Chapter 6 **CME, Simulations and Social Lifeworlds**

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data and interpretations from the last stages of my immersive ethnography. It documents encounters with the social networks of consumers of simulations, and the role these simulations play in mediating and restructuring their social lifeworlds. It is based on interaction with a group of Irish families, and explores how CME technologies have impacted family structure and the social relations that underpin them.

Informant networks, sample demographics and family sketches, as well as modes of encounter and data collection techniques for this ethnography are outlined in chapter 4. In comparison to previous subject and informant networks, which comprised of individuals, this network was comprised of families, and represented micro-social clusters of the local society. The data for this year long study was collected between August 2004 and July 2005, during my residency in a suburban housing scheme in Mullingar, about 60 miles west of Dublin.

Emic-etic interplay guided the process of data collection in this evolving ethnography. Transcripts and field notes were periodically coded and interpreted to detect patterns of behaviour or identify themes. Sometimes when a strong theme or pattern was identified, the emic view was placed against the etic and new lines of enquiry were established. Periodically, themes were pruned and readjusted and insignificant themes were replaced by newer stronger ones. However, since most data collection was naturalistic in a small sample of population, enquiry and explication along themes of interest was not always possible, and thus some themes remained unsaturated.

6.2 Integration of CME in micro-social structures

This ethnography was aimed at understanding modifications and adaptations to micro-social clusters, as their members, individually as well as collectively, chose to consume in a CME. As explained above, this integration of CME technologies into households was studied using an evolving ethnographic approach.

Social dynamics take distinct and diverse patterns at the micro level; individuals or groups may respond differently to similar situations. Although many observed behavioural and interactional phenomena were unique in contextual terms, there were similarities in the way they impacted on different families. Collective patterns emerged where diverse acts and situations enacted and experienced by different actors had similar impacts on the family as a unit. As themes emerged from this collective analytical process, they became part of a framework. Each time new data were analysed, this analytical framework was refined and updated. This procedure was repeated till saturation was reached for most themes.

At the end of this thematic refinement process, four strong themes were selected for further interpretation and the creation of thick description. These were;

1. Empowerment – Disempowerment
2. Social Aggregation – Social Alienation
3. Immersion – Disengagement
4. Experimentation – Deviation

It is interesting to note that each of these four themes is bi-dimensional in nature and thus appears as an interconnected or polar pair. The first component highlights the operative condition and the second its possible resultant impact. Empowerment of an individual changes his relative position in the immediate social group, which might manifest itself as disenfranchisement or disempowerment of another individual. Social encounters and ties in cyberspace often alter the composition of an individual's social

reference group and may result in social alienation with immediate family members. The phenomenological nature of immersive experiential consumption in cyberspace disengages an individual from his physical world, and finally experimentation in the virtual domain can manifest itself as social and cultural deviation. These themes are now individually discussed in detail.

6.2.1. Empowerment – Disempowerment: This theme highlights the empowerment accorded to consumers by CME technologies and the relative polar position of disempowerment. The internet has evolved as a social and commercial enabler. It empowers a consumer to work from home, shop from his bed, run errands while keeping children company, conduct research as well as entertain himself from the comfort of home. But consumers, who are unable to negotiate a CME, or choose not to, are disadvantaged by not being able to enjoy the convenience and benefits many simulated consumables and online marketplaces offer.

It was evident with my cohort of families that, within a familial context, computer proficiency can be an empowering resource for an individual. Conversely, inadequacy in the new technological realm may increase co-dependence in relationships. This was amply evident in the case of my informant Sheila, whose newly acquired computer proficiency had altered the status of co-dependence in her spousal relationship. Sheila narrated her own empowerment and its impact on her own role in the family as follows:

> *Yeah, I got this NCT booking done online for my car. I also pay road tax online, I mean now that it is so easy, and can be done from home – I am not dependant on Adam in this way, In fact, I do a few things for him…. like recently we were up for insurance renewal, I saw that ad on TV and went online and I found a much cheaper quote – for his car as well….. well yeah, now he says you go do it, may be he has realized that I can do it better.* (Sheila)

At one level Sheila's computer proficiency had enhanced her stature in her co-dependant relationship with her husband, at another level this empowerment had given her a feeling of 'being better'. This somewhat competitive feeling of being better at

some tasks often shifts the role and responsibility structures in families. In this network, I came across several examples where women in the family who were either full time homemakers, or were in partial employment, learnt to use the computer at home. These women were keener to experiment in cyberspace, and to learn to negotiate cyber-marketscapes, than their spouses. Some of them assumed additional responsibilities for performing online tasks such as banking and fund management, paying bills and taxes, booking flights, hotel and appointments as well as information search. It was also not unusual to find women scouring through online financial and technical literature in order to prepare a considered set for major purchases.

