Chapter 4   **The Subject / Informant Networks**

4.1   Introduction

As outlined and explained in the previous chapter, this research was conducted using an evolving ethnographic approach, allowing emic-etic interplay to guide data collection as well as analysis. Such an approach was adopted primarily to give a sense of direction and achievement to the process of data collection; instead of devoting a year to data collection and another to analysis and ethnographic writing, this ethnography was conducted as it was analysed and written. Research foci and aims were used to guide the access to relevant informants and lived experiences, resulting in the evolution of a set of four studies within this singular ethnography. Naturally, each of these studies borrowed from, or built onto, the findings of the others, but each with its own research focus, identifiable informant network, and unique data and analysis.

The evolving approach also resulted in continual assessment of both the research direction and realignments of the line of enquiry. All enquiries were truly informant driven; detection of new lived experiences called for entering new fields and encountering new informants. Each of these studies was thus conducted in a unique combination of informants and environment, yielding unique consumption practices and lived experiences. Since informant networks were organized around specific research aims, their ethnographies too became independent, with their own emic-etic cycles.

This organization around research aims also meant that, although there were some commonalities and crossovers, informants for each study could be considered an independent group and their ethnographies uniquely identifiable. The first study, which was the largest in terms of number of informants, was bi-focal. In the first part the study was focused on consumption practices and experiences relating to simulations in

general. In the later part of this study, interaction with this group was refocused around a new aim of the social significance of simulations, and the role of simulations as possessions. Together these two interconnected studies are presented in chapter 5.

The second study was aimed at exploring the impacts of consumption in CME on social networks, and provided me with an understanding of how consumption in CME was mediating family lives and structures. This study is reported in chapter 6.

The third study was aimed at exploration of consumer empowerment in cyberspace. The informant group for this study comprised of grounded as well as cyber informants and was instrumental in giving me an understanding of consumer empowerment and cyber-marketplace discourses of power. This study is reported in chapter 7. At the end of this study, a new research aim emerged; consumers were marketers and story tellers, they created extended narratives around their marketing efforts, how were these consumer narratives in cyberspace contributing to the marketplace discourses of power? This study of consumer narratives in cyberspace is reported in chapter 8.

These informant networks, and the way data were collected from them is now described in detail. Data analysis techniques for these studies are embedded within the data presentation section in their respective chapters.

4.2   Study 1: Consumers of Simulations

Study 1 was a two stage ethnography documenting the integration of simulations in individual lifeworlds. This study is presented in chapter 5. The first part of this study uses data from a large group of informants, which was accessed during the earliest phase of my ethnography. Much of the data and interpretations from this initial phase were exploratory in nature, but helped foreground the notion of simulations as consumption objects. Once early explorations were complete, this informant network was accessed again to explore the role these simulated consumables play in their lives,

particularly in self extension. The two phases of this study are now described individually.

Phase 1 – Simulations as consumables: The informant network for the first stage of my ethnography was the most expansive. This informant network was established immediately after I had arrived in Ireland and settled in Mullingar and at DCU. As in any ethnographic study, first contacts were with colleagues at work and neighbours in my residential area. Using a snowballing technique, and by using the social networks of these early informants, this network was gradually expanded and data were collected from 72 Irish informants over a period of one year. These informants were geographically dispersed in locations such as Dublin, Mullingar, Kinnegaad, Waterford and Athlone.

Recruitment of these early informants had qualifying criteria; all were gainfully employed adults who spent at least 3 hours per day in a CME. The criteria of adulthood and employment were applied to recruit and retain geographically local, socially and culturally grounded individuals and to filter out juveniles and/or deviants. Although some elements of the criteria were found to be inconsequential later, the original intention behind them was to ensure that the consumables and consumption choices studied were those of a larger 'normal' segment of a geographically local population as opposed to social/cultural deviations and sub-cultural consumption.

The data collected from this network comprised formal unstructured interviews, informal accounts of lived experiences and observational field notes. This data-set was further strengthened by using field notes and observational data from venues such as public internet kiosks and video game arcades.

