount of pressure on the individual to engage in fantasy creation, and at the same time the much lower stakes mean that any fantasy creation that goes on will not result in the same degree of incongruity once physical reality intrudes on the relationship.

Summary

The act of meeting a friend is also a trial of that friendship. That is the point where both parties will discover how honest the other has been. The evidence indicates that it is misrepresentation, whether intentional or not, that affects whether or not the friendship can be considered "successful". Since it is so very easy to lie on the Internet, people are aware of this possibility. It is also compounded by the fact that we tend to create fantasized notions of each other; a natural response to an incomplete picture of each other. This is exacerbated further in romances, where the emotional stakes are so much higher.

Chapter 7:
Meeting Friends and Being Safe

When the topic of internet friends and meetings comes up in casual conversation, the topic of safety generally follows. There is a highly pervasive societal discourse, perpetuated by the media and urban legends, which portrays internet users as potential predatory freaks and internet friendships as abnormal and dangerous. This discourse states that the person on the other end of the electron stream is likely to be a dangerous killer or a sexual predator looking to lure the unwary into his (and it is almost always portrayed as a he) grasp, so that he can then rape and/or murder the poor victim. There are constructs - stereotyped images created and spread by popular culture – which represent this nebulous threat of the stranger: the Axe Murderer, a crazy axe-wielding man; and the Rapist, who tends to be portrayed as being a man between 40 and 90 years, variously old, balding, unkempt, fat, and commonly a pedophile, pretending to be a teenage girl. These two tropes and variations thereof were described to me a number of times by my respondents, and those who did not describe them were nonetheless familiar with them. These seem to be the kind of trope that just about anyone who uses the Internet is familiar with. Interestingly enough, the murderer was always an axe murderer, never a knife or gun wielding psycho. Why axe murdering? This was not a question I could answer.

My respondents are by no means ignorant of the pervasive discourse of danger and threat on the Internet. Where they differ is how they engage with this discourse. The more optimistic of my respondents, such as Eric, actively disagreed with the notion that people on the Internet are potentially predatory. Eric has made a conscious effort to disregard the dire warnings that any participant in internet friendships is bombarded with, and to treat incidents that conform to the discourse of danger and disaster as isolated incidents rather

than proof that the discourse is indeed real. It is possible that at least some of my respondents may be choosing to continue making and meeting online friends to spite the discourse, to prove it wrong or inaccurate. Jason seems to be one such, he actively disputes the twin beliefs that the Internet is inherently dangerous and making and meeting internet friendships is a dangerous hobby. For Jason, these activities are safe until proven otherwise. He treats his less than satisfactory experiences as isolated incidents, products of individuals rather than traits of the online world.

At the other end of the spectrum are others who treat the discourse as provisionally real. For these individuals, everyone else is potentially an Axe Murderer or a Rapist until proven otherwise. Yet the possibility is small, small enough that individuals are still willing to go ahead with meeting friends. The construct is presented as a remote possibility, rather than as a certainty. Jeremy provides an excellent example:

> JEREMY: I was afraid that… I was 18 at the time, and I knew of what people called internet prowlers, [preying on] people that are young on the Internet. I mean, I was afraid that I might meet a 45-year old 400 pound guy that would want to touch me in my private places, you know what I mean? (laughs)… So that's what I'm saying, that's always a concern for a lot of people that I know of. (Jeremy)

These individuals are disengaged enough from the discourse to go ahead and meet people, yet they take steps to ensure that if the other person happens to fit the construct, they can get out safely. In Jeremy's case, he brought a friend with him to the meeting.

Of those that believed the discourse, the reason they usually gave for going ahead with the meeting anyway was a belief in their own ability to judge character. My respondents felt that sufficient time had passed, that they had gotten to know the other well enough to judge the character of the other. If there had been other forms of communication such as voice chat (via VOIP or telephone), or the exchange of photographs, they added another layer of veracity to the relationship. So too would contact with a friend of the friend, or a

mutual friend who had real-world contact with the other friend and could "vouch" for the person the respondent was going to meet. Moreover going to meet a group of people was perceived as safer than going to meet a single individual. Now, objectively, none of these measures are any safer, as photographs can be faked, voices can be filtered, and groups are not necessarily a safer bet, but photos and voices are perceived as being harder to falsify and harder to coordinate for nefarious purposes. In a group, some form of conspiracy would no doubt be required, and it appears that most individuals are not willing to see conspiracies to hurt them lurking around every corner.

> AMY: And there's this completely idiotic belief that no one would send you a sweatshirt if they were evil and planning to kill you, because her mom makes me sweaters for Christmas and those kinds of things. And I was like no one would add that much detail. (Amy)

As Amy tells us, detail, both in the literal sense of shirt decoration and in the sense of those little human touches of personality and emotion are good signs. There is a (possibly justified) assumption that no one is going to spend hours sewing little beads on sweaters, or performing other likewise time consuming acts of caring[4], just so they can later kill you. Travis also considered this:

> TRAVIS: we thought about [our safety], I mean, we're going to meet people that basically could be anyone, theoretically we've heard their voice, maybe they've sent us a picture, some of them have, but there's no guarantee at all that that's anywhere near factual. You really don't know going into those situations, but nobody, nobody had intentionally misled us on our trip at all. And I, I really get the feeling that not many people on the Internet would intentionally mislead you. There are well known stories of that, but they're just as rare as violent crime and other real world activities. (Travis)

In his case there was a conscious negotiation of the discourse, and the discourse was discarded in favour of the assumption that untoward events are isolated incidents.

For many of my respondents, discussing their activities with outsiders, whether friends and family or random strangers, brought about comments that engaged with the discourse.

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[4] Gift exchange does seem to happen among online friends, although I did not specifically inquire about this. Anecdotally I have been both the sender and recipient of gifts to online friends, and have spoken to many friends who likewise participate in this. Usually these tend to be home-made or otherwise invested with time and emotional energy.

The comments of others included such things as "weren't you scared?", and "isn't that dangerous?" Usually those who made this variety of comment were older; parents, grandparents, aunt and uncles were often cited as the authors of this kind of comment. Among the younger generation, my respondents typically reported being admired for going through with it, or receiving supportive comments. A few of my respondents told me that their peers did not find meeting friends problematic, because, as Nicole puts it: "my friends are in the same era as I am so they've met people from off of the Internet too, and they're a lot more supportive when it comes to meeting people." And for some, such as Amy, family members and friends who had previously made comments that tied in with the discourse of danger and fear were nevertheless supportive when the actual meeting occurred. Kirsten also encountered this – when the time came to take her trip, her family helped her financially so she could travel, and most of their warnings were about travel safety rather than internet safety. Kirsten's trip reflected this, her most apprehensive times were not in the company of her internet friends but while she was vacationing or traveling alone.