Online product information search and shopping is a significant area within this theme. Consumers who would normally find it difficult to negotiate the maze of supermarkets' brand constellations may become easily accustomed to the online format. In my core informant group, shopping was evidently an interdependent family activity. However, there were indications that use of the internet was mediating these interdependencies to some extent. As an illustration, my informant Lisa, who was a non-driver, was dependant on her husband Mike to drive her on shopping trips. Mike however, was a passive participant on these shopping trips and mostly acted as a child minder, leaving all decision making for Lisa. Lisa learned to use computers during the course of my study, and by the end of the study, had progressed to a point where she conducted online product searching and as well as shopping. Mike, who was an expert computer user, became an active participant in this exercise. When probed, it became evident that technology's mediation was a significant contributor to this change. Mike commented on his participation in online shopping,

> *It's not shopping, choosing what to buy is tricky, stressful really, and I make so many mistakes when I go shopping (*on my own*), but it's not like your car or machines where there are specifications to compare, yeah, but maybe its'* (household shopping) *cathartic to women I suppose, they are natural at it, ----- its' different online, I mean here* –(gestures to the computer) *its' a man's ball game* –

now you have tools to compare them side by side, gives you options, makes decisions easy. (Mike)

Here Mike contrasts the two modes of shopping, and finds product selection stressful in a bricks and mortar marketplace. He is an engineer and thinks in numbers. He thinks that because many products do not have specifications on the label, comparing them is difficult. He likes the online comparison tools and extensive product information, and finds online shopping more to his taste.

Mike's use of technology to circumvent and negotiate the supermarket maze was not unique. Another informant, Mark, employed the same means to a different end. Mark and his wife Lorna's use of online shopping was fairly sophisticated, as they had made shopping baskets of their preferred brands and products which they used in their shopping selection. They had discovered that with each online order their shopping baskets got more precise as the software remembered their usual requirements of weekly consumables, automatically adding them to their list, which they could modify if required. Lorna felt that online grocery shopping had not only reduced '*oh I forgot to get that*' occurrences resulting in constant revisits to the store, but had also allowed her more time with her kids.

However, not all online shopping activities are so clearly goal directed producing tangible results. John worked as a security supervisor in a Dublin bar and found his job physically and emotionally exhausting. He seldom participated in household chores and specially did not like to participate in family shopping. However, as a keen surfer, he found bargain hunting through online auctions and clearance sales a very interesting activity. Although he would still not go shopping himself, he would compare prices on various websites and provide tips to his partner Jennifer, who on the other hand, found little use for such an exercise. She reported:

O Come on, I mean you don't buy things unseen, and you know what John does, he opens up a few sites, Aldi and Lidl and Tesco and Argos and he give me a summary,

> *Oh its much cheaper there, this is new and that's a bargain, well do we really need it? And who knows about the quality – that's not how you shop! It's like his hobby you know, and I am happy for him.* (Jennifer)

This verbatim highlights a domestic discourse of power. It is apparent that Jennifer does not value the online product information. She thinks that because purchase decisions are made in a physical world, based on tangible properties of products, online information search does not contribute to them. It also appears that she is somewhat dismissive of John's well meaning efforts to participate in family shopping decisions through his online search of supermarket sites. Her classification of his contribution as 'hobby' suggests that, in their household at least, the impact of online activity on the existing shopping power structure may be quite limited. Her espousal of 'real-world' shopping may well have more to do with maintaining this status-quo, than with extolling the merits of one specific mode of shopping. On the other hand, because this 'online window shopping' was part of John's larger recreational use of the internet, we can also see it as an attempt to buffer his job stresses by making him feel successful in finding bargains and being useful to the family (Barnett and Hyde 2001).

Work-life balance is one of the key quests in contemporary families. CME technologies empower individuals to enhance their work-life balance by working from home. Telecommuting allowed one informant to commit more emotional resources to his family. Mike worked partially from home and his wife worked half days for five days a week (see exhibit 4.3, chap 4, p.155~156). Mike enjoyed the benefits of both flexi-hours and telecommuting; he worked on Saturdays and two evenings at his employer's premises. For the rest of the time he worked from home, caring for his two toddlers. He felt such simultaneous multi-tasking in physical and cyber space was beneficial to him.