Initial formal interviews were around one hour in duration and were unstructured. The informants were also observed while engaged in the CME. Besides the modes and modalities of their interaction with/in the medium, their functions and activities were

also observed, and many revelatory insights were gathered during the process. The observation component varied from informant to informant and lasted between one to three hours per session. Multiple observation sessions were conducted with nineteen of the informants, while the rest were observed for a single session.

Informants were occasionally questioned during the observation exercise and field notes were taken. Follow-up examination of informants took the form of occasional brief visits, phone calls or e-mails. Follow-up questions related mostly to the emergent themes and provided clarity and coherence in informants' accounts and actions.

This early data was organized around a theme of functions, activities and products used while in a CME. A selected sample list of informants, their functions and activities in CME and demographics is presented as list 4.1

Respondent	Age	sex	Profession	Routinely used products, activities and functions in the CME	Time in CME Per day
Cathy	35	F	Academics	E-mail, News, songs, Info-seek, E-books	3-4 hrs
Don	30	M	IT professional	Infoseek, industry news, research, product development, (E-mail)	5-6 hrs
Garry	27	M	Banker/Amateur musician	E-mail, Musical instruments, Entertainment,	10 + hrs
Gill	80	M	Retired mariner	E-mail, Newspaper, infoseek, greeting cards, communications	3-4 hrs
Hick	55	M	Engineer	E-mail, Infoseek, research, Business & industry contact , advertising, e-books, Communications	8-10 hrs
Holt	29	M	Carpenter	Chat, Gaming, Video / audio entertainment,	3 hrs
Ian	28	M	Office worker	E-mail, info seek, gaming, greeting cards, chat, communications	7-8 hrs
Jackie	35	F	Business Pub co-owner)	Newspaper, cards, soundtracks, email, fashion, industry news,	2-3 hrs
James	30	M	Business	Trade info, gaming, porn, simulation, news, audio-video, (E-mail)	6 hrs
John	26	M	ISP operator	E-mail, Accounts, News, Video-conference	5-6 hrs
Ken	45	M	Doctor	Chat, infoseek entertainment, News, E-mail, E-books, communications	2+ hrs
Kim	55	M	Manager	E-mail, entertainment, musical instrument, sports news, shopping, infoseek , e-books	2-3 hrs
Liam	48	M	Farmer / trader	E-mail, News, Infoseek	2 hrs
Lisa	33	F	Home carer	E-mail, entertainment, greeting cards, audio video, communications, shopping,	2-3 hrs
Liz	45	F	Office worker	E-mail, chat, entertainment audio/ video	2 hrs
Lorna	25	F	Student / Clerk	Infoseek, email, chat, audio/video, communication, e-books, entertainment, gaming	5-6 hrs
Mariam	23	F	Banker	E-mail, entertainment, chat	5-6 hrs
Mat	37	M	Doctor	Infoseek, Shopping, E-books, entertainment, communication (E-mail)	3 hrs
Micheal	23	M	Bar tender	E-mail, News, Encyclopaedia, gaming	3-4 hrs
Nick	43	M	Doctor	Infoseek, Entertainment, E-books, Communications, gaming	2 hrs
Niel	23	M	Security guard	Email, Recruitment service, news, entertainment	2 hrs
Niles	30	M	IT professional	Industry news, e-mail, infoseek, web-site, research, shopping, audio video, product development	6-8 hrs
Norm	50	M	Shopkeeper	Chat, Entertainment, greeting cards, E-mail, porn	2-3 hrs
Ross	45	M	Doctor	News, Infoseek, Entertainment, E-mail, Trade and	2 hrs

				marketing, chat	
Sarah	40	F	Store clerk	E-mail, News, Banking, Shopping, Entertainment, Pictures, religion	2-3 hrs
Steve	48	M	Doctor	Composer, picture editor, library, encyclopaedia, medical record, synthesis	3 hrs
Ted	40	M	Business	Web page, infoseek, trade and industry, travel, banking, shopping, e-mail, picture album, scheduler planner, alerts, communications, advertising, news, television, audio video, chat, accounts, religion	5-6 hrs
Tom	25	M	Business	E-mail, chat, entertainment, gaming,	4-6 hrs
Tracy	45	F	Office Manager	News, E-mail, Entertainment, Shopping, E-mags,	6-8 hrs

List4.1 Sample list of Informants

This list will be referred to again in chapter 5 when data and analysis pertaining to this informant network will be presented.