Jason and Travis, having had serial meetings, noticed a variety of different reactions to their visits by the friends and family of the people they visited. They told me that they were made welcome and greeted with hospitality at every visit. In most of the visits, they were only with the people who they met on the Internet. However in a few visits, there were other friends and family members present. Usually these individuals were told who Jason and Travis were and that they were from the Internet, but the game connection was sometimes left out or obfuscated. Jason told me that parents, in particular, often started out somewhat suspicious, but when the two young men proved to pose no threat or display any terrible manners, they were tentatively accepted. In one case, Jason told me, their internet friend had told his parents that Jason and Travis were old friends who had been local and

moved away, and were coming back to visit. This individual's parents were so against internet friendships that he felt he could not tell them the truth about his friendships' origins. This was the most dramatic obfuscation they encountered, and to the best of my knowledge this individual's parents still do not know the "true origins" of Jason and Travis. It is worth noting that, as with Kirsten, the most frightening moments of their trip did not involve internet friends at all, but travel dangers: hitting a deer in Nebraska, losing control on a patch of black ice in the Rockies and almost careening off the side of the mountain, and sleeping in creepy rest areas along the Interstate.

Of course the Rapist and the Axe Murderer are not the only dangers faced by people who meet internet friends, simply the example given by the societal discourse. Some of my respondents were worried about more pedestrian concerns, like being the victim of a theft, encountering someone unpleasant but not necessarily dangerous, travel woes, or being stranded. These concerns, however, are not exclusively associated with the Internet. They could happen to anyone, anywhere, and the Internet is not implicated as the cause of them, unlike the Rapist and Axe Murderer who are specifically tied to the dangers of internet use. The discourse states that it is internet use itself that leaves us vulnerable to predation. So dangers from more pedestrian sources are not typically attributed to the Internet but to life in general – these are dangers that people would face in other circumstances. This is what distinguishes the discourse – the Internet is the cause and internet users are presented as misguided and foolish victims to-be mixed in with dangerous predators[5]. This is simply another form of Stranger Danger created for both youth and adults, made more frightening by the fact that one cannot see the body language or face of the other.

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[5] No one's friends or family ever seems to worry that they will be the predator. It is always the other person who is the potential predator.

The discourse is aided by the fact that there may be a publishing bias in the media; newsmakers are not interested in talking about the thousands of unremarkable meetings that go on due to internet contacts. Weird internet goings on make news, commonplace internet goings-on do not. We do not hear about a murder in a city in another state, province or country, unless it involves something bizarre, or it involves the Internet somehow. Unfortunately I know of no systematic study on the percentage of online interactions resulting in someone becoming victimized, if such a study is even possible. Suffice to say, that in all actuality the percentage of people who meet Axe Murderers and Rapists is probably tiny to non-existent, and I doubt that the percentage of people who suffer more general forms of victimization via meeting friends on the Internet exceeds the percentage of people who suffer general forms of victimization in the population at large, although this could be an interesting topic for another researcher to study. These assumptions do not include child-luring. Child-luring is widely believed to be a rampant problem in certain venues of the Internet, and does indeed occur. One of my colleagues, Silvana Romano (forthcoming) is conducting her Master's thesis on the belief of the prevalence of online child-victimization and the actual prevalence of such activity. Other researchers have and are continuing to study many different aspects of child-victimization and the Internet. This thesis, however, is entirely concerned with strictly adult activities and can make no theoretical or statistical arguments concerning child-victimization.

During our interview, Anabahs problematized the tendency to consider the unmet to be strangers:

> ANABAHS: So, once I got over the initial shock, because you know you're nervous, you're like "am I really doing this? This complete stranger?", but yeah you've talked to them, you've gotten to know them over the phone and we had a lot of commonalities and so, I think, I mean the friendship aspect was there. (Anabahs)

There is a kind of cognitive dissonance in meeting people; on one hand my respondents felt that they knew their friends well enough to call them a friend and meet them face-to-face, yet on the other hand, before meeting them, these friends were often characterized as somehow still being a stranger. This dissonance, this study suggests, is caused by the discourse, which states that everyone on the Internet is a stranger until proven otherwise. My respondents obviously believed their friends were really friends, or they would not have gone through with meeting them in real life. Yet in conversations they would often outline the other as a stranger. Conceptualizing the other as a stranger may be a normative act – if we fail to conceptualize the other as a stranger and accept them as a friend, we are not taking the required care of our own safety that the discourse demands, which potentially reveals us as naïve or foolish, or downright stupid. Taking "proper precautions" relies on the assumption that the person you are meeting is not a friend, but a potential assailant. And in today's world, assailants are almost always conceptualized as strangers.

The "Safety Protocol"

When it comes to face-to-face meetings, the notion of a "safety protocol" emerged in the interviews. In some cases, my respondents sometimes referred to it as "the safety protocol" (William), or "the necessary precautions" (Dylan). This is a list of behaviours or preventative measures that one is supposed to take before or while meeting someone from the Internet. Yet, is this not on the cusp of becoming yet another discourse, if it has not already? Everyone seemed to know what the steps were, even if only a few used the actual phrase. And whether or not an individual practiced the protocol, they all seemed to be aware of it. As with the discourse of the dangerous other on the Internet, the Safety Protocol is not universally accepted as valid and true. People engage with it to varying

lengths, some taking the protocol seriously and following it wherever possible, others considering it relatively good advice but not absolutely necessary, or entirely situational.

What is the protocol? Here is a list of the attributes I was given, both commonly and not so commonly, along with some of the rationales behind them:

- Meet in a public place – the assumption is that an assailant will be less likely to hurt you when others are present and can hear you yell for help. Restaurants, coffee shops, bus stations and airports fall into this, although bus stations and airports may be off limits to some, since they generally imply that an individual is personally picking up a friend. Meet over an activity or event.

- Meet in public places a few times before you move to a more private one. Do not take them directly to your home – this way you get to know them better, and have supposedly ascertained whether or not they are likely to do something to you.

- Meet during the day – not only are there likely to be more people around, but the day is less scary. People may also believe that crimes are more likely to happen at night.

- Tell friends and family about the meeting, who, where, when, and when you expect to be done. Provide an itinerary if you travel – this way they can contact the authorities if they believe something has happened to you.

- *Bring* a friend or family member if possible, or meet in a group – others can defend you or call for help, or their mere presence may dissuade your internet friend from trying to hurt you.

