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/WHOIS?
Identity: Collectivity and the Self in IRC

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ABSTRACT

Cyberspace challenges our traditional cultural understandings of notions as basic as time, space, and—more importantly—identity. With the advent and growth of electronic communication, it is becoming increasingly necessary to ask ourselves who we actually are and who we are interacting with when we are on-line. This article focuses on a case-study from the IRC chat room #rudos (Undernet), and poses the question of whether cyberspace is quite simply a powerful means of reaffirming pre-established Physical-Reality identities, or, on the contrary, a medium that allows for the creation of Virtual-Reality personae. Drawing on examples from casual conversations extracted from our emic ethnographic approach, the project soon revealed that the traditional dichotomous separation between reality and virtuality is not quite as clear-cut as many would have originally assumed.

Keywords: *identity, IRC, chat room, computer mediated communication, cyberspace*

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1. Introduction

[Neo looks at his hand; fingers distended into mirrored icicles that begin to melt rapidly, dripping, running like wax down his fingers, spreading across his palms where he sees his face reflected.]

Neo: Did you...!?
Morpheus: Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real. What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?
Neo: This can't be...
Morpheus: Be what? Be real?

The Matrix.

Throughout the last ten or fifteen years, the more industrialised regions of the world have experienced the overwhelming spread of a revolutionary mass medium. Internet, or *the* Net, originated during the 1970s in the USA as ARPANet—a fail-safe military

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communication system in the event of a nuclear war (Pickard 1998). Its main strength lied on its multiplicity of nodes and unlimited capacity of growth. In little time, the Net's advantages and potential as a mass medium grew evident, and, today, Internet has become an effective, relatively affordable and simple tool to which more than 60% of households in the USA and 250 million people worldwide have access (Looksmart Ltd. 2001).

The fast spread of Internet has occasioned an ever-increasing amount of different types of interaction on-line among users at an international scale. The Net has transformed the way we work, the way we get in contact with others, our access to information, our levels of privacy and indeed notions as basic and rooted in our culture as those of time and space.

The popular perception of time today is still based on the 18th century notions, which conceived of time quite simply as "that which is set by a clock" (Benedikt 1991: 60), as a linear, monolithic, unique and unstoppable phenomenon[1]. In cyberspace, however, this is hardly ever the case. People connected to a virtual community from different parts of the world find that they share one single virtual space and time while physically being in different geographical locations, different time zones and even different seasons of the year depending on the hemisphere! "The computer has an infinity of times in potential, ready to be actualised. It is a time that has a crowd of moments" (ibid.).

One of the most common questions asked by those who are unfamiliar with the nature of the technology is 'Where is cyberspace?' For those people who are accustomed to dealing with material, bounded objects, locations and resources, this seems a logical question to ask. Cyberspace, however, does not exist at any specific physical location. Instead, it exists in an eternal state of construction or invention, brought about through continuous interaction between the nodes. Cyberspace exists in the action of networking, in much the same way as conversation is constructed through the linking of individual words (Pickard 1998).

This redefinition of our senses of time and space renders our previous solid and irreplaceable conceptions completely relative. In cyberspace, time and space do exist, but embracing their own particular set of rules. Attempting to understand these phenomena the way we traditionally have done outside of cyberspace is fruitless.

More importantly, time and space are not the only games that cyberspace plays with our senses. Philosophers have long understood that time and space are bound up with

[1] Although we do affirm that these perceptions of time exist in the traditional popular view, in no way do we sustain that the complex phenomenon of time can be reduced in academic study to the oversimplified "monolithic, unique and unstoppable" indication that is set by the clock. As expressed by Munn (1992: 93), "time is infinite complexity." The different perceptions of time in relation to action, actors and space, can (and indeed should) be subject to deep theoretical study. Nonetheless, a close analysis of these topics would transcend the limits of our discussion here.

one's experience of the self and others (Campbell 1994, cited in Jenkins 1996: 27). Space makes no sense outside of time, and time is important in processes of identification because of the continuity which is established in a claim to, or an attribution of identity (Jenkins 1996: 27). The distortion of space and time in Internet is thus linked to another crucial redefinition—that of our notions of identity.

Internet is, undeniably, a powerful tool of communication, but to what extent is it simply a tool used to transmit a message? To what extent is cyberspace a world in its own right? In this context of increasing social interaction on-line and constant redefinition of essential notions such as time, space and identity, it becomes crucial to ask ourselves *who* we actually are in Internet and who we are interacting *with*.

Throughout this text, we will aim to consider the ways in which cyberspace affects our notions of identity and the ways in which we conceive of others on-line. Is Internet a means of reaffirming the identity of our Physical Reality[2] (hereon PR), or is it a way of evading the physical and social constraints of PR by adopting new *cyber-identities* and creating virtual personae? Are virtual identities the caricature of something we wish to imitate for experimentation or entertainment, or do we actually reflect through these caricatures what we unconsciously want to be in PR by giving free will to our desire in Virtual Reality (hereon VR)?

Certainly, Internet and a PC have no meaning per se—after all, it is the human factor behind them what creates the communication, the interaction and their significance. In Computer-Mediated Communication (hereon CMC), there is always (or nearly always) a physical, 'real' person producing and sending a message from his/her side of the computer, and another physical, 'real' person receiving the message through his/her PC and replying in a similar way. Schefield (1998: 180) considers thus the interaction in virtual communities to be an accurate reflection of PR social relations. In the words of Warner (1992, cited in Poster 1998: 190), "technical forms are never 'independent variables', but always already inscribed in social and cultural processes." What takes place through these new technologies, therefore, reflects, according to Warner, a social *reality*, the reality of the physical world that has given rise to these new media.

McLuhan, on the other hand, affirms that "by putting our physical bodies inside our extended nervous systems, by means of electric media, we set up a dynamic by which all previous technologies that are mere extensions of our hands and feet and teeth, will be translated into information systems" (McLuhan 1964: 31). *The medium is the*

[2] Throughout this text we will employ Velmans's term—Physical Reality—instead of what has traditionally been referred to in previous literature as 'Real Life', for, as we will later explain, we consider the latter term to be inaccurate and rather misleading as a concept. In his article of 1998, Velmans distinguishes between three types of reality—the physical reality, the virtual reality and the psychological reality. Physical reality exists independently of the observer, extended in space—in the world. It has tangible properties such as mass and solidity. Virtual reality appears to be in the world as well, but is actually in the mind. It appears to have extension in space but has

message; the technology of communication (not the content itself) governs the nature of human communication and thereby human affairs and interaction. According to McLuhan, when new media are introduced into societies, it is the form of those new media that most deeply impacts us.

In cyberspace, there seems to be an evident aspiration to leave the bodies behind—to free ourselves from the fixed situated identities of gender, race, ethnicity and sexualities, and enter a free space of imagination in which we are allowed to choose 'who' to be and 'how' to be (Jeleniewski 1998: 20). In the words of Meg Pickard (1998), "in cyberspace, the playing adult can step sideways into another reality." It is this apparent contradiction in cyberspace that leads to the question: "are identities and social interaction in VR *virtual*, or *real*?"

2. Cyber-ethnography

> In virtual ethnography there are no exotic locations, no mosquito nets or peanut butter cravings.
>
> Meg Pickard 1998

The term 'cyberspace' was originally coined by Gibson (1984) in his science-fiction novel Neuromancer several years before Internet became the revolutionary mass medium that it is today. In Neuromancer, cyberspace is a consensual hallucination, a virtual space of powerful desire and even self-submission, where things attain a super vivid hyper-reality (Gibson 1984: 35).

