Chapter 1   Introduction

The Computer Mediated Environment (CME) has emerged as a new consumption arena. One of its commonly recognized manifestations is cyberspace. Cyberspace is often characterized as an imaginary space inhabited by consumers located within countless communities of consumption in trans-global social spaces. The contemporary tolerance of novel ways of having, being, doing and consuming (Bauman 2000) has allowed CME to gain a foothold as a consumption space in society. If viewed beyond the narrow libertarian ethos of cyberspace, the CME now contains increasingly immersive hedonic, aesthetic, semiotic and functional consumption spaces, where the self can supposedly be limitlessly extended, where pastiche and countercultural impulses can be satiated, and where geographically ungrounded acts of consumption can be created. The CME has broadened the scope of consumption for the individual by offering new consumables in new consumption spaces. Being eternally transient in nature, the CME is perhaps the perfect platform for self articulation of a post-modern consumer in a transient society.

Baudrillard (1983, 1991) asserts that new media technologies are harbingers of countless possible simulated life-worlds where illusion is not the opposite of reality. He opens his discussion on simulations with; *'The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth that conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true'* (1983, p.166). Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum is one of creative imagination; even the best of illusions are but human creations.

Animating the inanimate, creating life-forms from dead matter, and ultimately creating another self are primordial dreams and desires of mankind. Such desires and dreams are amply evident in both religious and cultural mythologies and texts (Frye 1964). They are reflected, for example in the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, when

Pygmalion creates Galatea as a sculpture whom the gods bring to life, or in the Golem of Prague, created from clay to protect the Jewish dwellings. The world of simulations is perhaps a modern incarnation and thus continuation of this dream. Now instead of clay or stone, technology is the medium in which life is inscribed. We manipulate our physical environment, turning it into what we desire it to be. Where we reach a limit to what we can do with our physical environment, we may invent simulated versions of reality closer to our imaginations and desires.

Daniel Miller (1998) argues that cultures materialize knowledge and practices into artefacts. Bernard Miège (1989, 1998) argues that although culture and technolgy are interdependent and interrelated, they do not always act in unison in a predictable manner, and that whilst new technologies do increase commodification of culture by the introduction of industrial methods of production, they also create the possibilities for new cultural innovations. To Appadurai (1986) technologies are materializations that embed and locate societies and cultures. He argues that contemporary commodities flow between scenes and localities, and change the way in which technolgies have traditionally been understood and manifested.

Technologies thus are materializations, ordered structures of knowledge, materials and symbols that tie together cultural domains, social interests and actors. Media technologies are also structures that embed and locate, but simultaneously liberate individuals. These technologies present us with a dilemma; we exist physically and experience the world through a material existence. A mediated environment mediates the reality of material existence; it brings to existence what is not material, and makes us believe that it is real. Such mediation blurs the boundaries between matter and non-matter, real and simulation, man and machine.

The research presented in this thesis is an attempt to access the emic reality and situate it in an etic context. But realities are circumscribed, and so no emic can fully embrace all there is, and no etic can ever interpret all that could possibly be called emic. This dissertation documents an ethnographic exploration of the emic that emerges out of the interactions between individuals and CME technologies. This research evolved over a period of three years comprising several linked studies, and is thus presented as a staged process. The presentation uses a style common to ethnographies. The four data and analysis chapters contain their independent thematic discussions which are synthesized in the final chapter.

An ethnography needs to answer the questions of 'why here and why now' before laying claims to its validity. Ireland was chosen as a locality because at the time of study it was undergoing a unique social, cultural and economic transformation. At that time Irish consumers were just beginning to embrace CME technologies. During the course of this study broadband was introduced into Ireland and internet diffusion rose from around twenty-five percent to over fifty percent (Appendix 2.1). Greater economic freedom was exhibited in increased use of products of CME technologies among the population.

In general ethnography does not follow a predetermined research design, but follows the focal phenomena, allowing exploration of rich, untapped data. It allows multiple interpretations of reality, and alternate interpretations of data throughout the study (Fetterman 1998). Because contemporary ethnographers accept the possibility of multiple realities, the practice of ethnography does not follow a specific theory, or a singular philosophical paradigm. The Ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, equipped with an array of theories and paradigms from which to choose, and he is free not to choose any in providing a thick description.

Within the discipline and practice of ethnography, there are different schools of thought. The traditionalist approach to ethnography tends to focus on scientific validity, and traditional ethnographies are often impartial observations of a 'social scientist'. Many contemporary ethnographers question the notion that such 'author absence' enhances validity of the text. For example, Geertz (1988) claims that ethnography is in fact a construction and an ethnographer's creation, and that creative ethnography as an authored narrative does not necessarily point to monologic self indulgence.

I have chosen the representational practice of owning this authored text. It reflects my constructions of my informants' constructions of their lived experiences. No matter how much I try, I cannot remove myself from the context of these constructions. I find this inescapability of self to be not a de-authenticating characteristic, but a challenging responsibility. However, the reader should be assured that regardless of its representational style, this ethnography was conducted and documented using widely acceptable practices.

A note on the use of the term CME: In comparison to the common terms such as the world-wide-web, the internet or cyberspace, Computer Mediated Environment (CME) (Novak and Hoffman 1996) is a lesser frequently encountered term in literature. Each of these terms has been used in different contexts to illustrate different phenomena. World-wide-web is generally associated with information content on the internet. The term internet has often been used in the study of online activities and interactions. The term cyberspace has evolved as a denotation of alternate social worlds in electronic environments.

This thesis aims to explore consumers' lifeworlds, which is a larger domain than any of these three terms can possibly encompass. Contemporary consumers' lifeworlds

include various manifestations of media technology; 3G mobile phones, game consoles, media players and interactive television are some other devices that provide as rich a mediated consumption experience as the computer. This study uses the term CME to refer to all manifestations of computer media technology collectively. The terms cyberspace and internet would still be used in their widely accepted contexts.

Summary of Contents

Chapter two presents an expansive literature review which covers diverse domains and disciplines. It leans heavily on post-modern concepts of simulation and simulacra, as well as scientific theories of media engagement and immersion to foreground the notion of lived experience in mediated environments.

Chapter three presents methodological orientations of this research. It outlines and argues for the merits of ethnography, as well as the research tools and techniques used and developed in this research.

Chapter four describes the evolution of this research and data collection techniques used in its four constituent studies.

Chapter five presents the first study. It is based on extended interactions with a varied but stable group of informants and documents the integration of simulations in their lifeworlds. The first part is exploratory in nature and establishes simulations as consumption objects. The second part explores the role these simulated consumables play both in consumers' lives and in self extension.

Chapter six features the second study and documents my encounters with the social networks of consumers of simulation and the role these simulations play in mediating and restructuring their social lifeworlds. It is based on immersive interactions with a group of Irish families, and explores how CME technologies have impacted family structures and the social relations that underpin them.

Chapter seven presents the third study, which is a cyber-ethnography based on a two year immersion in eBay. It is a thick description which blends the ethnographer's lived experience with informant narratives to provide a grounded context and uses online data to provide the cyber-context.

Chapter eight is an analytical and interpretive study of the ethnographic and deep web data collected during immersion on eBay. It presents an emic-etic view of discourses of power in these new fluid marketplaces.

The discussion in chapter nine synthesizes findings from the four studies and traces them back to their philosophical underpinnings. And finally chapter ten reflects on the research process in a general fashion, and attempts to identify gaps as well as opportunities for future research.