> *Well I could go five days a week, but why? Saves me driving, and allows me to be home more. I do have the computer on during the day and sort of keep an eye on the mail, you know, so they know I am available ---- I know it's a lifestyle thing, but I think its' all about balance between your work and your family*. (Mike)

Telecommuting in his case was empowering both spouses, enabling them to share parental and wage-earner roles. Where it allowed Mike to spend more time at home with their very young children, it empowered his wife to take up part-time employment. Mike's account also offers a significant insight to his work arrangements; it had become his lifestyle. I had observed him several times preparing lunchtime barbeques, tending to his garden, or watch daytime television in the middle of the week.

A majority of informants considered that providing knowledge and information was a home computer's primary function. Some parents were also obviously struggling to keep up with their children's quest for knowledge, occasionally finding them inadequately equipped. They were thus keen to delegate their role as an information source for their children to computers. On several occasions parents were observed encouraging children to go to the internet first of all for information. Home computers have been around for a few years now, and some teenagers in this study had been using them since early childhood. Routine encouragement by the parents to consult the computer first has perhaps brought this 'generation txt' (Thurlow 2003a) teenagers to a point where they would rather go to the 'net' than ask their parents. My informant Lorraine was a typical Irish teenager. She lived with her sister during the week, as her house was closer to the school. She commented on her use of the internet as an information source,

> *'no it's much easier to find it on the net, isn't it? and then I mean I doubt the older generation know as much about what's out there now, I mean what's cool and what's passé* (Lorraine)

Knowing what is cool and what passé is has always been at the forefront of social desirability for the younger adult generation. Social theory informs us that in contemporary societies young adults tend to experiment in terms of knowledge and practice, rarely conforming to traditional and longstanding cultural narratives. Many permissive parents acknowledged the existence of these generational gaps and were

thus willing to allow their children's online activities. They were, however, also conscious of the potential harmful effects of the internet, and often made an effort to control the content their children accessed. My informant Jackie was a single mother of two teenage boys, and internet supervision was one of her fulltime responsibilities. She commented on her modes of parental control,

> *They are not allowed to go wild on the internet, at least not in this house. I mean kids, they have to be told their limits – now Nathan is good in this way, he knows what he is allowed. Kevin* (pause) *likes to explore, and so I have made Nathan the internet sheriff – to keep an eye on things when I am not there.* (Jackie)

It is obvious that Jackie was overwhelmed by her parental control responsibilities. Where she did want to monitor and limit her children's access to online content, she found herself ill-equipped to perform this function fully, and had to delegate part of the responsibility to her children. Jackie was not alone in this practice, as I found other parents trying to supervise their children's online activities by employing all possible means. Where Jackie had delegated this responsibility to one of the siblings by according him the status of a third parent, others had installed supervision software.

Cyberspace, however, is a social world, and children may soon become entangled in the web and separated from their parents' reach and knowledge spheres. Internet thus empowers children to widen the generational gap at their discretion, and even disenfranchises parents from being a part of this process. Exploring the web independently, children may also try to evade adult company or supervision during the activity. The dilemmas parents face in trying to keep the situation under control is amply evident from Adam's response below.

> *Broadband, internet, it's funny but I find it very much like this world, you know, there are good things about it, and bad things on it.*
>
> And how do you deal with it?
>
> *Turn the freaking thing off, I suppose what else? I mean you have doors, right, and then you shut them to keep the evil out…. for your kids. Internet to my mind is that evil that got in through the doors, it's in your house now, and you have little control.* (Adam)

Controlling and mediating unwanted and undesirable social encounters is one of the primary parental responsibilities. Parents do so by limiting and controlling social exposure and children are discouraged from talking to strangers or watching adult television programs. Adam's feeling of loss of control over the internet access represents a common parental fear of subversion of authority in terms of regulation of social exposure. The cyberworld, like a real world in virtual settings, can impact on an individual through social and cultural encounters. Unaware of their children's online encounters, parents are unable to mediate this exposure and channel this learning process. However, it was surprising to note that parents who would normally have debriefed children after independent social encounters like school, parties or playground sessions, would often fail to practice such a debriefing after online or video game sessions.