- Carry a cell phone – so you can call for help.

- Before meeting, exchange pictures/talk on the phone – this helps ensure that the people are who they say they are, and that you will recognize them.

- Talk with your friend lots, make sure you really get to know them – this way you are not really meeting a "stranger".

- Make sure you have control over your own transportation/ have an escape route planned – then you cannot be stranded.

- Make sure you have money – this can help you get transportation, call home, or otherwise get out, and you are not financially dependent on the other.

Whether all these steps are effective is something that safety experts can rule on; I cannot judge the actual safety of the protocol. However varying, principles of the "protocol" are accepted as safe and valid by people who meet friends from online. The first principle of the protocol was the most universally mentioned; the majority of respondents considered meeting in a public place to be tantamount to ensuring one's safety. For a small number, this was the only step mentioned. Others gave lists of things that contained some, but not all, of the principles set out above. It is interesting to note that leisure activities such as going to restaurants or participating in an activity such as bowling are considered to be safer. It may be that the safety benefits of meeting in a public place are entwined with participation in a "fun" activity – leisure offers individuals an extra opportunity to "get to know" each other before making a decision to meet in a more private venue (which thus increases one's feeling of vulnerability).

Ironically, not everyone followed their own advice. Following the protocol is normative, individuals give reasons for why they did not do it and establish themselves as following the norm of the protocol in the present. Some of my respondents attributed not

following the protocol to first-time naivety. Others told me that in retrospect they "should have" followed more of the protocol, but did not do so not because they felt they were naïve, but because they did not consider it important or relevant at the time. I think that my respondents may have felt social pressure to appear to be taking their own safety "seriously"; and as defined by the discourse that means following the protocol, even if individually they felt that these steps do not necessarily apply to them. They spoke of following the protocol, but the examples they gave me of what they actually do when they meet friends was not always consistent with the protocol. The groups that were consistently named as being the ones who *should* make every effort to follow the protocol and any other safety measures were the young, the naïve, and the internet-inexperienced. In the cast of the first two, a lack of good judgment skills was implicated as the reason why these groups in particular should follow the protocol. The third group was also cautioned to be alert, due to their lack of familiarity with the potential dangers of the Internet. For adults who were veteran internet users, following the protocol was *good*, but there was an implicit assumption that by virtue of their own competency, they were less likely to attract the kind of individual that would make it necessary to have to follow the precautions.

Summary

Safety on the Internet is a serious issue, but it is an issue that is surrounded by numerous assumptions and beliefs created by the prevailing discourses. My respondents defied the popular notion that the Internet is swarming with predators and danger, yet they were able to identify and present a "safety protocol" for would-be partners in friendship to follow predicated on the assumption of danger from online friends. It is clear that many of the beliefs and assumptions surrounding internet safety are exaggerated and possibly even

based on fiction, yet there is still a need for safety. Future researchers may wish to take on the task of fully disentangling reality from the discourses of danger and fear.

Chapter 8:
Other Findings

In the course of my interviews subtle themes emerged that were not a part of the central line of inquiry of this thesis, yet were nevertheless scientifically interesting. These include observations on the impact of gender and generation on respondents' views and opinions, the emerging popularity of social networking sites like Myspace and Facebook, and devastating experiences that serve as cautionary tales of the dark side of internet meetings. Chapter 8 addresses the issue of gender and generation and explores social networking.

Gender in this Thesis

Due to the fact that I was using a sampling method that had very little control over who chose to respond to my request for interview subjects and was decidedly non representative, I did not include gender and age as specific line of inquiry in my thesis. None of my questions were specifically crafted to address any differences gender may have made in how people responded do certain topics or ideas. Nevertheless, there were moments where participants brought up gender as a pertinent factor in their own behaviour and beliefs. Though these occasions were not common enough to make an expansive argument about gender and the meeting of internet friends, they did provide an opportunity to observe some of the consequences of gender for certain individuals.

The responses that made reference to gender tended to emerge from two discussions; that of the reasons why people make friends online, and that of personal safety. In the former, some of my respondents told me that men and women make and meet friends for different purposes, and have different expectations of what the online relationship will lead

to. These individuals told me that when making friends, men tended to use the Internet in order to find romances or sexual relationships while women tended to look for platonic friendships. These two goals were seen as subtly at odds with each other. Some of my respondents, such as Danny, ascribed to the belief that platonic friendships between the sexes were unlikely or even impossible and that the goal of any mixed-sex friendships would ultimately be romance. My female respondents, on the other hand, often did not seem to subscribe to this belief, but they noted that men commonly expected far more out of the relationship than my female respondents did. This was noted as a distressing and sometimes confusing tendency, but as Anabahs told me in retrospect, there were often signs that the other was interested in more than a platonic friendship – "…as we got further along, when we were talking on the phone, you know, he said a few interesting things, like, 'oh man, I could fall in love with you'" (Anabahs). These little comments may not be fully seen for what they imply until during or after the face-to-face meeting, and then they may seem like obvious signs that were disregarded. The men I interviewed never mentioned being the receiver of these kinds of advances, this seemed to be something that was exclusive to my female respondents.

The second kind of reference to gender involved ideas surrounding personal safety. This comprised a number of different references. Danny felt the Internet was safe for himself, but worried about the safety of the women he met who seemed too trusting – he was not going to hurt them, but if they trusted him so easily, they might endanger themselves meeting men who might. Both Dylan and Shane are tall, well built men. Yet they differed greatly in their belief in the degree of safety conferred by being a tall, well built man. For Dylan, this attribute contributed to his feelings of safety meeting friends, and contributed to a feeling of being able to "take care of himself" in a pinch. Shane, however,

discovered that he could feel very unsafe despite being a physically strong and large man, and trained in self defense.

Some of my female respondents told me they felt safer meeting other women from online. Amy told me that she would have been less eager to meet her friend face-to-face and absolutely opposed to letting that friend into her home, had her friend not been female. For Kirsten, the fact that the conference she was visiting was composed mostly of women also made sharing rooms with strangers feel more safe, though this had not been in the forefront of her considerations while planning for the conference:

> CHRISTINE: did that factor into your feelings of safety?
>
> KIRSTEN: it definitely did. Knowing that um, well, it did but it wasn't really, it wasn't in the forefront for me. Because … shipper fandom is predominantly female. I didn't see anything strange about it being predominantly women wanting to meet and talk about Grissom and Sarah shippyness, and, so I didn't see anything unusual about it. So I wasn't thinking a lot about it, but I do believe it maybe factored in a little bit in knowing that I wouldn't have to share a room with anyone who was male and I wouldn't really have to worry about … the physical threat that somebody who is male could offer to somebody who's female. (Kirsten)

Even though one of the people Kirsten shared a room with was a lesbian, she did not feel the same physical threat she felt she would have if there had been a man present. Another respondent, Katarina, is above the average height for women and a physically strong woman. Like Dylan, she felt a degree of safety conferred by her physical build, and did not ascribe to ideas of feminine vulnerability that were hinted at by Amy and Kirsten.