Phase 2 – Simulations as possessions: Once the early phase of my immersion into informants' consumption universe was over, I was able to navigate around their consumption practices to look for hidden meanings. A logical intrigue at this juncture was whether Belk's (1988) construct of self extension would apply to consumables in CME? Once early explorations were complete and an understanding was achieved that consumers do replace real and tangible consumables with simulations, this informant network was accessed again to explore the role these simulated consumables play in their lives, particularly in self extension.

This part of my study used data gathered from extended interactions with 42 informants. Many of these were continual participants, but some new informants were also recruited. Some of these informants appeared to present a richer canvas for the research. These were individuals who had consumption practices peculiar to the study, and could also articulate the meanings in their consumption effectively. These were focused on especially as case studies. The use of case studies in ethnography is not common, and notion of selected informants, selective data in ethnography argues against such a practice on the grounds that it reduces a generalized application of the findings, but such a selection criterion was used simply because it enhanced the epistemological dividend of my research.

This phase of the research was also more immersive in nature. In true ethnographic fashion, this group of informants became my social subset, with which I interacted on an almost daily basis. Data were collected during informal interviews in a variety of settings for varying lengths of time. Informants were observed in their own social and domestic environments, and were occasionally questioned during the observation exercise. I also immersed myself in the CME practices and processes cited by informants in order to acquire a 'lived experience' perspective. This data was also more emic in nature, capturing a combination of informant and ethnographer's lived experiences. Routine interaction with informants took the form of occasional brief visits, phone calls and e-mails. Since data collection was emergent in nature, some of these interactions were specifically targeted towards the emergent themes in the interest of furthering clarity and coherence.

In addition to direct interaction with informants, the research also benefited greatly from the local media which routinely aired views and reports on relevant topics. One national FM talk radio (Today FM) in particular became a very potent data source during the course of this study by conducting phone-in debates on several relevant topics, at least one of which was at my request. This popular radio station, which has the highest audience ratings in the country, uses mobile phone based text polls to conduct snap surveys and solicits calls from listeners to share views and opinions. Although such nation-wide data proved difficult to document faithfully, as a quasi social barometer of the dimensions of interest, it did shape the research significantly.

Data, interpretations and analysis pertaining to the two phases of this study are presented in chapter 5.

4.3   Study 2: CME and Social Networks (family)

This study was conducted in the later half of my research. In comparison with the previous informant network which comprised of individuals, the network for this study

comprised of families, representing micro-social clusters of the local society. Interaction with this social network was aimed at exploring how CME technologies impacted family structures and relations. Chapter 6 documents my encounter with this social network, and explores the role consumption in CME plays in mediating and restructuring social lifeworlds.

The data for this year long study were collected between August 2004 and July 2005, during my residency in a suburban housing scheme in Mullingar, about 60 miles west of Dublin. Twenty households were accessed during the study period. Immediate neighbours were the initial target group, but as happens with any longitudinal study, the target population shrank with time. All subject families with two exceptions boasted a traditional familial structure (married couples with children). The two exceptions were one divorced single mother and one unmarried couple. All subject families were upper-middle-class households possessing at least one computer with an online connection. Nine of these families had more than one computer and a broadband connection as well, and all except one had other immersive interactive consumption platforms like Play-station or Xbox console. Close liaison and contact with the subject families enabled access to all the members as well as some individuals from their extended social circle.

The dataset comprised several short and depth interviews, field notes from several participant observation sessions and notes on frequent front-door chit-chat highlighting the daily goings-on. Many of the interviews and observation sessions were impromptu, informal and un-structured.