The concept was later adopted by Internet users to describe the virtual environment produced by the Net. Today, cyberspace is "the world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments and after-human agency takes on form" (Benedikt 1991: 1).

The study of humans in virtual communities and networked environments is referred to as cyberanthropology. Carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in cyberspace implies a series of outstanding advantages for the anthropologist. In cyber-ethnography there are no flights to take, no passports, no vaccines or extreme weather conditions. We become, in the most literal sense of the word, armchair anthropologists.

no actual extension. Its existence depends on the interaction of the user with the Virtual Reality equipment. Psychological reality exists only on the mind, depending exclusively on the observer. It is relatively intangible and unsubstantial (Velmans 1998: 46).

Moreover, cyberspace as a medium is readily accessible from a great variety of places. The physical and temporal constraints of anthropological fieldwork are thus eliminated. Whether at home, at university, in Barcelona or in Moscow, as long as there is a PC with an Internet connection, we can always go back to the virtual community and carry out some more research. “Virtual reality is just around the corner from commonplace” (Jones 1998: vii).

On the other hand, there are indeed a number of important disadvantages to bear in mind when studying interaction in virtual media. Kitchin (1998, cited in Hine 2000: 5) divides into three categories the effects of cyberspace: changes to the role of time and space, changes to communication and the role of mass communication, and a questioning of dualism such as the virtual and the real, truth and fiction, technology and nature. In cyberspace we deal with large numbers of people who come and go, who conceal PR identities or have multiple cyber-identities. There is very frequently a carnivalesque, irreverent atmosphere and attitude in virtual communities. Rejecting common sense and playing with concepts such as reality, presence, gender or logic are favourites among cyberspace users.

Cyberspace is subversive and carnivalesque in its nature (Danet 1998: 130). Like cyberspace, Carnival has many faces, many voices—it has riotous upside-downings and playful inversions (Gilmore 1998: 213). Carnival is a metaphor for the temporary licensed suppression and reversal of order, the time when the low shall be high and the high low, the moment of rupturing, of “the world turned upside down” (White 1993: 1). In Europe, argues Lommel (1972: 7), masks as a part of everyday life belong to the distant past. “Masks have become simply a disguise, whereas in other areas the mask still personifies something or somebody” (ibid.). In Internet, however, we find that the typed text is this mask (Danet 1998: 129). It is a mask of letters and symbols in a Carnival of electric impulses and fibre optics. More than the reversal of status and social roles, the Carnival of cyberspace is concerned with the more intimate aspect of ourselves—gender, age, ethnicity—identity. If we do not understand this particular carnivalesque nature of CMC, cyber-ethnography can result confusing and misleading. The key, affirms Derrick de Kerckhove (Muy Interesante 1999: 132), lies in breaking with classical mental habits and substituting them by new ones.

One of the main problems that Meg Pickard (1998) found in her work as a cyberanthropologist was trying to convince her ‘real life’ community members (both academic and social) that what she was doing was actually worthwhile research. To what extent is cyberanthropology actual anthropological fieldwork? “The Internet and

its various functions and guises are generally considered to be a mere leisure pursuit, and a fairly fruitless one at that" (ibid.).

Many anthropologists will argue that, in cyberspace, the academic wanders in places that do not exist, cohered by ties which, in PR, would not hold a group of people together for more than half an hour. In these terms, the study of social worlds built by people on computer networks challenges the classical dimensions of anthropological research (Paccagnella 1997).

Anthropology is concerned with the identification, study and understanding of other cultures—this itself is difficult to deny. If we take Tylor's classical definition of culture as "that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society" (Tylor 1871, cited in Pickard 1998), it immediately becomes clear to us that cyberspace is indeed a scenario full of profound cultural processes. In virtual communities, new users learn from older users behaviours, ideas, concepts, skills and rules specific to the context in which they interact. "Virtual communities have evolved rules, rituals and communication styles that qualify them as real culture" (Shaw 1997: 135).

Many ethnographic studies of on-line settings have made a major contribution to the establishment of the view of Internet as a culture based on the uses that people make of the technology available to them (Hine 2000: 9). Thus, terms like 'cyberculture' (Benedikt 1991) or 'cybersociety' (Jones 1998) have emerged among anthropologists within the last two decades to describe the culture and social organisations that exist in cyberspace.

Whether cyberculture is a homogeneous, monolithic culture shared among all cyberspace users or a phenomenon that emerges at a more context-specific level within cyberspace as a medium, is an issue that we will consider later on. What leaves no place for doubt is the fact that any situation that involves the interaction of humans in symbolic and social ways, and in which participants skilfully juggle issues of identity, culture and community, surely merits an anthropological approach (Pickard 1998). "As with artificial cultures, [cybercultures] may be subjected to the same disciplinary operations as natural cultures—ethnography and archaeology" (Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology 1997: 308).

Due to its versatility and increasing acceptance among Internet users, we have opted to focus our study of identity in cyberspace on IRC communication. IRC (Internet Relay Chat) is a real-time conversation program based on a network of IRC-

specialised servers throughout the world[3]. In IRC, users[4] have the chance to carry out perhaps the closest and most socially active of the interactions on-line by engaging in real-time, face-to-face (or nick-to-nick, rather) conversation with others.

Nicks are quite simply the usernames or pseudonyms that we choose as aliases for ourselves in IRC. They are our physical appearance—the equivalent of our face in PR interaction. In IRC, names are local labels, and participants seem to have no difficulty addressing, befriending and developing fairly complex relations with the aliases—or 'delegated puppets' of other participants.

Most of the examples in our study will be drawn from a chat room called #rudos, in the server Undernet. In #rudos, there is no single nationality, religion, general interest or topic of discussion cohering the members of the community. Its only particularity with respect to other chat rooms is that what would otherwise be considered intolerable, insulting behaviour or language, in #rudos is tolerated and even celebrated. Members of #rudos log on from a variety of nations and cultural backgrounds—mainly South American, Central American and Spanish. Communication generally takes place in Spanish, although conversations in English or Portuguese are not unusual.

Despite this heterogeneity, #rudos is an active community with a strong sense of identity. Its members keep a web page with the history and origins of the chat room, OP details, general information on events and gatherings, and several manifestations of the chat room's philosophy and attitude.

#rudos originated in 1995 as the result of a division between the OPs of the chat room #insultos, in Undernet. Several OPs in #insultos eventually decided to abandon the community and open their own chat room. #rudos was thus created, and #insultos immediately established as its rival.

The approach adopted throughout our fieldwork in #rudos has been an emic, participant one as an active member of the community with intermittent access to OP status. Natural, spontaneous conversations were encouraged. In fact, most of the material that we will use to illustrate our discussion has been extracted from casual conversations in the chat room and private windows (with the consent of all parties involved).

[3] See Appendix 2 for *An Introduction to IRC*.

[4] We prefer to employ the term 'users' as opposed to 'players' to refer to those who get connected to and interact in IRC, for it seems clear to us that IRC, more than a game, is a medium for social interaction, independently from the transcendence one might wish to grant to this interaction.

Jones (1998: 4) warns us about the dangers of being lulled into a false sense of certainty when considering CMC interaction by "freezing" electric discourse, capturing text and the information it may contain and putting it under a microscope regardless of the interpretive moment in the electric discourse from which it emerges. Throughout this text, fragments of 'frozen' electronic conversations will be used only as relevant examples of our ethnographic fieldwork to illustrate our analysis, not as self-explanatory pieces of text to analyse in their own right.