In summing up all the dimensions examined under this theme, it appears that family members benefit from the products and services available in the CME by removing and overcoming many of their inadequacies and by becoming able to assume additional roles. Since empowerment is a relative position, this role assumption in families can be complementary and facilitative, as well as competitive. It may also appear that in some cases one member's empowerment is at another's expense, and the empowered individual can thus assume stronger roles.

6.2.2. Social Aggregation – Social Alienation: This theme contextualizes the social alienation family members sometimes experience when they utilize the aggregation potential of cyberspace to expand their social sphere. Because many members of a family may also have biological relationships, their emotional ties to each other are qualitatively different from other types of social associations. Family members have always been considered a strong and closely knit social group because of the interdependencies and sharing in their collective lives. Sharing of values and heritage,

space, objects and possessions as well as time makes their experiential repository similar in many ways.

With the advent of new modes of mediated consumption, the phenomenology of a consumption experience has become partly independent of the tangible environment. By dissolving the distinction of place, sense of time and value of objects, a mediated environment may allow an individual to create independent social worlds through networked communications (Schau and Gilly 2003), while still sharing space, objects and possessions with other family members. Social encounters and ties in cyberspace often alter the composition of an individual's social reference group and may result in social alienation from immediate family members (Kraut et. el. 1998).

Distinctiveness and exclusivity is an inherent component of many familial relationships. Cyber-relationships take diverse forms and some cyber-emotional ties can compete for emotional space within a family. However, some of my informants believed that because of the ethereal nature of cyberspatial social ties, any emotional investment in this technologically created social order did not impact their familial bonds. John was in the habit of spending extended solitary hours on his computer. He was very keen consumer of adult content on the internet, and was a regular at an Irish chat site. He defended his ethereal mode of consumption,

> *It's all about choices isn't it, I mean between my job and travelling, I have limited time for other things, you know what I mean, and and my time on the net is my entertainment – so to say, I don't think I would be spending more time with Jen or kids if not online, ah but, ah maybe watch TV or something.*
>
> Can TV do the same for you?
>
> *Oooo No sure, no, maybe not, I mean net is alive, tv to me is a dead thing you know, I mean you meet people, see what they are doin, find new things– so it's it's a lot more interesting to me? Do so much more than sitting watching tv with the kids.* (John)

John justifies his desire for social encounters in cyberspace by arguing that it was his time, and he preferred to spend it on a mode of social interaction that he found richer.

For John TV watching *en' famille* was apparently a less preferred activity and furnished him with a rationale for opting for online engagement in its place. The social alienation potential of consumption in CME, as a solitary immersive activity, is amply evident in this case, as it allowed John to 'be away while at home'. At another level, John's justification for '*doing more than watching TV with the kids'* perhaps also echoes the separation that has already taken place in the family through his choice to spend the collective social time in a solitary activity.

In my observation of families, the strains on available resources of time and emotions were visible at many other occasions when an investment of these was made in cyberspace. Although the use of cyberspace as an alternate social platform varied considerably within the cohort of families, there were consistent indications that such social ties were impacting on the family as a whole. The overall perspective of most of my informants was that they would like to have a balanced approach towards this alternate use of private time, and in many families excessive solitary immersive activities (such as chatting sessions or video gaming) by an individual were often overtly disapproved of by other members. One of my informant families, Jonathan's, was an extreme case in point, where his wife Nora continually complained about his overtures on chat forums and considered it a minor form of infidelity.

Familial context is considered to have the greatest influence on consumer socialization and leaves lifelong imprints (Moschis 1985). Levels of inter-family communication are indicative of close familial bonds and also affect family members' independent consumption choices (Carlson, Walsh, Laczniak and Grossbart 1994). Such communication between family members is also conducive to social learning and patterning, and parents often use it to warn children of undesirable external influences. However, digital textuality has altered the mode, form and content of communications

of ‘generation txt’, and I found that parents were often unable to communicate with their children simply because they spoke a different language (Thurlow 2003b).