In another discussion, Kirsten also brought up the expectation of gender in the use of screen names, specifically when using relationship-oriented sites. Though she usually used a very gender-neutral screen name, when visiting relationship sites, she felt compelled to create something more feminine, in order to present herself as a woman to would-be inquirers:

> KIRSTEN: I mean I can't go onto one of these things and put on my name as [my usual screen name], because I don't feel that people will think that's feminine enough. And there is this expectation that if you're a woman trying to attract a man you have to have a feminine name. And I

imagine men feel just as badly, that you have to come up with something that will impress women. Yeah, and so you don't actually get to be yourself either. (Kirsten)

This is interesting to note. I have heard it joked by some online that "there are no women on the Internet", a reference to the fact that men are commonly *seen* as the predominant users of the Internet, despite the fact that women's use of the Internet has risen considerably since the first days of the Internet (Wasserman and Richmond Abbot, 2002). In some interactions online, it seems that there is a tendency to assume the other person is male until they reveal otherwise – this is something I have personally encountered and observed while using the Internet. On a dating site, however, gender is a primary factor in how people must present themselves to others in order to attract the demographic they wish to attract. If a woman allowed herself to be assumed to be a man by "default" due to using a gender neutral or gender ambiguous name, she risks embarrassing or uncomfortable advances by people who assume she is male.

It is also worth noting that the previously mentioned constructs of the Desperate Housewife, the Rapist and the Axe Murderer are all gendered. They represent gendered threats to the unwary while online. As a woman, the Desperate Housewife is a non-physical threat – she threatens to waste one's time and energy in an ultimately pointless and fruitless relationship. The Rapist and the Axe Murderer, on the other hand, are presented as being male, or being men masquerading as women in order to trap the unwary. Both constructs represent physical, specifically masculine violence. Though women rape and murder (albeit less frequently than men, and for different reasons), the threat of such violence from a woman was never brought up by my respondents. Tying into the stereotype of "there are no women on the Internet", one of the biggest fears my male respondents related in meeting a friend for the first time was the fear that someone who presented themselves as a woman

online might actually be a man. The assumption was that such individuals were likely to try to victimize the respondent in some way. No one ever mentioned worrying that an online friend who represented himself as a man would turn out to be a woman in real life.

<div align="center">Generation</div>

There were generational differences in the attitudes my respondents had to online friendships. While the generational line was not defined by my respondents, the further past the mean age my respondents were, the more their opinions tended to differ from younger participants. Older participants were more reserved about their internet use, while younger participants were more likely to see using the Internet as a normal part of day to day living. These attitudes were reflected in the comments they made about internet friendships and meetings.

Ed, Shane and Danny were all above the mean age for the sample. All three made mention of a stigma associated with meeting people on the Internet. For these respondents, there was a fear that others who did not participate in meeting people on the Internet would perceive these friendships as the last resort of a desperate man, especially when these friendships were intended to be romances. Danny spoke of the reactions of his peers:

> DANNY: Oh, everyone responds negatively … 'I didn't know you couldn't get a date', or 'did you have troubles meeting people', or 'certain types of people go on there, guys who can't meet women', or whatever the case is. Everyone's got their little opinion of it, unless they've been on the Internet, dating. And everyone you meet who hasn't actually experienced it has got a negative view on it… I tend not to advertise it. (Danny)

Ed and Shane echoed these sentiments. While these respondents were quite willing to discuss this with me, they indicated that it was not something they told everyone. And their comments indicated that they did not consider these types of meetings to be ideal for themselves as well.

In contrast, for respondents below the mean age, meeting friends on the Internet was not associated with any stigma. This was partially because, as several told me, all their friends were doing it as well, and the kinds of people who objected to their activities were all much older than they were – grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, and the members of older generations. The fact that it was the elders who objected may have made it easier for my respondents to discount the objections; the older generations were perceived as not participating in using the Internet and thus unqualified to give their opinions on it.

Older respondents were more likely to tell me that they used the Internet sparsely, whereas some of my younger respondents told me that they figuratively lived on the Internet. The younger respondents spend incredible amounts of time connected, often using Instant Messaging services, playing games, using utilities like Facebook and Myspace, and generally surfing the web. Some of my older respondents may also participate intensively in these activities, but frequently they told me that their internet use was far more pointed – they used the Internet for specific purposes over shorter periods of time, as opposed to aimlessly wandering the Net as a pastime.

I found it interesting that generation did not seem related to my respondents' attitudes towards their own personal safety and the general dangers of the Internet. All ranges of the age spectrum seemed to concur with the notions of personal safety discussed in the previous chapter.

In addition to being a man, the Rapist is likewise characterized as being middle-aged, although variations do occur (for Amy the Rapist was 90, possibly to emphasize that this is not necessarily a rational fear). I do not know why this is, but it seems clear that the Rapist's purpose is to serve as a bogeyman for the young and unwary, to force them to consider the danger of the unknown on the Internet. Will the Rapist age as the "Internet

Generation" ages, or will he stay permanently in his 40s in order to continue to bogeyman for incoming generations? As my generation crosses 40 ourselves, will our Rapist continue to be 40, or will he advance in age in order to continue to represent the threat of the older man? These are questions worth thinking about as time goes on.

Social Networking

At the time of this writing, social networking utilities such as Friendster, Myspace and Facebook were starting to garner national media attention in Canada and other countries. These social utilities were not the focus of my inquiry; however they did come up in conversation. From what my respondents indicate, these kinds of websites are used differently from either general community sites or dating sites. The latter two are used either for general communication or specifically meeting people, whereas social networking sites are typically used to keep in contact with existing, offline friends, or to monitor interests such as favourite bands.

The use of the term "friends" on social networking sites has come under fire. My respondents did not always agree with the term "friends" as a correct representation of who was in their friends lists. They told me that their friends lists tend to be composed of two kinds of people – real friends, and acquaintances or contacts (or as Eric characterized them, "fans"); yet there is often no way to distinguish between the two. My respondents told me that this did not mean that there was no such thing as real friendship on the Internet, just that the terminology of a "friends list" is not always congruent with the concept of friendship as we understand it. This counters one argument in the media – that the Internet is trivializing friendship by terming all contacts "friends".