Finding and recording cases of casual, spontaneous conversations in IRC about the topics we will discuss in our work has not been difficult, as the notions of identity and concepts of reality-virtuality tend to be topics that IRC users in general are most often concerned and confronted with.

3. Method

In no way do I maintain that there has ever been a tribe, a language in which the term 'I', 'me' (*je*, *moi*) has never existed, or that it has not expressed something clearly represented.

Mauss 1985: 3

The study of identity is a complex and problematic one. Who decides who belongs to what? The observer? Us by contrasting ourselves to an 'other', the 'other' by noticing that we are differentiating him/her, or perhaps all at the same time? Identity encompasses a wide range of aspects of ourselves. We can thus distinguish our religious identity, gender identity, social identity, political identity, personal identity and many more which academics have categorised in different ways.

"Much sociological and everyday discourse draws a distinction of type between social identity (or identities) and individual identity" (Jenkins 1996: 19). Beels (1978, cited in Antaki & Widdicombe 1998: 11) makes a distinction between cultural, social and self identity, whereas Moll, in his Identity and Religion (1978) opted for the categories of the personal, the group and the social identity in the frame of a linear evolution from the personal to the social.

In Internet, the creation of different categories of identity is a difficult exercise. Identities in cyberspace are blurry and redefined at a very high rate. Many of the previously solid and well-established categories of identity are inexistent in the virtual medium, others are redefined to the point they are hardly recognisable.

For the sake of a more convenient analytical approach, we have opted in this work for a distinction between the self and the collective identity in cyberspace. Self-identity will be held to mean in this context the diversity of fundaments used to construct our own sense of individuality with respect to that of others (i.e. the *moi*). By collective identity we will understand the varied aspects of ourselves such as nationality, ethnicity, beliefs, social background or sense of belonging to a chat room that might be used to shape the shared identity of a group of people in a virtual community.

We shall start by considering the notion of self-identity in cyberspace, its role in the construction of a virtual identity and in the reaffirmation of PR identities. We shall then move on to an examination of the collective identity in cyberspace, its virtual and PR exponents, and finish by reconsidering our question of whether cyberspace should be defined as a medium that reaffirms PR identities, or rather as an alienated, virtual world from which cyber-identities and virtual personae arise.

4. VR Self Identity

Agent Smith: "Do you hear that, Mr. Anderson?"
[Agent Smith grabs Mr. Anderson in a chokehold, forcing him to look down the tracks, the train's headlight burning a hole in the darkness.]
Agent Smith: "That is the sound of inevitability. It is the sound of your death.
[There is another metal screech, much louder]
Agent Smith: "Goodbye, Mr. Anderson."
[The veins bulge in Mr. Anderson's head, as he grits through the pain. He is not ready to die.]
Mr Anderson: "My name is *Neo*."
[Impossibly, he hurls himself straight up, smashing Smith against the concrete ceiling of the tunnel. They fall as the sound and fury of the train explodes into the station.]

The Matrix

In the words of Víctor Domingo, from the Spanish Association of Cybernauts, "cyberspace makes us different" (El País Semanal 2000: 46). For some, cyberspace offers the possibility of entering a party with a redefinition of their entire body, flesh and bones, that can be stored on a floppy disk (Stenger 1991: 50). In the TV program "The New Edge" (Discovery Communications Inc., 1999), a paralytic cyberspace user described how Internet has changed his life and the ways he interacts with and shows himself to others. "In cyberspace I am another integrated member of society, I feel free. Nobody sees my spasms or my wheelchair. Cyberspace represents for me what the fall of the Berlin Wall meant to many Germans."

"For Descartes, it is crucial that as rational selves we have an inner relationship to reason, mind and consciousness, and an external relationship with our bodies" (Jeleniewski 1998: 25). In VR, this Cartesian distinction between the physical and the non-physical is taken to extremes in a shift away from the basic Newtonian conceptions that helped organise the 17th century scientific revolutions. "Being a body constitutes the principle behind our individuality" (Heim 1991: 71). Today, CMC simply brackets the physical presence of the participants, either by simulating or by omitting corporeal immediacy. "This frees us from the restrictions imposed by our physical identity" (ibid.).

According to Jeleniewski (1998 20), the disdain for the body runs deep within Western culture, and the wish to escape from it is given new forms within visions of cyberspace. In IRC, the user experiences a phenomenon that we could describe as the *distortion of the self*. One looks at the screen of the PC and sees him/herself interacting in the chat room among other users as if s/he looked at him/herself through a mirror. Our physical presence is embodied by our nick in IRC, our words become lines of text and our identity is projected on the screen. The presence of the body is eliminated in CMC interaction, bodily language is substituted by the use of emoticons and physical contact is inexistent.

When designing virtual worlds, computer programmers face a series of reality questions. How, for instance, should users appear to themselves in cyberspace? "Should they appear to themselves as one set of objects among others, as third person bodies that users can inspect with detachment, or should they perceive the virtual world as if they were looking through their own eyes?" (Heim 1991: 59). Cyberspace distorts how we see ourselves, and how we see ourselves affects the way we perceive our self-identity.

For MacKinnon, interaction and social roles in cyberspace are moulded through the persona (1997:217). Social interaction via Internet technology allows users to experiment with identities, ideas and situations. It is this playful experimentation that develops our cyber-identity. "If our culture no longer offers an adolescent moratorium, virtual communities do. They offer permission to play, to try things out—this is part of what makes them attractive" (Pickard 1998).

In #rudos, creating virtual identities is a common practice among most users. Atenea, for instance, has adopted the identity of the Greek goddess of wisdom, not only through the use of her nick, but also in her interaction within the community.

[Chat room #rudos, 15 July 1999]

*Atenea is preparing a sociological study about the rabble in this chat room. Are they inferior to the rest of the *mortals*? lol

*Rook produces abundant information to sustain that thesis.

*Atenea welcomes any statistics, data, notes or photos. I have to forward them to God Zeus!

[Chat room #rudos, 22 September 2000]

*Atenea is feeling very pessimistic today

*Rook prescribes chess and wine!

<Atenea> I shall immediately start the treatment. Any brand of wine in particular, Rook?

<Rook> No cheap wines!

<Atenea> Obviously, Rook! I am a goddess! Only refined brands for me…

(italics mine).

Several members of #rudos find in their virtual identity the perfect excuse to play with ambiguity and experiment with aspects such as gender, nationality or age. Canovas21, whose DNS is from Mexico, when asked about his nationality, constantly gives as a response:

<Canovas21> I am a native of Sri Lanka, but I grew up in the arid lands of Mauritania.

Car- has been a member of #rudos for several years now. Throughout all this time, s/he has developed an androgynous gender that makes it impossible for other user to distinguish whether s/he is 'in reality' a male or a female. The nick Car- is the abbreviation for the Spanish names Carlos (male) or Carla (female). In some occasions, s/he joins the chat room with the nick Carlos:

[Chat room #rudos 23 May 1999]
<Carlos> *Hoy vengo de hombre.* (Today I come as a man).

Other times s/he adopts the female nick of Carla or Zulema:

[Chat room #rudos 12 October 1999]
<zulema> *Hola, Gilbert, me encuentras guapa*[5] *hoy?.* (Hi, Gilbert, do I look pretty today?).