There is a common belief in media and culture studies that this digital lifestyle is apparently irreversible, and young people are increasingly socializing through digital means. My general observation of the local society was that such mediated socialization trends started very early; children as young as 10 could occasionally be found text chatting through their mobile phones. Most teenagers communicated and socialized through their SMS texts and through the internet. A whole new language, and now with the advent of 3G mobile phones, genres of representation, is evolving. Children have already started using a language which is built around their text messaging practices, and elders have come to accept this language as a valid form of communications. Jeremy Clarkson of BBC, in his exploration of the ‘*mobile phone nation*’ noted the overuse of SMS textual communications in social discourses and quipped that ‘*a whole generation of British children have evolved a larger thumb*’. Teachers in Irish secondary schools routinely encounter, accept and interpret such textual and communication experimentation. List 6.1 presents some of the textual shortcuts (they are not called abbreviations by the ‘natives’) used by the generation text both in SMS and web based chatting in Ireland.

A3	*anytime, anywhere, anyplace*	*LYN*	*lying*
ASLP	*age, sex, location, picture*	*MisSM*	*Mark is shagging Marry*
BD	*big deal*	*MMAMP*	*meet me at my place*
CMB	*call me back*	*OC*	*out of credit*
CMI	*call me*	*P999 (P911)*	*parents are coming*
CTN	*can’t talk now*	*PRW*	*parents are watching*
CUAS	*see you after school*	*RUMF*	*are you male or female*
F2T	*free to talk*	*STATS*	*your sex and age*
FFPG	*free for a pint of Guinness*	*UPUT*	*usual place usual time*
FYEO	*for your eyes only*	*YIWTGO*	*yes I want to go private*
IAD8	*it’s a date*	*CUOL*	*can you come online / see you online*
LDR	*long distance relationship*		

Teen web lingo in Ireland

List 6.1

Socialization in cyberspace is not always entirely experiential and virtual, as in Irish chatrooms, it is quite common to be invited by strangers for a rendezvous. Forming new relationships in such a dramatic fashion appeared to fascinate one of my teenage informants:

> *Oh yeah, off and on you get this guy who wants to meet up.*
>
> And have you ever met someone this way?
>
> *O gosh no, I have no reason, now I am not saying I might never will, who knows about the future* (pause) *now my friend met her boyfriend like that, through the net I mean, so I know you can meet some really nice guys like that*. (Lorraine)

Lorraine appears to be apprehensive in revealing her own cyber-experiences. She talks about other people's experiences to conceal what is private to her own, but in my opinion her position represents that of a majority of Irish teenage consumers. Social theory informs us that young adults, who are actively pursuing expansion of their social networks, use all means available to them. Similarly, contemporary Irish teenagers are using media technologies extensively to this end.

New relationships in cyberspace can either be manifested as real person to person social or emotional ties, or as seemingly innocuous cyber-chitchat with anonymous online others. Individuals' social and emotional involvements are relative to each other and each time an investment in a new cyber-bond is made, familial bonds may risk deterioration.

6.2.3. Immersion – Disengagement: This theme is about separation of the phenomenal world from the physical, and the impact such separation has on both individuals and family. CME, because of its multi-sensory captive immersive ability (Biocca 1997), is a very potent platform for experiential consumption. Consumers have

now come to accept simulations in lieu of the real, and multi-sensory immersion has thus become a valid alternate mode of consumption. In my observation, the most common immersive applications in CME were the videogames. Children and young adults have an affinity towards videogames, and videogame consoles (such as Play-station and X-Box) and DVDs have been top Christmas time sellers in Ireland for many years now.

Although almost all families owned at least one such gaming platform, parents were also often concerned about the negative impacts such mediated consumption had on their children. My informant Lisa was very concerned about the nature and content of this mode of consumption. She narrated her dislike for a certain type of game content as follows;

> *Its not all Barney and Barbie stuff out there is it, I mean most games are death and fire and destruction and kill kill, shhhhhh … you should look at their faces when they are playing it.* (Lisa)

Media theory maintains that when video-gaming is opted for as an alternative to a physical activity it affects the way an individual perceives and reacts to his physical world. In a positive constructive manner, simulators using similar technology have long been used in training and practice for many sports and professions. However, recreational videogames are not primarily aimed at imparting skills in a simulated environment. One of my critical reflections emanating from observations of video gaming sessions in participating households was that the majority of these games were hyperreal glorifications of violence in which gory aggression was presented as a form of sport.

On the basis of my existing data, a value judgement (either negative or positive) on impacts of videogames is difficult to empirically establish and critically evaluate. I would thus present one field note, followed by a related case which suggest that such

violent video game players may become '*disengaged from their immediate physical and social world*'.