Clearly this thesis is in no position to speculate on the future of sites such as Myspace or Facebook. Unfortunately I did not personally become aware of these sites until late into my data collection, and was unable to include them extensively in my inquiries. However, from initial observations it seems that these utilities are mostly used to keep in contact with existing "real life" contacts, rather than to make new friends online, and thus are somewhat outside the scope of this thesis.

Summary

Clearly both gender and age have an impact on how we make and understand internet friendships. Though these were not central lines of inquiry in this thesis they nevertheless proved to be present and are worth investigating further.

Other researchers may wish to take up the investigation of gendered experiences in making and meeting friends from online. From what my respondents indicate, gender may not be a primary consideration for everyone, but it seems to play a role for some; the extent of this role and for whom it is relevant is something that could be subject to further inquiry. Likewise, age may be a relevant factor in future studies of internet friendships. It is no doubt going to be interesting to see how future generations differ in their approach to the Internet, and how our own attitudes change as we age. These are questions which must be studied over a period of time and related changes may be difficult to predict at this moment.

Social networking sites were also not central to my inquiry, yet their rising popularity suggests they may be worth investigating. Other researchers may wish to investigate the kinds of friendships associated with these sites.

Chapter 9:
Conclusion

This thesis has been an exploration of internet friendships and meetings, from friendships' initial formation to the meetings that arise from them, with a small glimpse at what can happen after. As well, this thesis has explored some of the discourses that commonly surround internet relationships and revealed a strong primacy of the physical world despite fears that people would abandon it in preference for an online fantasy world.

Friendship on the Internet is indeed possible, as this research shows. As opposed to traditional friendships where friends meet face-to-face first and gradually get to know each other through face-to-face interaction, often as part of some leisure activity, with online friends mutual self-revelation tends to occur before the actual face-to-face meeting. Indeed, some friendships may never extend to the physical world, but may remain online indefinitely. Certainly deep rapports form, deep enough to encourage friends to meet and become a part of each other's "real world" lives.

Friendships arise on the Internet that are both intentional and unintentional. Typically intentional friendships are the result of individuals looking for romantic partners, but these may become platonic friendships as well. Unintentional friendships can be either romantic or platonic, and often arise out of participation in communities devoted to specific interests, or in games and chats. Though they can be casual, these are often focused around serious leisure pursuits, and may be forms of Amateur participation or serious leisure pursuits of game playing. The venue of the interaction has a role in shaping the friendships that arise, as there may be limitations placed on how interactions can occur.

When the friendship progresses to the point of meeting, a number of obstacles must be overcome. This can in be terms of finances and travel in the case of long distance

friendships, or in terms of scheduling and meeting places, and feelings of safety, in the case of local friendships, or it can be aspects of either. Some relationships never overcome these hurdles and thus never meet. Especially in the case of travel, those that do overcome these barriers often use the meeting as a rationale for further social activity or vacationing. Meetings generally occur over casual leisure activities, which provide both an opportunity for "fun" as well as an opportunity to evaluate the other. These are social events, and are usually casual leisure endeavors.

Meetings offer friendships an opportunity to confirm each other as friends in the face-to-face world. My respondent's experiences indicate that these events are commonly viewed as a "make or break" point in a relationship. From the meeting, the friendship may become a more face-to-face oriented "real life" friendship, or it may dissolve and drift apart if individuals discover they do not "click" face-to-face as they did online..

There may be disappointment, and disappointment is typically drawn from misrepresentation. This may be deliberate or it may be inadvertent. The degree to which misrepresentation divide friendships depends on the severity of the misrepresentation, and also on what individuals expected out of the relationship. Group meetings are less problematic, the spectre of expectation and misrepresentation does not linger over group meetings to the extent that it does dyad meetings. In addition, there is a tendency for people to create fantastical others in the absence of accurate data of the other. This kind of "fill in the blanks" can often lead to mismatched expectations or disappointments when the other is finally met and turns out to be different from what was imagined.

Online friendships and meetings are situated within a discourse that often presents them as unsafe, unwise, and unreal. The discourse, disseminated by urban legends, the media, and the beliefs of others, presents online friendships as something which is escapism and

fantasy at the very least, and foolishly placing oneself into danger at the most. People engage to varying degrees with the discourse, some believe it, others defy it. Nevertheless most of my respondents tend to take issues of personal safety fairly seriously. They presented evidence of what may be commonly held beliefs regarding behaviour that is intended to increase safety while meeting friends. The emergence of a "Safety Protocol" in the discourses may be imminent.

There is a stigma associated with finding friends on the Internet that seems largely felt by those older than 25 years of age. Younger generations clearly have a somewhat different attitude towards internet friendships than do their elders. In addition, gender may influence understandings of why we make friends on the Internet, and may also influence perceptions of safety in meeting friends. Finally, online social networking sites are a rising phenomenon which may intersect with other forms of online friendship and meetings.

This study advances the field of research on internet friendships in that it investigates both platonic friendships and romances, and considers a variety of friendship sources. It is also one of the first to examine how online friends meet and what those meetings look like. Furthermore prior to this study, there had been little inquiry into what influences disappointment outside of romances. Also important is the fact that this thesis identifies and describes prevailing discourses surrounding internet use and meetings, and examines the variety of ways in which individuals engage with those discourses.

Suggestions for Future Research

This is an exploratory thesis, aimed at understanding some of the basics that go on in internet friendships and the meetings that come from them. From these findings a number of issues have arisen that may be excellent topics for further research. In addition there are

issues that are outside the scope of this research that may nevertheless intersect with it. Certainly this is just a beginning, as time marches onward the concerns that drove this research may recede and new research concerns may arise.

Others may wish to further pursue the leisure studies angle of this thesis. My results strongly suggest that leisure plays an important role in both the formation of friendships as well as the ways in which people choose to meet. A number of friendships in this study appeared to arise out of serious leisure pursuits, suggesting that it may be important to further understand internet friendships in these terms and to distinguish these ties from those based on casual leisure interests. This suggests that the predominant approach to internet friendships – which focuses on exploring romances that occur on dating sites – may be missing the importance of free-time activity, which this study suggests, helps explain the basis on which these ties develop.

Other researchers may wish to take some of the findings of this thesis and put them to a quantitative test. Some of the findings may be appropriate for that; it may be interesting and informing to see, for instance, what percentages of relationships start out as platonic friendships and what percentages as romances, and what proportion of interactions start via dating sites and what proportion via inadvertent friendships through other means. Indeed I would highly recommend such an exploration, considering that a considerable part of current research has focused especially on dating sites. It could be that this proportion is smaller and less significant than was previously thought, which indicates that research should be done on interactions that occur outside of dating sites.