But, in most cases, s/he uses the neuter nick of Car-, which conceals his/her gender and allows for ambiguity and playful experimentation.

[Chat room #rudos 23 May 1999]
<Carlos> Pero y si realmente soy mujer? (But what if I really was a woman?)

These changes in the nick imply as well a change in Car-'s gender roles and identity. Thus, when s/he joins the chat room as a female, his/her attitude is completely that of a female throughout his/her stay.

[Chat room #rudos 12 October 1999]
<Car-> *Jijiji* (Giggles).
<Car-> *Eres muy inteligente, Napito*[6]*.* (You are very intelligent, Napito).

[*S/he receives a digitalised photo*]
<Car-> Ay, que lindo, Napo! (Aw… How cute, Napo!)

In cyberspace, people who have never before been interested in cross-dressing become members of the opposite gender (Danet 1998: 129). Brenda Danet describes the categorisation of genders in the Western world as "the tyranny of genders" (ibid. 131). Not only do we tend to polarise our society into the male and female spheres, but we also expect each person to act according to his/her gender role in the way s/he behaves, perceives him/herself and talks to others.

Cyberspace revolutionises these traditional gender categories and allows us to take advantage of the gender roles of each other. Females can become dominant and active in dealing with public affairs, and males can experiment what it feels like to receive the gentlemanly attention of other users (Danet 1998: 129).

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[5] Car- uses g*uapa* (pretty) in this case as a feminine adjective (*guapo*- [male] handsome; *guapa*- [female] pretty).
[6] Napito- affectionate form of the masculine nick Napo.

In cybersex relations, some people occasionally discover that their partner is not of the gender they had originally expected. Many users decide to adopt an attitude of resignation in this circumstance.

> [Chat room #rudos 15 July 1998]
> <Rook> In cybersex, the *real* identity of the other person is the least important after all.
>
> (Italics mine).

Certain user conceal their PR self-identity and real intentions behind elaborate personae with the aim of obtaining information or services from another party. This is particularly the case among hackers and members of the counter-hacking world, such as programmers or network security professionals, who refer to this practice as *social engineering*. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1969: 141), Goffman defines this position or role as the "strategic secret." In adopting strategic secrets, a party conceals from the audience its intentions and capacities in order to prevent them from adapting effectively to the state of affairs that the party is planning to bring about (ibid.). In #rudos, for example, the user Amoeba, who is lesbian, occasionally adopts a male nick and identity with the aim of attracting unaware females into flirty, private conversations.

Another role identified by Goffman in everyday social interaction is that of the 'non-person'. The non-person is that who is present during the interaction but in some respects does not take the role of either of a performer or of the audience, nor does s/he pretend to be what s/he is not (Goffman 1969: 151).

Finding non-person cyber-identities in IRC is not unusual. Certain users adopt nicks such as Silencio (Silence) or Nemo (Latin for *nobody*) and join a community (sometimes for long periods of time) without any participation or signal that they are following the interaction of others. The adoption of a non-person cyber-identity, however, does not imply that the user will adhere to it eternally. Identity is a fluid and mutable phenomenon (Widdicombe 1998). In cyberspace, identity is as fluid and versatile as it is in PR (if not more). In #rudos, for instance, the original non-person

cyber-identity of Nul0 (Nil) gradually evolved into an active, participant role. Through casual conversations with other members of the community, Nul0 gradually passed from being a mere, passive observer, to acquiring an OP status and being partially responsible for the management of the channel.

According to Goffman, we must not underestimate the degree to which the person who takes a non-person role can use it as a defence. (Goffman 1969: 152). Particularly in the hectic, rebellious atmosphere of #rudos, a non-person role can be an effective way of avoiding unkind comments and verbal quarrels.

Non-person roles, on the other hand, can also be imposed on others as a sanction. “A team can treat an individual as if he [sic] were not present, doing this not because it is the natural thing or the only feasible thing to do, but as a pointed way of expressing hostility to an individual who has conducted himself improperly” (ibid.). In IRC, this sanction can be carried out through the use of the command /ignore [nick], which will cause our IRC client to ignore the presence and participation of another user in all of IRC, independently from the chat room or server we are using.

Moreover, chat room operators have the possibility of imposing the non-person self-identity on another user by preventing him/her from sending any messages or participating in any way in the community (even whilst being in it). This is done by denying a user his/her right to the *voice* as a sanction or an expression of hostility.

The imposition of a non-person self-identity in cyberspace, whether through the use of the command /ignore [nick] or through the denial of the right to voice is considered to be a severe punishment. For certain users, their cyber-identity and social roles within a virtual community are not a mere game, but an issue of great importance—a crucial element of their self-conception.

Throughout her fieldwork in teenage chat room communities, Schefield came across several users who claimed not to attach too much importance to their virtual self-identity. “Jake: It’s pretty fun, ‘cause it’s like you don’t really care, ‘cause they don’t know who you are. It doesn’t matter, you’re just talking about all this stuff” (cited

in Schefield 1998: 179). In #rudos, however, far from being anonymous, careless individuals, most users have constructed through time an identity and a network of social relations within their virtual community. Denying them the right to interact in certain social circles or under a certain nick would be analogous to killing the virtual identity that they have constructed through many years of interaction.

In fact, the banning of a particular user from a chat room or a server is occasionally referred to as "killing the user." In the server Dalnet, the importance of the virtual self identity is reaffirmed by a system that allows users to register their nick with the server administrators. Registering a nick will grant a user the exclusive right to its use, thus strengthening his/her individuality and virtual self-identity.

5. PR Self-Identity

> Internet is not a world, it is only a tool.
>
> Abraham López (in El País Semanal 2000: 49)

"There has never existed a human being who has not been aware, not only of his [sic] body, but also at the same time of his individuality, both spiritual and physical" (Mauss 1985: 3). The notion of the self is inherent to the human condition.

In "A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of the Person, the Notion of the Self" (1985) Mauss suggests that our understanding of the self has passed through different socio-cultural stages before developing into our modern-day perception of individuality. In its primeval, less developed form, self-identity is conceptualised through the notion of the persona (*personage*). Thus, in the totemic system of Pueblo Indians, the clans are conceived of as being made up of a certain number of persons "who are in reality characters (*personages*)" (Mauss 1985: 3). The role of all these people is to act out, and insofar as it concerns them, the prefigured totality of the life of the clan (ibid.).

From the notion of the persona, Mauss moves on to the emergence of the notion of the person[7]—the *personne* and the *moi* in the classical civilisations. All freemen in Rome were persons (*personnes*). The Roman citizen had a right to the *nomen* and the

cognomen. Only the slave was excluded from it. *Servus non habet personam.* S/he has no personality (*personalité*) (ibid. 16).

Our present-day notion of the person is based on "the Christian person" (ibid. 19), which Mauss seems to depict as the ultimate and most developed of all perceptions of the self. The Christian person is *one* that is subdivided into three parts and two natures: *unitas in tres partes, una persona in duas naturas*. It is from the notion of the *one* that the notion of the person (*personne*) was created (ibid. 19).

In cyberspace, we are, for better or worse, still irremediably bound to our physical body. "To this day, virtual bodies remain coupled to selves which depend on physical bodies for existence" (Shaw 1997: 134). For a number of scholars, this physical constraint implies as well a boundedness to our PR identity. Stones (1991: 113, cited in MacKinnon 1997: 217) illustrates this concept rather graphically by affirming that "no refigured body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with AIDS."