> *5 Dec 04, 5 sherwood, Kevin, Observation of Gaming, glorification of violence, death is the sport and objective, another dies and Kevin is visibly upset, he did not want to die, or lose, shouts and blames Ciaran for distraction, keeps muttering 'I will be back'. TV in the corner of the room against a flat wall, dim lighting and drawn curtains, door shut. Kevin playing mortal kombat which is basic audio-visual embodiment, fast paced video shots quickly changing, over powering sound levels, flashes of red and blue randomly appear, colours, immersion and sense of intense, literally life and death competition in the non physical interface - moves and jitters to the tune of background music - and twitches at the sound of each gunshot or death, agony and pain is felt, face gets red and breathing abnormal. Using controller violently now, Fighting and cursing and kicking, moving whole body –rage, violent rage - immersion, transcendence from virtual to real - and how these physical symptoms persist for a while after he finishes playing the game. Ignores his mother calling to turn the volume low, ignores phone and door bell. Each defeat increases his level of anxiety and immersion into the game and each victory makes him satisfied and encourages him to increase the stakes.* (observational field note)

This field note relates to Kevin (13), who was, in my opinion, an extreme video-gamer. My observation of Kevin as a case started with his mother's expression of concern that his videogame obsession was disengaging him from real life as well as conditioning his responses. She thought that videogames had conditioned his response such that he had started to live in fear of the next surprise appearance of a deadly foe in his real life. At the time of this study he was also learning Karate at the local gym, and she recounted that he once had a panic attack during his karate training sessions. It was a wonderful summer that year, but during this phase I seldom saw him playing outdoors with other kids. His mother told me that he was sleeping through the day and was scared of going into unknown buildings like new grocery stores or shopping malls. On occasions that I did see him outdoors, he was constantly looking over his shoulders and changing positions and would involuntarily hit siblings when they approached him.

6.2.4. Experimentation – Deviation: One resonant theme in media and culture studies is that cyberspace has emerged as a playground for experimenting consumers. Howard Rheingold (1993) was one of the first authors to recognize its potential of

allowing individuals to pursue their hobbies and fantasies in alternate social dimensions. Since then, it has continually been depicted as a domain largely populated by emancipated 'nerds' and wayward 'geeks' satiating their countercultural urges.

However, I was observing and interacting with a very 'normal' segment of a local society in 'traditional' social clusters, and not exclusively with cybercitizens. Even so, in my cohort I was able to detect diverse ways of experimental cyber-consumption. There were indications that cyber-sexual experimentation was a lifestyle for some, and online gambling and competition was a source of recreation for others. Jennifer for example was an avid online poker fan and her partner John was partial to online adult content. The following friendly banter between John and Jennifer highlights some of the contrasting views this couple had regarding each other's experimental consumption in cyberspace.

John: *she is the gambler*
Jennifer: *no I am not, poker, it's called poker and it's not gambling*
John: *you bet money, it's gamble*
Jennifer: *your eBay gamble too? you bet money there!*
John: *Yeah but I am sure to get something in the end – its not a zero-sum game*

Although it cannot be called a very revealing contribution to any thick description, this dialogue is significant because it highlights a fresh dimension of domestic discourses on this topic. John labels Jennifer's passion as gambling, perhaps in an attempt to portray it as deviation from his own social and cultural viewpoint. Jennifer argues for the legitimacy of her own actions by attempting to equate bargain hunting with poker. In this case both partners were involved in online experimentation which is viewed as deviation by the other.

Technology has always been at the forefront of gambling, and marketers now use it to control the odds and position it in larger segments of population. Irish society has had a long affinity and tradition with gambling, and bookies can be found at every street

corner across the country. On one stretch of the high street in Mullingar, 3 out 57 businesses are bookmakers, and lottery tickets are available at another 11 of these establishments. There is a distinct difference between the use of these two types of facilities; where women can generally be seen buying lottery tickets, it is very rare to find them placing bets at the book makers. It is also my understanding that betting and gambling has traditionally been a male domain in Ireland. However, with the advent of online gambling, gambling as a form of consumption has now entered traditional Irish households. Where many Irish men still prefer to visit a bookmaker for placing their bets, online betting has allowed Irish women to join their men folk.

Sexual experimentation is another commonly cited form of consumption in cyberspace. Ireland has its share of adult content websites and chat forums which have tens of thousands of members. John was also one of these members, and he gave his view about a particular Irish website as follows.