Ideographics of the network: This section presents ideographic demographics (Table 4.2) and observational accounts through family sketches (Exhibit 4.3) of this informant network. The intention behind presenting such accounts is only to capture the ethnographic character of the study and not to summarize the emic totality of the

ethnographic narrative. A non-analytical approach is used in preparation of this largely

observational account and emic view; lived experiences and interrelationships between

acts and impacts are presented and discussed in chapter 6. Data analysis techniques for

this study are embedded within the data presentation section.

Sample Family Demographics				
	Age/ gender	Status in family	Main occupation	Favourite pastime
Mike's				
Mike	34/M	Father / Spouse	IT Trainer	Gardening, woodwork
Lisa	30/F	Mother/ spouse	Secretary (Part time)	Gardening
Eric	4/M	Child	Growing up	Playing
Ben	2/M	Child	Growing up	Drooling
Adam's				
Adam	45/M	Father, Spouse	Engineer	Golfing, socialization
Sheila	42/F	Mother, Sister, Spouse	Secretary (part time)	Homemaking, socialization
Zoey	5/F	Child	Student	Barbies
Lorraine	17/F	Sheila's Sister	Student	Socialization
Jack	21/M	Lorraine's boyfriend	Salesperson	Rugby
Marks's				
Mark	40/M	Father, Spouse	Salesperson	Family
Lorna	31/F	Mother, Spouse	Homemaker	Children
Breda	9/F	Child	Student	Dancing
Kit	2/F	Child	Growing up	Watching Breda dance
Jackie's				
Jackie	45/F	Single mother	Estate management / Masseur	Literature reading
Kevin	13/M	Eldest son	Student	Videogaming, Karate
Nathan	12/M	Son	Student	Karate
Aisling	9/F	Daughter	Student	Ballet
John's				
John	45/M	Partner/guardian	Security supervisor	Motorcycles, online surfing,
Jennifer	44/F	Mother, Partner	Homemaking	Online Poker
Jill	9/F	Child	Student	Music
Jack	7/M	Child	Student	videogaming

Table 4.2

Two family sketches

The Adam's: Adam's are a highly social and outgoing family. An avid golfer and Liverpool football club fan, 45 year old Adam works as an engineer in Dublin. His day starts at dawn as he has to travel 100 km to work. Occasionally he returns early and tends to his cars or garden. They are a three car family and Adam loves his brand new BMW convertible. Sheila is 40 and works part-time as a secretary in Mullingar town. Five year old Zoey is a precious child of the family as she had been diagnosed with cardiac dysfunction very early on. Like her parents she exhibits social tendencies and often holds her own children parties on the front lawn on summer evenings. Lorraine, Sheila's sister is a final year high school student and has recently got emotionally involved with Jack. Their house and garden are always kept very well maintained and cars always sparkling clean. Sheila likes flowers and her front porch is always full of season's best. Sheila likes to entertain as well as attend parties. Adam likes to spend his Saturdays on the local golf course and evenings at the pub watching and betting on football. Their social circle is wide and varied as they know how to entertain diverse groups. They often have over a dozen visitors on Saturday evenings, Sheila's sisters and their families; Lorraine's boyfriend as well as Adam's golfing partners all assemble together for dinner. Occasionally Jack stays over till Sunday morning, as do some of Adam's friends. They are a two computer family and have a broadband connection. Lorraine has her own computer in her bedroom and the family computer is in the living room, which has very infrequent use. Sheila and Adam are somewhat computer challenged and thus their computer time is generally task driven.

Exhibit 4.3

4.4   Study 3: Cyber-Market structures (eBay)

This multi-sited study was conducted simultaneously in cyberspace and in a local community. The informant network for this study comprised of grounded as well as cyber informants and was instrumental in providing me an understanding of consumer empowerment in cyber-marketplaces, and its role in marketplace discourses of power. This study is reported in chapter 7.