Expressing a PR identity in IRC, however, is not as easy as it might seem at a first sight. How do we approach the act of expressing who we are in a virtual medium shared by users from all around the world who see from us little more than our nick, our IP number and the text messages we send? A common mistake among new IRC users (newbies) is to enter a chat room and type a general "Hi, *who are you*?"

[Chat room #azul, 9 September 2000]

<Cici> *Hola, Lynx, quien sos?* (Hi, Lynx, who are you?)

In a monthly reunion of driving-school teachers, for example, this question might receive a number of appropriate, satisfactory answers in accordance with the context of the interaction. In the context of IRC communication, however, an answer of the sort of "I am John, how do you do" would lack any meaning. For Goffman, interaction takes place almost by definition in a situation, in a context (or *frame*) (Goffman 1997). The frame of the interaction is what renders what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful (ibid. 21).

[7] Carrithers (1985) suggests that Mauss renders as a single story here what is in fact a complex plot (1985: 235), and affirms we should disentangle and distinguish the *moi* from the *personne*, the *moi* being a conception of the physical and mental individuality of human beings, and the *personne* the conception of the individual in respect of society as a whole.

In cyberspace, however, we find people from all genders, ages, professions and social backgrounds. It is what we could call a decontextualised context. Certain chat rooms have a specific topic of discussion or an obvious aspect that coheres the members of the virtual community (e.g. #philosophers, #lesbians or #mormons). But there are also chat rooms like #rudos, where there is no set topic of discussion, no general area of interest, nationality or shared profession.

So, *who are you* in cyberspace? Many French chat rooms have established a tradition by which every user that joins a chat room for the first time will have to include immediately after his/her greetings his/her age, gender and city of origin. Failing to do so will cause other users to make him/her aware of his/her error by addressing him/her the question of "*a/s/v*?" (*Age, sexe, ville*—Age, gender, city). If the user insists in not answering the question, s/he will be infringing a netiquette rule by not giving away his/her PR identity, and might be sanctioned accordingly by the OPs.

In #rudos, users generally prefer to conceal their PR identity and use it as an excuse to play with ambiguity and reaffirm an anarchic, irreverent attitude. However, those who do wish to express their PR self-identity make use of different methods, depending many times on the aspect of their PR identity that they wish to express and to whom.

Thus, Paulina25 suggests through the use of her nick that she is 25 years old and female, which are both true aspects of her PR self-identity. However, Paulina25's /whois information does not include her real name. She has therefore chosen to express only some aspects of her PR self-identity—her gender and age, but not her real name.

Lea26, by contrast, has opted to express as much of her PR self-identity as she could. This she has done by constructing a web page in which she has included personal information such as name, gender, age, profession, favourite colour and cartoons, hobbies, as well as pictures of herself, her friends, her house and family. This representation of Lea26's PR self-identity is, nonetheless, intended only for certain members of #rudos. By giving the URL of her web page exclusively to those who she trusts and sympathizes with, Lea26 limits the number of people who enter the web page and thus have access to her PR identity.

Whether the users start circulating this information among others is probably something that she cannot control herself, though. In #rudos, it is common for a member of the community to be picked on by others who have had access to aspects of his/her PR self-identity that s/he did not want to be publicised. Thus, s/he might start

being addressed by his/her first name instead of his/her nick, or sarcastic comments might be made about his/her looks in a photo, about his/her clothes or hairstyle.

Another popular method of expressing PR self-identities in IRC is the exchange of digitalised photos through a DCC connection. In fact, #rudos' web page has a section including a rather large collection of photos of the more regular users. Some of these photos are rather suspicious, though, and much discussion goes on over whether they reflect the 'real' person or whether they have been scanned from some random source. Other photos are overtly 'non-real', among which one could find images of Drew Barrymore or Bugs Bunny.

Once again, the extent to which users have access to others' photos as representations of a PR self-identity depends to a large extent on the restrictions set by the user in his/her decision of who (or who not) to send the image. In #rudos, certain photos have become very valuable—even mystified—with time. Owning the 'real' photo of a particular user has become, in certain cases, analogous to keeping a genuine copy of the *Necronomicon* in your library.

Ocasionally, IRC users not only reaffirm their PR self-identity through cyberspace as a medium, but also base their PR identity on cyberspace itself. Thus, cyberpunks reject in general their human condition and use cyberspace both as a medium and as a topic to express their discontent with PR.

For a cyberpunk, the ideal physical state is as an irrational animal, a corpse or a machine. Many connect plugs, electronic chips or other technological devices to their bodies in the attempt to assimilate themselves to cyborgs. Others use heavy makeup to conceal the more human physical traits and enjoy listening to synthesized music composed exclusively with computers and electric, non-physical instruments.

According to Featherstone and Burrows (1995: 4), we are all cyborgs in one way or another. If plastic surgery, genetic engineering and nanotechnology allow us today to live with metallic braces in our mouth, a pacemaker in our chest or orthopaedic limbs, the form of postbiological humanity that can be achieved in fifty years will have profound implications for our self-identity.

Mateo Conde, or *Linkman*, has also chosen to base his PR self-identity on cyberspace, although not precisely as a cyberpunk. Conde's job consists on browsing the Net in search of any information or resources that his client demands. He has

developed the search engine for *El Centro Cervantes* in Spain, and has a strong reputation among journalists, semiologists and professors for being able to find any sort of information as long as it exists.

Mateo Conde spends the night in cyberspace, when the number of Internet users decreases and the speed of the communication is faster, and sleeps during the day. His profession, and indeed his entire lifestyle would not be possible without the existence of cyberspace (El País Semanal 2000: 48).

6. Reconsidering the Question

The real face and the mask get confused in a mirror's reflection.

(Séneca).

Having considered the use of IRC as a means of constructing VR personae and as a tool to reaffirm PR self identities, it would seem there is a profound contradiction between those who claim that cyberspace is a reflection of the PR social relations (e.g. Schefield 1998: 180) and those who claim that it is a revolutionary medium that allows us to free ourselves from the physical constraints of our self-identity (e.g. Heim 1991: 71).

In PR interaction, physical presence and body language are of great importance. Identity is considerably stable within each frame, or context, and categories of identity such as gender, age or nationality tend to be, not only clearly demarcated, but also elements that condition how we perceive ourselves and interact with others.

In IRC interaction, the physical presence is inexistent and bodily language is substituted by emoticons. Identity is very redifinable and potentially volatile, and categories of identity such as gender, age or ethnicity tend to be used as an excuse for playful experimentation or even to conceal PR self-identities.

For many users, this paradoxical nature of the interaction in cyberspace has given rise to existentialist worries and confusion about who one is in VR and who one interacts with. "How does an individual maintain existence in cyberspace? Who are we when we are online?" (Jones 1998: xvi).

[Chat room #rudos 25 April 1996]

<Weasel> In reality, I don't know you. I am not really talking to you. I am only talking to a nick.

Ninety nine percent of all encounters on the virtual community where Stenger carried out her fieldwork never led to an actual meeting (Stenger 1991: 36). But when an actual meeting does take place in PR between people whose relation originated in VR, how are these seemingly opposed spheres and the identities constructed in them harmonized? What are the implications of transferring a relation from VR to PR, or from VR to PR?

When asked about their own experiences in this respect, certain users affirmed not to perceive any difference whatsoever between their relations and identities in VR and in PR. For these users, cyberspace is, as claimed by Schefield (1998: 180), a reflection of their PR social interaction and a powerful tool of communication more than a world in its own right.