> *Oh I love them, I mean if you look at the content, it's far richer than what your TV or videos or magazines would give you, and everything is on-demand and instant, well sort of, but most of it free anyway – yeah I'd say, go try one of them daily tips you have on www.xxxxxxxxx* (site identity concealed by author), *some are gags really, but there are gooduns as well.* (John)

We can see that John finds personal meanings in these websites. He considers these websites easier to access and feels they contain richer content than other forms of media. He also reviews them and propagates their use by recommending his favourites.

Although my detailed ethnographic study of pornographic and adult websites is not a part of this thesis, even a cursory examination of Irish adult sites reveals that some of them are designed to target teenagers and young adults. Data from outside of this network suggests that although many Irish teenagers access such sites for sexual information, few would admit to doing so. My informant Lorraine also denied accessing such sites on a regular basis.

> *Jesus no I don't, I mean I don't have the need, ah but I know my friends do … I mean, I mean Jack does, and, and sometimes he would be on the net and IM me to check something out – but then if I am home I can't risk going to such sites (pause), ah so normally I don't'* (Lorraine)

Lorraine's viewpoint is somewhat complex. She appears to be acknowledging and accepting use of such websites, while simultaneously downplaying her reasons for doing so. She also foregrounds the notion of parental supervision by expressing her fear of getting caught visiting such sites while at home. Her crafty third person reportage of sexual experimentation in cyberspace also indicates the pervasiveness of such form of consumption among Irish teenagers.

Concerns that children's access to such information reduces parental control over sex-education and awareness have been resonating in Irish print media for some time now. It has been argued that teenager visits to such sites affect the role adults play in their sex-education. Asked if such was the case for her, Lorraine commented:

> *Well Sheila* (older sister) *is very supportive, more like a friend, but I really never had these many questions when I was young, I don't know but I mean maybe girls are not that crazy about sexual information, they take it as it comes and if they fancy I mean they would go with a guy, and I don't know – is it not getting very private now?* (Lorraine)

Notions of not having questions and not caring about the answers generally indicate an independent path to discovery. Irish teenagers in the twenty-first century are supposedly empowered by their computer prowess to explore and experiment to their heart's content. However, very few of my informants (only after reaching a certain level of trust and comfort) revealed such 'secrets', adding to my repository of revelatory moments and information. However, such revelations were neither guaranteed nor forthcoming in all cases. I still feel that there are certain gaps in my understanding of this mode of consumption and that at least a few of my informants did have lives in the virtual world to which I was not privy.

At a cursory glance, these four themes seem independent, and do not seem to constitute a coherent revelatory insight. However, ethnographer's interpretive license suggests

attempting to integrate them into one overarching theme. Transformation of familial roles would appear to be the theme that binds these four independent thematic areas most effectively. I will now discuss this transformation process in the light of data and interpretations presented thus far.

6.3 Consumption in CME and Transformation of Family Roles

Viewed from the position that consumption in mediated environments is often a solitary rather than shared activity (Kraut et.al. 1998), the four structural components of our thematic framework (Empowerment – Disempowerment, Social Aggregation – Social Alienation, Immersion – Disengagement, Experimentation – Deviation) appear to directly impact the structure of participating families in a variety of ways. In this section I argue that these four themes highlight the impacts families may face as a result of individual acts of consumption in CME, by altering the functional roles and emotional spaces in family structure. In a dormant mode these roles are contested, and in an active mode conflicts may arise due to this contest; empowerment can result in role increment, as well as role decrement, or role sharing and enhancement.

From a structural perspective, roles are the culturally defined norms—rights, duties, expectations and standards for behaviour—associated with a given social position. Although some theorists argue that nature does not enforce gender-differentiated roles (Barnett and Hyde 2001), such roles have historically been a cultural norm in family structure. Family structures, however, have also been historically dynamic in nature; diversity and multiplicity of roles have constantly redefined family structure (Belch and Willis 2001). Such role transformation has been considered healthy for the emotional and physical wellbeing of its members on the basis that liberation from such an ideological standpoint through mutual acceptance and division of work results in

strengthening of the family structure and relationships. Barnett and Hyde (2001) propose that

> "*the extent to which one holds traditional or non-traditional attitudes about the proper social roles of women and men moderates the relationship between multiple roles and a host of outcome variables*" (p.789).