The discourses that have been identified in this study certainly deserve to be explored further. These discourses appeared in the interviews with both Albertans and Americans from the Southern states, however, this is not necessarily an indication that all North

Americans, or all Internet-using individuals experience these discourses in the same ways. In addition, I believe it is important to study these discourses as they continue to evolve and change as the Internet becomes an ever-more prevalent aspect of our daily lives. Will the discourse of personal safety, for instance, be different in five or ten years, or will it be similar to today's?

Other researchers may wish to further pursue the factors that make meetings and friendships successful, or alternately, those that discourage further involvement with the online friend. Studies could be crafted to examine how prevalent misrepresentation is, how different kinds of relationships are affected by it, and what are the different effects of different degrees of misrepresentation. Similar studies could also be conducted to examine the tendency to create the fantasy other, and the effects this has on meetings and the relationships. These are both lines of inquiry that are possible to explore through traditional hypothesis-testing.

The issues of gender and generation are also of further interest. These were not able to be fully explored within this thesis, but nevertheless arose, which indicates that they may be significant. My colleagues who are interested in criminology and deviance may wish to further research the risks associated with internet meetings. In the push to focus on child predation not much seems to have been done to analyze the risks adults may face on the Internet. Certainly safety experts will wish to analyze the "Safety Protocol" and give their opinions of its true effects.

Further studies on social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace may be interesting. These came to my attention too late for full inclusion in this thesis. Their rising popularity suggests that they may be good candidates for further research. It will be interesting to see what the future brings for these kinds of sites. Finally, as our opinions

towards the Internet change and new generations are brought up internet-literate, online friendships may become more and more common and normal in the public eye. Researchers may wish to revisit these findings in the future, in order to compare how times have changed, or even possibly how they have stayed the same.

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Appendix A:
Interview Guide

Demographics

- How old are you?

- What is your occupation?

- What is your current level of education?

- Are you originally from _____?

Internet friendship Origins and the start of the meeting

- Have you met more than one friend from the Internet?

- (thinking of the first friend you met,) How did you originally get to know your internet friend?

- What methods did you use to communicate?

- At what point did your friendship become "real" to you?

- How long were you friends online before the idea to meet face to face arose?

- How did you go about the process of deciding to meet?

- When you did actually meet, what arrangements did you and your friend make for meeting?

- Did you go to meet your friend or did your friend come to meet you, or did you both travel?

- How did you decide who would be traveling and who wouldn't be?

- What barriers did you face in meeting with your friend?

The meeting and beyond

- When you first met your friend, what were your first impressions?

- What effect do you feel meeting had on your relationship?

- How has your relationship changed since you met?

- [If other friends] Thinking of some of the other friends you've met from the Internet, how similar were those meetings to your first meeting? [Depending on the number of meetings, the first three questions of this section may have been asked again.]

- What was different?

- Have you ever been disappointed? What made the experience disappointing?

On safety and Trust and Others

- How did your friends and family and other people react when you told them you were meeting a friend from the Internet?

- Was safety a concern for you?

- What did you do to ensure your safety?

- Do you feel those steps are necessary?

- Is the Internet an inherently dangerous place? (for whom?) [People answered this loaded question a variety of ways, and their responses were very useful for understanding the discourse of danger]

On the nature of friendship

- How would you compare your online friendships to more traditional "real life" friendships that you've had?

- Can you be as close to a friend who you only know through the Internet as you can to one you know IRL?

- What are the advantages to online friendships?

- How about the disadvantages?

Closing Remarks

- Are you familiar with Social networking pages like Myspace? [response based inquiry into social networking]

- Having had this (these) experience(s), would you meet a friend from online again?

- What would you do differently in the future?

- Allright, we're coming close to the end of my questions. Thanks very much for participating in this study, we've had a very interesting discussion today. Before we end, is there anything I didn't ask that you feel I should have?

Appendix B:
Glossary

Character: In an MMO, this refers to the player's avatar in the game world. Some games only permit one character per player, others permit multiple characters per player. Generally a player may only play one character at a time. Players can usually choose among a number of different kinds of characters which all have different abilities and tactics.

Everquest: One of the first and most well known MMOs ever created.

Forum: a set of webpages arranged in such a way that users can make posts viewable by other users, who can then respond to those posts. Usually requires membership to participate.

Friends List: a list of people on a networking site or in a game which an individual wishes to be aware of. These may not be actual friends, but may represent other forms of networking or non-personal communication, such as co-workers or acquaintances on networking sites, or competent players in games. Friends lists on networking sites usually inform an individual when people who have been marked as friends make a change or post something new. Friends lists in games inform individuals when friends log in and out of the game.

Guild: An organized group of affiliated players in an MMO. Kind of like a club. This may have other names in other games, but I am most familiar with guild.

Guildie: a member of a guild. Also called guildmate.

Hard Core: in the context of a raiding guild, this is a guild that is considered a top guild, where raiding becomes the sole purpose of the members' play experience, and possibly even the central feature of the members' leisure lives. Where non-hard core raiding guilds may decide on which few nights a week they want to raid, hard core guilds decide on which few nights a week (if any) they get off from raiding. This is the point where raiding starts to look like work. Most raiding guilds are not hard core.

IM: Instant messaging, generally instantaneous text communication between two people over the Internet. AIM, MSN and ICQ are common instant messaging programs.

Instance: in World of Warcraft, an instance is a dungeon that requires a party of 5 to defeat. These are separate, each party having their very own version of the dungeon which only party members can enter. Other MMOs use the instance system, or have public dungeons which permit multiple parties to be present at the same time.

IRC: Internet Relay Chat, a form of instantaneous text communication often involving "rooms" full of people as well as individual one on one interaction. DALnet is an example of an IRC. When discussing chatroom names, a "#" is usually put in front of the name, like #CalgaryGardeners, which would indicate a channel of that name.

Java: a programming language useful for creating real-time, interactive website content. In the context of the Internet, the word usually refers to the programming language, not the beverage.

Maple Story: a Korean MMO.

MMO or MMORPG: A Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMO is the short version), a game which can only be played on the Internet and in which individuals users will necessarily encounter other individual users via the net.

NPC: Non Player Character, this is a creature in an MMO that is controlled by the "computer" rather than an individual player.

Party: In an MMO, a party is a temporary grouping of characters in order to defeat a common short-term goal. This is different from a guild, which is an affiliation and is often considered to be far more long term, persisting months and years rather than the minutes and hours a party exists for. Players can usually party with anyone in their factions or teams, they are not restricted to guild members.