Interviewer: So, what is the difference, do you think, between meeting someone in the chat room and dating someone in person?

Michael: Well, when you're dating somebody and it seems like, you're more looking at them, but when you're like, chatting to them, you can't see them, but you can get that trust going on with the person, and you can really get to know them before you see them. And if you know them before you see them, you'll like, even if they don't look physically attractive to you, you'll still like them, because you know them and you have a lot in common.

(cited in Schefield 1998: 167).

In the chat room #cristianos (Undernet), Alberto_ described the gathering of members of the virtual community carried out in the Dominican Republic several months before our conversation as a wonderful experience. He had the chance to meet in person with many good friends from the virtual community whose physical appearance he could not even imagine. When asked about the implications of transferring the interaction from VR to PR and whether he felt any difference in the identity of his friends with respect to how he knew them in VR, Alberto_ answered that the concept of knowing a person, whether it is in VR or PR, is relative:

[Chat room #cristianos 28 January 2001]

<Alberto_> There is a girl I know who lives an hour away from my home. She sometimes joins the chat room, but we hardly ever talk.

<Alberto_> You see… we live so close by, but we hardly know each other.

<Alberto_> The friends I met in the Dominican Republic were just like the people I knew here, in #cristianos. They were the same.

<Alberto_> Day by day you keep talking to the same people here, making good friends and getting to know each other well.

<Alberto_> In #cristianos there are lots of *real* friends.

(Italics mine).

On the other hand, it is not infrequent to find among IRC users, people who perceive their interaction in VR as completely alien to the sphere of the PR. Some attach a great importance to concealing their PR identity, or even protecting their virtual identity from PR 'contamination'. Elizabeth, a member of a teenage chat room community, describes how she decided to terminate a relationship owing to the fact that the boy she interacted with in IRC attended a neighbouring school. "We started comparing notes about who we knew in each others' schools. But I didn't want to meet him, or someone from my own school, because then what if I know who he was in person and said something mean about me, I'd be like, hurt" (cited in Schefield 1998: 169).

In certain cases, users discover that the identity of the person they interact with in IRC does not coincide with the way they perceived him/her when the relation is transferred to the PR. Azucena24 describes how a relationship that started as a passionate affair with an Argentinean man ended up in complete failure after she met in person with him for the first time:

[Private 03 March 2001]

<Azucena24> He was an Argentinean man from #rudos

<Azucena24> I spoke with him in IRC for about six months

<Azucena24> and then we decided to meet up in Miami.

<Azucena24> We were very much in love

<Azucena24> but, when we met, all the attraction suddenly disappeared.

<Azucena24> He was… too serious.

<Azucena24> In IRC he seemed nice.

<Azucena24> He was more charismatic and sexy

<Azucena24> but when we met in real life he was too boring.

<Azucena24> After that it was too hard to keep the relationship alive.

In a similar way, transferring social relations from PR to VR might result in the feeling that the new medium distorts the original relation and the identities constructed within it, or precisely the opposite—that it enhances the interaction and allows us to inquire into the 'real' identity of the other party in a deeper way.

Pcit, in #rudos, affirms that communicating with his sister in IRC has contributed to him knowing her better as a result precisely of what other users might consider drawbacks of IRC social interaction:

[Private 07 August 1999

<Pcit> Here she doesn't see my face, I'm not really there, so it's like she's not afraid of telling me things that she wouldn't say in my face.

<Pcit> Also, I can't see her gestures, or the way she uses her hands when she talks, so she expresses things better in the way she talks to me in IRC. She's not as ambiguous here.

Tula's experience, by contrast, is more in line with McLuhan's "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964). For her, speaking with her boyfriend through IRC is "different." She affirms that his character and personality change in IRC. She perceives him as distant and "less of a person," and does not find IRC an appealing medium.

Sometimes, a person's online persona becomes so finely developed that it begins to take over his/her life off the net (Allucquere 1991: 82). A particularly illustrative example of the paradox between PR and VR self-identities in IRC is the case of Lambda, from the community of #rudos. Lambda interacted in #rudos for several years with an elaborate virtual self-identity that she used to conceal her PR identity. Lambda would refuse to give any PR information in the chat room such as city of origin or real name. Moreover, very few users in #rudos had access to her digitalised photo. After some time of absence from the community, Lambda returned with a new nick and the aim of expressing her PR self-identity to certain members of #rudos. This implied her having to interact with a new identity and others having to assimilate it and accept it. Thus, Lambda admitted being of a different age from the one she had previously suggested and contradicted many other elements that she had previously used to construct her cyber-identity.

For Goffman, revealing internal secrets, particularly if they contradict the presentation of the self that a party had previously used to construct its identity, is a destructive information (Goffman 1969: 143). The disclosure of different types of secrets about the self threatens the situation that its performance fosters.

In #rudos, after so many years interacting with Lambda's virtual identity, certain users found it difficult to assimilate her new PR identity. In fact, some kept addressing her by her previous nick. In a way, Lambda found herself in the frustrating situation of being trapped by her virtual identity when what she really wanted to express was her PR self-identity. She could not find an effective way of disentangling herself from her previous self and interacting in the chat room as the person she wanted to be.

"How much of one's day does someone have to spend 'playing a game' before it is fair to call it a 'life'? How deep does a relationship with another 'player' have to be before s/he can be called a spouse?" (MacKinnon 1964: 232). More than with well-defined, unambiguous categories of identity, in cyberspace we are dealing with multiple levels of identity that might eventually give rise to representations of the representation of a representation. PR and VR identities do get confused sometimes, and the barrier (if we can talk about such a barrier) between reality and virtuality is often blurry. It would seem to us as we delve deeper into ethnographic fieldwork in virtual communities, that the distinction between the roles of cyberspace in the construction of VR or PR self-identities is not as clear-cut as many academics have suggested.

7. VR Collective Identity

<CoCoBoNgO> *que pex, la raza de rudos!* (Whazzup, race of rudos!)

[Chat room #rudos 23 July 1997]

The processes of identity formation in IRC seem at a first sight to be moulded exclusively by each user's nontransferable decision at a very personal level. "In cyberspace you can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want" (Danet 1998 136). Indeed, it is the user who decides the nick, the attitude and identity that s/he wants to adopt in cyberspace. However, it is only within the community or interaction with other people that this identity is validated and given meaning. For Jenkins, what people think about us as individuals is no less important than what we think about ourselves. It is not enough to assert an identity. That identity must also be validated (or not) by those with whom we have dealings. Social identity is never unilateral (Jenkins 1996: 21).

The individual identity, whether in a virtual medium or in PR, is created in a social context, not in a vacuum. Thus, Lambda's attempt to redefine her identity deeply affected, not only her interaction with others, but also the collective identity of the entire community in #rudos, to the point that some users refused to address her by her new nick. When an individual appears before others, s/he knowingly or unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of him/herself is an important part. When an event occurs which is incompatible with this fostered impression, significant consequences are simultaneously felt at several levels of social reality. Social interaction between two parties or between an individual and his/her community, for instance, may come to an embarrassed end. The interaction may cease to be defined and previous positions may become no longer tenable. Moreover, the reputation or role

of the collectivity might be affected by the incompatibility in the identity of one of its members. Audiences tend to accept the self projected by an individual performer during any interaction as a responsible representation of his/her colleague-grouping, of his/her team and social establishment (Goffman 1969: 235).
Self-identity and collective identity are thus intricately interconnected. The collective identity validates the self-identity, and the self-identity contributes to moulding the collective identity. This symbiosis between the individual and the collective in #rudos is such that the members of the community have even personified the bot of the channel (W) as an old, ugly lady, and refer to her as “la gorda” (the fat lady), with ‘her’ own place and social role in the community.