Our first theme of empowerment-disempowerment indicates that CME empowers individuals to assume additional roles in the family thus enhancing their sense of wellbeing. Telecommuting allows men to stay home and contribute towards cooking, cleaning and childrearing. Finding it easier to navigate the online environment, both men and women feel empowered to share additional household chores. Working women, who break free from the traditional cultural role of a mother and homemaker by adopting a now socially acceptable 'juggling supermom' lifestyle (Thompson 1996), are also empowered in the CME. Adjusting and adapting to the exigencies of contemporary society exposes these juggling Supermoms to stressors of negotiating multiple roles through compromises and concessions to their primary roles. As a working single mother, my informant Jackie found CME empowering as she could perform a few tasks late in the evening in the company of her children, without compromising her parental role.

Disempowerment, at both real and perceived levels, may also transform an individual's roles in the family. Perhaps because he was raised in a traditional household, Mike held a somewhat outdated belief that childcare was solely a mother's responsibility. His decision to partially work from home allowed his wife Lisa to work first shift. Although at the surface this may appear empowering to both the spouses, I found that this difference between his belief and practice occasionally left him feeling disempowered.

Multiplicity of roles and social intertwining of contemporary work and family contexts can also become sources of conflict for both working men and women (Major, Klien

and Ehrhart 2002). Flexibility and acceptance of gender diffusion and multiplicity of roles are prerequisites in resolving such conflicts. Men in dual earner couples who adhere to traditional gender role beliefs are more vulnerable to psychological distress when their work situations are troubled (James, Barnet and Brennan 1998). Adam, who held traditional gender role beliefs, was apparently in a constant state of stress. He believed that certain household responsibilities were solely the man's domain. However, his wife Sheila's use of internet enabled her to handle many tasks that remained outstanding because of Adam's demanding job schedule and habit of procrastination.

Although rigid distinctions in division of labour in child rearing are eroding (Nugent 1991), the father often plays the role of guardian and mentor in terms of introducing economic, political and technological systems, while the mother supervises social and cultural grooming (Coltrane 1988). With changes in the technological order it was apparent that in many situations neither of the parents could assume their proper roles. Some informants felt disempowered by being unable to fully assume the roles of guardian and mentor when it came to CME technologies. Because children spent long hours online and were better versed in computer technology than their parents, parents were unable to monitor and mediate their social and cultural online encounters.

Children themselves have a significant role in the traditional family structure. Besides acting as an emotional nucleus for both parents, they are also given the responsibility for many menial household tasks (Gager, Cooney and Call 1999). CME technologies affect the children's task-performing role in two ways. First, because children and young adults gain proficiency in using the internet quicker than their parents, in many households teenagers have assumed the role of a technology supervisor and moderator. Such role enhancement arguably increases a child's stature in the family structure. Second, many parents think that a child's time online is being spent in the most useful

manner, and thus a child often assumes a legitimate and automatic right to spend time on the computer. This apparent empowerment either automatically exempts them from performing menial tasks when online or, because of the disengagement children feel while in CME, they may actually decline performing such tasks out of hand.

Empowerment: reason behind the decision to consume in CME? The preceding overview of the ways in which consumption in CME empowers or disempowers individual family members begs the further question as to the nature of the relationship between family structure and consumption, specifically in a CME.

I found that there is a symbiotic relationship between consumption in the CME and family structure. Family dynamics at times initiated the move of a family member to cyberspace; equally, immersion of a family member in cyberspace often affected family dynamics at large. Members from close knit family structures with strong social and emotional bonds used the CME only as a partial extension of their broader social and emotional fabric. On the other hand there were fragmented family units exhibiting multiple computers in the household, with highly individualized CME consumption patterns, that seemed to accelerate the pace of social and emotional isolation among family members.

6.4 Impact of Consumption in CME on Families: Macro-level Implications of the argument:

Domestication of technologies modifies and reforms societies permanently (Pantzar 1993 and 1997). CME technologies, through their systems and networks are dynamically evolving at a pace incomparable to any other 'medium' technology in the past. However, it is the non-technological social-content manipulated within this medium that has created a new social 'life-form' (Miller and Slater 2000).

Simulation technologies have reached a level of domestication where consumers can now focus on the function and the content and ignore the technology (BinsBergen 1998). Contemporary shifts in family consumption behaviour towards individualistic values and self-fulfilling aspirations at the expense of familial and religious values have been attributed to the post-modern libertarian ethos (Gergen 1991). Consumption in CME accelerates this process of liberation by separating the physical from the phenomenological, the social from the geographically local, thereby altering social structures at both macro and micro level.