Profile: A page on a dating or meeting site where users can post personal information about themselves for others to view.

PVE: Player versus Enemy, when players fight the computer controlled monsters and other in-game content. Also, servers where PVP does not occur at all, or occurs only under controlled circumstances.

PVP: Player versus Player activity in an MMO, where players kill or fight with other players in the game. PVP refers both to the activity of fighting and also occasionally to games or servers which permit uncontrolled or unrestricted PVP

Questing: In an MMO, this refers to fulfilling tasks set by NPCs in the PVE world.

Raid: 1. An instance that requires more than one party and a great deal of planning to defeat. 2. The term for the group of people who are participating in a Raid Instance. 3. A large, multi-party organized group of players participating in PVP.

Raiding: When members of the same guild work together to defeat in-game challenges that would be impossible alone or in small groups. May involved groups of between 10 and 100 or more people working closely together. Raiding is a time consuming activity which often takes hours of preparation in addition to the hours spent actually raiding. After reaching maximum level, personal and guild progress is often measured by the raid challenges which have been met and defeated.

Regulars: In an internet context, this usually refers to frequent and active participants in a particular site.

RP: In World of Warcraft, RP servers are role playing servers, where players are expected to be "in character" at all times. Players are expected to develop a persona for their characters and to react and communicate based on how the *character* would react and communicate. *Only* RP servers have this particular requirement, PVE and PVP servers do not. RP servers are by default PVE, although there are RPPVP servers now as well.

Server: In IRC and videogames, this is the hosting computer. It is almost always automated and generally not run by any one particular individual. Thousands or millions of people may be on a given server at a time, depending what the server is hosting and where it is physically located. In the case of IRC, servers are linked together in a cluster and people on different servers can talk with each other, provided they are using the same IRC. In the case of a video game, there are often multiple servers and the servers have no communication with each other, meaning that a person on server A could not talk to a person on server B without actually changing servers. Most games charge a fee for transferring characters from one server to another. Some will allow players to create new characters on different servers.

"Soloing": In an MMO, solo play is playing alone, rather than in a group or party with other players. Many MMOs prior to World of Warcraft have made solo play exceedingly difficult, essentially forcing individuals to play with others. WoW is noted for making solo play possible in the game world.

Teamspeak: A popular VOIP program used primarily by game players. "TS" for short.

Ventrilo: A popular VOIP program used primarily by game players. "Vent" for short.

VOIP: Voice Over Internet Protocol, a method of communicating over the Internet using instantaneous voice transmissions. Depending on the VOIP provider, this could be identical to a phone call, or could permit multiple users to voluntarily connect to a server where they can communicate simultaneously.

World of Warcraft: A hugely popular MMO produced by Blizzard Entertainment, involving the game universe from the popular Warcraft strategy games.

Appendix C:
Cautionary Tales and True Experiences

Most people who use the Internet are likely familiar with the horror stories – they *are* part of the discourse of personal safety. These cautionary tales serve as warnings of the horrors that await the unwary, and include tales of people murdered, raped, defrauded, or otherwise victimized. These kinds of tale are told generally as accounts of something that happened to "someone", or "a friend of a friend", and are largely urban legends or mythical.

Though cautionary tales are usually mythical, people can and do have bad experiences meeting others on the Internet, or even merely communicating with others. The vast majority of my respondents encountered nothing more sinister than others who may have been different but mostly harmless, or possessing poor manners and rude mannerisms. For two of my respondents this was not the case; both Shane and Leslie had experiences that were frightening, and in Leslie's case, life altering. Shane's case may be used as an example of why it is a good idea not to neglect personal safety wholly when meeting friends, and Leslie's case is a cogent demonstration of how online harassment can have deeply felt offline effects.

Shane's Experience

Shane's account begins similar to others. He had met the other person on a dating site and had communicated via email, instant messenger services, and telephone. They had exchanged pictures. A romance had started to grow between them. Everything seemed to be fine, and they arranged to meet each other. The idea was for Shane to fly to Montreal to

stay with his friend. The ticket was purchased and the arrangements were made. Before flying, Shane made sure to tell a friend where he was going and when he expected to be back, and also promised to call when he could to make sure his friend knew he was alright.

Upon arriving at Montreal, Shane did not immediately recognize the person he was supposed to meet.

> SHANE: I wasn't sure it was [her] at first because [she] looked a lot different in person than what the shading and the lighting controlled, I realized later that I had been manipulated slightly, or greatly, whichever way you want to look at it. And I almost didn't recognize her. The only reason I did was the person was sitting there with flowers, and nobody else was, so I figured that's got to be her, and I thought 'oh my god, maybe I should just keep walking'. But she recognized me, and so I was trapped at that point. (Shane)

Shane later told me that he started having trepidations almost immediately upon seeing his contact, and that in retrospect he should have followed his "gut feelings". On the way out of the airport, the woman[6] flirted nonstop with what seemed to Shane like every man who crossed their path. He told me he did not realize until later that she was trying to make him jealous to see what his reactions were. Caught offguard, Shane's reaction was to "wait and see", rather than act.

They left Montreal, and Shane discovered that the woman did not in fact live in or near the city as he had been led to believe, but instead lived on a pig farm outside of a small town 300 kilometers from Montreal, in a *very* Francophone area. Shane's French was inadequate and highly accented.

They spent the first night in an apartment rented by the woman's daughter. Here, they ordered a pizza. Due to a medication, Shane's appetite was greatly reduced from normal, and he only ate one slice. The woman then asked if Shane was still hungry, to which he replied that he was not. She cooked him a steak dinner anyway:

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[6] She was never named in the interview.