A community is, in the words of Fernback (1997: 38), “a bounded territory of sorts (whether physical or ideological) as well as a sense of common character, identity or interests.” The first virtual communities emerged in the 1970s as Bulletin Board Systems, or BBSs. These systems depended on individual computer terminals connected to a closed network. It was the Community Tree Group, regulated by John James and Dean Gengle that developed the idea of BBSs as potential electronic communities that could eventually transform social life and give rise to new social forms (Finquelievich 2000). With the spread of Internet, community formation in virtual media has flourished at a vertiginous rate and the Community Tree Group’s prediction of virtual communities giving rise to new social forms has been proven not to be misled. Today, certain anthropologists and sociologists consider the collectivity of cyberspace users as a community in its own right, and refer to its members as cybernauts or netizens (Pickard 1998). Jones defines cybersociety as “the new social form originated by the rise of CMC technology” (1998). For Benedikt, Internet has given rise to its own distinct culture, which he refers to as cyberculture. “Cyberculture is the culture of and in cyberspace” (Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology 1997: 306). But, is there such a thing as the culture *of* cyberspace? Some scholars not only do not doubt that there is a homogeneous, monolithic culture embraced by all cyberspace users, but also affirm that this cyberculture is a possible threat of dissolution of cultures, of homogenisation, a great syncretism of many cultures into one that has no nation or territory but exists in a virtual environment (Poster 1998: 185). In the words of Fernback, “there is a *collectivity* of CMC users. This collectivity is driven by the principles of democracy and egalitarianism in its use of CMC. […] There is a virtual ideology in cyberspace which is collectivist in orientation” (1997: 46, italics in original).
On the contrary, following Liebniz, we could describe the social organisation of cyberspace based on the model defined as *monadology* (from the Greek monas—unit).

For a network to exist, more than one unit (in this case, independent virtual communities within the broader world of cyberspace) must exist. Otherwise, there is nothing to be networked (cited in Stenger 1991: 71).

Denying the existence of cyberspace as a distinct sphere with its own particularities or even its own logic, would be difficult. What is more difficult to sustain, however, is the idea that cyberculture is a homogeneous cultural body. There is no such thing as a typical cyberspace user today as reflected by Gibson in Neuromancer (1984). There are no blue neon lights, no consensual hallucination, no unique ideology or aesthetic criterion embracing the totality of cyberspace users. Among CMC users, there are several distinct cultural groups. Within these groups it is possible to recognise even further identity divisions. Far from being a monolithic culture, cyberspace is shaped by a series of overlapping circles of identities and collectivities.

Patt and Black, and GusTaf and Pop, for instance, are all members of the community of #rudos. They all share this collective identity and would join forces against an 'enemy' chat room such as #insultos. However, in a different context, Patt and Black (Mexican) would stand against Pop and GusTaf (who are Peruvian) and pick on them because of their difference in their collective national identity. Any one collective identity does not preclude another one. To further illustrate our point, a member of #insultos might eventually sympathize with a member of #rudos when put together against a user of the server Dalnet, instead of Undernet, despite the fact that #rudos and #insultos are traditionally enemy chat rooms.

Certain academics take the argument to extremes, and affirm, not only that there is no such thing as a homogeneous cyberculture, but that there is no such thing even as a 'real' sense of collective identity within virtual communities at all. Jenkins (1996: 27), argues that "social continuity needs the positing of a meaningful past or history. Social identities are in themselves one foundation upon which order and predictability in the social world are based." The usual absence of a recorded history or of any order and predictability has been used by some scholars to deny the existence of cyber-*communities* as such and of a virtual collective identity that distinguishes the members of a virtual community from others. Widdicombe, for instance, affirms that "there are shallow reasons for affiliating with a virtual group—the related identity may thus be regarded as inauthentic" (Widdicombe 1998: 65). For Schefield, the teenage chat room of her research was merely "a gathering of unconnected individuals, seeking others (or usually one another) for the establishment of individualistic relationships with a lack of any communal sense of identity" (Shefield 1998 181).

#rudos does have a web page with a section that describes the history and origins of the chat room, but most virtual communities lack this sort of historical record. However,

this does not seem a legitimate reason to affirm that collective identity within cyberspace is inexistent. It would be perhaps more suitable to describe the situation as a different sort of collective identity, more in accordance with the new set of rules that the virtual medium implies than with our traditional notions of community and collectivity.

Indeed, certain users in cyberspace will occasionally deny that they feel any sense of belonging to the chat room in which they interact. However, as expressed by Zimmerman (1998: 87), analysis shows that, in resisting subcultural identity, speakers acknowledge and undermine normative cultural assumptions, by rejecting the category-boundedness of particular attributes and transferring their meanings so that they become expressions and a reaffirmation of a personal identity. This does not imply that the categories or collectivities that these users deny do not really exist. The assertion that there is no such thing as a collective identity exhibited by the users of cyberspace communities is perhaps too precipitated.

During our ethnographic fieldwork in #rudos, an important event occurred in the server Undernet. In December 2000, the official Undernet bots, X and W, in charge of maintaining the social hierarchy and order of all chat rooms in the server, were put out of order by a severe DoS attack[8]. The entire hierarchical system of all the chat rooms in Undernet was eliminated. There were no more legitimate OPs, no more differences in status, no bot mediation in the creation of official ban and ignore lists or the prevention of abuses such as flood. At the time of writing this text, unofficial bots have been introduced in #rudos by the members of the community to reconstruct the social order, but the official X and W Undernet bots have not been yet restored.

In #rudos, the fall of X and W was received with excitement, particularly by the members of the chat room who did not have an OP status, as we would expect. Virtually all users seemed to enjoy the atmosphere of anarchy and lack of control.

[Chat room #rudos 13 January 2001

<Gnomo> Down with the OPs and W! *Viva la anarquia!*

<ana300> *Libertad, Libertad, libertad…*!

When the unofficial bots were introduced in the chat room and the social structure was reconstructed, some users complained about the restoration of the previous order and control, but operators were quite happy to obtain their status back. An important aspect of this unusual event is that, throughout the entire process, no abuses were attempted. None of the members of #rudos seemed to take advantage of the vacuum of power to

[8] Refer to Appendix 4 for a copy of the official letter sent by the administrators of Undernet to all the users.

cause harm or to destabilize the community. Moreover, none of the regular members of the chat room have abandoned the community as a result of the lack of social control. This suggests that, in #rudos, there is indeed a feeling of belonging to the community and a sense of collective identity that are sustained by stronger bonds than those of a computer-based social stratification or the mediation of bots

The sense of belonging to the virtual community in #rudos is sustained by a series of perceived characteristics in common. For instance, in #rudos, most users are native Spanish speakers. Other shared characteristics that promote the cohesion among the members of the community are constructed within the virtual medium itself. According to Goffman, inside secrets are those whose possession marks an individual as being a member of a group and helps the group feel separate and different from those individuals who are not 'in the know' (Goffman 1969: 142). The use of the symbol "+," which in other Undernet chat rooms is used to identify the users who have the right to voice when the channel is set to moderated mode, is known to be among #rudos's regular users a denigrating or insulting mark imposed by OPs to those who they perceive as alien or intruders. Thus, when a new user joins #rudos and s/he is happy to receive a + sign, unaware of its derivative meaning, jokes and excitation immediately arise among the more regular users who do know what the internal meaning of + is in #rudos.