Although this was a multi-sited enquiry, the split between the two sites was not equal. The subject and informant network for this study was based more in cyberspace than in the geographic locality. It comprised of a cohort of consumers on eBay from the UK and Ireland, and was accessed during a two year immersion in eBay, the world's largest marketplace and auction site. The cyber-ethnography presented in chapter 7 (and further in chapter 8) captures the data from this informant group. The thick description of this multi-sited ethnography was created by blending informant narratives with the ethnographer's lived experience to provide a grounded context, and marketplace interactions to provide the cyber-context.

I discovered eBay as a site of consumers' lived experience and meaning during study 2 described previously. Intrigued by the consumption phenomenon of internet-based auction sites, I decided to explore the dynamics, mechanisms and modes of consumption on eBay. This ethnographic encounter began in March 2004 with an initial immersive study on eBay and was intended to last eight months. However, given the dynamism and expanse of this field, new themes were uncovered on a regular basis, and saturation was not achieved at the end of the stipulated period. Unsaturated themes directed towards a new research aim and the immersion was continued for a further sixteen months, finally terminating after two years. Unsaturated themes from this study were used to create a new research aim focused on exploration of consumer narratives in cyberspace, which is reported in chapter 8.

The mode of access to field in cyberspace was by choosing a trader identity (***netnographer***), and by allocating an initial sum of 1000 dollars to trading. Since eBay is an expansive network of dozens of regional sites each having hundreds of product categories, observation and interaction with a stable group of consumers is quite difficult. At first it appeared that consumers were acting randomly and transiently, shifting between categories as their interests and consumption choices changed. It was only when interactions were limited to one very specialized area of interest where buying, bidding and selling patterns started emerging, that it became possible to observe and interact with a stable group of consumers.

It was decided at the outset that in order to explore the eBay consumption experience comprehensively, both buyer and seller roles would be assumed. The intention was that items bought off eBay would be sold later on in order to circulate the initial funding and prolong the consumption experience. Over the initial period of eight months a total of 121 transactions were completed, both buying and selling. Since all

transaction activities become a part of eBay record, they remain available online at eBay UK site under the user ID 'netnographer'.

Deep web cyber archaeology, (p.131, chapter 3) was also refined and applied during this study, allowing access to new sources of data at a variety of levels and media in the cyberspace. In true contemporary multi-method ethnographic fashion, the data collected were in the form of field notes, e-mail exchanges with other members, phone call transcripts, sale-purchase records of transactions and member feedbacks. Members with whom I transacted became tacit as well as active informants. Informants ranged in age between 21 to 72 years and were mostly males.

This ethnographic study also proved to be far more immersive than others, and went beyond basic online data collection, as each transaction involved either receiving or sending a physical parcel. With the passage of time storing, cataloguing and keeping track of the items themselves became an overwhelming task. The little shop in cyberspace was allocated half a garage space and the car had to be pushed outside.

An ethnography presenting encounters with this subject and informant group is presented in chapter 7. Data analysis techniques for this study are embedded within the data presentation section.

4.5   Study 4: Cyber-narratives and marketplace discourses of power

Study 3 was aimed at exploring consumer empowerment in cyber-marketplaces. At the end of the initial eight month period, although the original study was complete, many themes remained unsaturated, and many fresh lines of enquiry were uncovered. So, immersion on eBay was extended indefinitely at this point by reorganizing informant and subject networks around the emergent research aim of consumer narratives in cyberspace.

This ethnography was purely cyberspatial in orientation. The study used consumer and consumption narratives in cyberspace to construct an emic-etic view of discourses of power in these new fluid marketplaces. During the last eighteen months of immersion in eBay, a huge number of these narratives were collected. At the end of data collection the extended database comprised over 10,000 eBay auction listings, and consumer narratives amounted to more than 2,000 pages of printout. Chapter 8 presents an analytical and interpretive study of the ethnographic and deep web data collected during this extended immersion on eBay. Data analysis techniques for this study are embedded within the data presentation section in chapter 8.

The next four chapters present the data and analysis from these subject and informant networks, revealing how simulations and consumption in CME mediate consumers' lifeworlds.