SHANE: So she makes a steak dinner anyway, against my wishes. And she cooked me 2 large steaks, at least 8 oz steaks each. And she, she mashes up 6 potatoes. And a whole can of corn. And then to boot she asks if I want gravy … And I saw that it was this cheap little can sloshing around gravy in a can, you know, like? I don't want gravy. Well, I don't know what I want so she cooks me the gravy anyway and pours it over everything. But, she asked how I wanted the steak, so I said I don't really want the steak but if I was eating the steak I'd want it rare. So I got beef jerky for the steak, so dried, it was almost over - beef jerky, chewy. And I was trying to make an attempt to eat this food she had cooked me, right, to be a, you know? I don't know why I was even making the attempt. I was just trying to - at that point I felt a little threatened that I should try and eat this food, you know. Things were going bad. (Shane)

Shane struggled with the food, and the lady took notice. According to Shane, she grabbed the plate in a huff, angrily stomped over to the sink, and began scraping off the gravy. She returned the plate to Shane, who could not resist his self-professed urge to be a "smart ass":

SHANE: I said 'Hey! You missed a spot,' and pointed at a little glob of gravy that was on the potatoes, right? … But she took all that gravy and stuff that she took off the thing, and in one fluid motion turned around and smacked it on my head and rubbed it in on my head. I mean I don't have any hair, I shaved my head, but, she smacked it on there and kind of smeared it around a little bit, then stepped back and looked at me like 'now what are you going to do'. And uh, I almost took a piece of steak and dipped it in the stuff on my head and then ate it, but then I thought 'my head's probably dirty, I don't want to do that'. But I did deliberately cut off a piece of steak and put it in my mouth and sat there to chew it 100 times and looked at her like 'I'm not going to say a thing.' My immediate gut reaction was 'don't react. I'm really really going to get in trouble now, something's going on, this person's WHACKED, and what the hell am I going to do, I'm in this dead end little town'. (Shane)

After spending a few days in the apartment, they departed for the lady's house, which turned out to be on a residence on a pig farm. While on the pig farm, Shane discovered that she was on medications for heart conditions and for unspecified mental disorders, and was also a heavy drinker. She invited friends and family members over for nights of heavy drinking and conversation, which Shane could not understand much more than that it was about him. He had one opportunity to call his friend back in Alberta. Since he had neglected to buy more minutes for his cell phone, his conversation was limited to indicating that the trip was not going well, and if he didn't come back to his home, to call the police.

The most frightening moment for Shane came on one night when the woman had been drinking.

> SHANE: And when she was drunk on the 3rd night, she said 'what would you do if I drugged you and tied you up and locked you up in the barn and sent messages to your family that you were in love with me and never wanted to see them anymore and you and I were going to get married and stay here forever?'… I'm thinking 'oh my God,' I didn't at all tell her what I would do… 'whatever I had to' was my response to her. And after the third day I stopped eating food that she had prepared of any kind, and that's when I wouldn't eat anything that didn't come out of a can that I opened right there and cooked in a container that I washed. (Shane)

This incident marked a turning point in Shane's trip. When the woman was next away from the house, Shane used the time to scout the barn and plan an escape route if the necessity arose. He spent the rest of the trip on the alert, using his military training to keep his body and mind ready for a confrontation. Shane told me that only his training and life experience kept him from panicking and doing something that might have hurt himself or the other person, and felt that had he been less experienced the trip may have been a lot more disastrous than it already was.

The woman's children were a source of support for Shane. They treated him well, confided in him, and apparently liked him. Apparently because of this affection, they showed Shane the hundreds of doctored photos that the lady used when courting online suitors. They also told of their mother's previous boyfriends, who had all been abusive. Shane concluded that some of the woman's behaviour was intended to ensure that he would not be the same kind of abusive man she may have been used to; and that she had been deliberately provoking him in an attempt to test him for abusive behavior.

Eventually the "vacation" ended, and Shane was safely returned to Montreal, and thence to Alberta. However the experience of being stranded in what seemed almost like a foreign country, without access to communication or transportation, and threatened by an unpredictable and frightening woman was very unpleasant for Shane. While this event has receded further into the past and become more humorous for Shane as time goes on, he still cautions others to be careful. To Shane, the Internet was implicit in this meeting and the

subsequent events; though he might have met the woman through other means (he has a relative who is married to her brother, something he did not find out until after the visit), he would have never gained a romantic interest in her - and thus the desire to spend further time with her, had he met her in "real life" first.

Leslie's Experience

Leslie's actual meetings have not been exceptionally terrible, but she has experienced firsthand the devastating effects of online harassment. Her tale begins with a former favourite MMO, Maple Story, where her character had accrued a degree of in-game fame. While playing this game, she maintained a separate and fictitious identity from her physical one, in order to protect her real world privacy. An online acquaintance continually wished to party and quest with her, which she declined. This seemingly small slight seemed to trigger an intense anger towards her, and the acquaintance (whose identity Leslie later found out) then began to cyber stalk her. He hacked all of her online accounts:

> LESLIE: he hacked my game account, every one of my emails, my MSN, my Livejournal, my Myspace, my freaking Pokemon site, that I don't even go on, my Neopets. He hacked, we had trouble with our bank account and credit card, he knew my address, he didn't know my phone number though. (Leslie)

Then the threats began. He started to send harassing and threatening emails to Leslie, threatening to "to cut me up and stick pieces of me into another person" (Leslie), and set her furnace on fire. The fact that these threats occurred in an online environment did not make them any less serious to Leslie, who was faced with the immense task of reclaiming her identity and protecting herself and her family from a frightening and threatening individual.

Although she has reclaimed her identity, there has been little she could do about the person who made the threats. She has instigated legal proceedings against him, but as he lives in the United States, this is a long and difficult process. She is afraid to press charges, because of worries about what he may be tempted to do in revenge if the charges fail or he eventually leaves incarceration. She is attempting to get him barred from access to Canada, or at least receive warning when he enters the country.

Leslie occasionally discovers that he has entered Canada, and on those occasions she spends her nights in fear, with furniture barring the windows and doors. She has not way of knowing how valid her fears are, since she has no way of discovering how serious this individual was about his threats, or whether or not he is still attempting to harass her. Though she has made steps at recovering her life and reducing the amount of fear she feels, it is still present.

While Leslie's experience does not appear to be a common one, it nevertheless provides a cogent illustration of how illusory privacy and anonymity can be on the Internet. Users tend to assume that they are private and untraceable, however Leslie's experiences indicate that this is not the case, and that people who mean harm *can* access private information of individuals for the purpose of harassment.

This experience is not strictly part of the analytic focus of this thesis. However Leslie has asked that I include it, as it serves as a demonstration of the serious consequences of online harassment for its victims. Certainly her experience is a sobering one, and worth contemplating.

Summary

Unlike urban legends, the experiences of Shane and Leslie are real and have real consequences for their lives. Both individuals told me that these experiences are the reason they are no longer willing to make or meet friends on the Internet. Though of my sample, only Shane and Leslie related these kinds of terrifying experiences, they nevertheless serve as a caution to others to take steps to ensure their own safety, and to never assume that they are anonymous and untraceable.

Not everyone has or will have terrible experiences meeting friends online. Though this is not a representative sample, it may nevertheless be safe to assume that these kinds of incidents are the minority. But these two accounts serve as evidence that not all online relationships are harmless, and that individuals should endeavor to keep personal safety in mind when online and when meeting friends made there.