More importantly, collective identity is constructed, not only by what one is, but by what one is *not*. "Members of a community must believe in themselves, their personality, by downgrading their enemies and asserting who 'they' are" (Fernback 1997: 42). By setting themselves in opposition to the chat room #insultos, the members in #rudos strengthen their own collective identity and the links that bond them together as a group. The rules and perceived set of particularities of #rudos are constructed in opposition to the characteristics of other chat rooms:

[Chat room #rudos 23 May 1997]

<Juancho> *Ya dejen de utilizar el ban!* (Stop using the command /ban!)

<Juancho> *Se estan empezando a parecer a los [idiotas] de #mexico, que banean por repetir hola tres veces…* (You are starting to look like the [fools] of #mexico, who ban users just for repeating "hi" three times).

The sense of belonging to a virtual community, however, does not imply that a user will have to adhere to exclusively one community. In fact, the user Bse is accepted as a member of the community of #rudos, but, at the same time, interacts in and is part of the chat room #insultos. Each context, or frame, allows for different sorts of interaction and different feelings of belonging and collective identity. What cannot be denied is

that, in each virtual community, most regular users are much more than "unconnected individuals with a lack of any communal sense of identity" (Schefield 1998: 181). In the words of Paccagnella (1997), "many of the most interesting virtual communities are very proud of their exclusive culture."

8. PR Collective Identity

> The perfect virtual community is that in which you feel like in your living room.
>
> Idoia López (in El País Semanal 2000: 47)

For Idoia López, director of the virtual community commm.com, the ideal virtual community is that which reflects the sort of interaction and socialisation that would take place in a PR environment. "The perfect virtual community is the one in which you feel like in your own living room" (El País Semanal 2000: 47). "The Net can be a space in which people can reach out beyond their own culture and circle of acquaintances to gather new information and insight that is unavailable to them in their everyday lives" (Velmans 1998: 23), but it can also be an effective medium to strengthen these original social circles and reaffirm the sense of PR collective identity in them.

Poster (1998: 205) perceives elements such as "the smell of food, the intonation of voice, bodily gestures and ways of thinking" as the everyday main building blocks of his Jewish ethnic identity. For Bourdieu, people and their relations are conditioned by their physical and social medium—the habitus. A habitus is a matrix of perception, appreciation and action common to all the members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and appreciation (Bourdieu 1977: 83). The way people act and perceive themselves is linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and the surrounding material world, charged with a host of social meaning and values (ibid. 87).

In Internet elements of PR such as smells, geographical space, bodily presence and physical traits are inexistent. Does this mean, however, that it is not possible to act collectively in VR in accordance with the ways we perceive and appreciate things in PR? "Anti-semitic writings in Europe referred to Jews as the deracinated people, those without a homeland, without roots in the soil" (Poster 1998: 205). For Poster, "Internet, far from dissolving ethnicity, enables all Jews, wherever they are on the planet, to connect with one another and reaffirm a pre-established ethnic identity" (ibid.). Thus, cyberspace as a medium can allow us to materialize our perceptions and appreciations in PR into actions in the virtual medium. In Poster's virtual community, Jewish people

found VR as a place to express and reaffirm their PR collective ethnic identity and the way they perceive and appreciate things in their habitus as Jews.

In contemporary America, Frazer asserts that coexisting, public spheres of counterpublics—such as gays, feminists, anarchists and so on—tend to form in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of public debate (cited in Fernback 1997: 38) This multiplicity of public spheres is represented in cyberspace, where dissonance is welcome and a plurality of constituent voices is exhibited:

[Chat room #punk 03 February 2001]

<Zionite> *Arriba el punk!* (Hurray the punk movement!)

<Zionite> *Arriba el punk!* (Hurray the punk movement!)

<Zionite> *Arriba el punk!* (Hurray the punk movement!)

In the chat room #cristianos (Undernet), users have found in cyberspace a powerful medium to cohere Christians from different parts of the world and propagate their religious message to others:

[Chat room #cristianos 28 January 2001]

<Alberto_> *#cristianos es un canal dedicado a reunir a creyentes de todas partes del mundo.* (#cristianos is a chat room dedicated to joining believers from different parts of the world).

[Question: What is it that coheres all the users of #cristianos, being from so many different places and social backgrounds?]

<Alberto_> *Se trata del amor a Dios.* (It is about loving God).

<Alberto_> *El amor a Dios es lo que nos une a todos en este canal.* (Loving God is what brings us together in this chat room).

[…]

<Alberto_>*Reunirse en un canal para alabar a Dios tiene muchas ventajas* (Joining in a chat room to praise God has a lot of advantages)

<Alberto_> *porque se comparten cosas hermosas* (because we share beautiful things)

<Alberto_> *y haces buenos amigos.* (and you make good friends).

[…]

<Alberto_> *Aqui todos somos sinceros* (We are all sincere here).

<Alberto_> *porque, si te acuerdas, de los diez mandamientos, dice NO MENTIRAS.* (because, if you remember the Ten Commandments, it says THOU SHALT NOT LIE).

<Alberto_> *Entonces hay una confianza y una union tremenda.* (Therefore, there is a great deal of trust and unity).

Far from the “homogenising tool that threats with the creation of a great syncretism of many cultures into one that has no nation or territory but exists in a virtual environment” (Poster 1998 185) feared by some, cyberspace can be an effective medium for the reaffirmation of a pre-established collective identity by providing a virtual space in which users join a chat room to share their perceptions and appreciations and *inter-act* accordingly.

9. Conclusions

> In modern everyday life, it is difficult (and becoming impossible) to definitely classify experiences as ‘real’ or ‘not real’; it is more helpful to determine the degree or ‘accent’ of reality in an event. The frames we once used, conceptually, to set the real apart from the unreal are not as useful as they once were; they are not as sturdy; they betray us. As they become even more fragile, we require new concepts and understandings.
>
> Mary Chayko 1993: 172

William James, in his famous chapter ‘The Perception of Reality’, first published as an article in *Mind* in 1869, instead of asking what reality is, gave the matter a subversive phenomenological twist, italicising the following question: ‘*Under what circumstances do we think things are real?*’ (cited in Goffman 1997: 2). Within the reflexive model of the perception of reality, the physical world as-experienced is part of the contents of consciousness (Velmans 1998: 56). That is to say, the truth is *not* out there, but in our mental processes, in the ways we, as individuals, perceive the reality. Once we perceive and interpret this reality, it makes no further sense to split the physical reality from the psychological reality.

To what degree is it appropriate to ask ourselves whether interaction and identities in cyberspace are virtual or real? In our predominantly materialist culture we take it for granted that the physical world is ‘real’. Often, we are presented with black and white arguments indicating that a choice has to be made between the virtual and the real, however, it would seem obvious that “the most common of the commonalities in both real life and virtual life is that they are peopled by people” (Pickard 2000). It is thus people who give true meaning and ‘reality’ to their interaction. “It should not be taken that people passively or latently have this or that identity which then causes feelings and actions, but that they work up and work to this or that identity, for themselves and others” (Antaki & Widdicombe 1998: 2).

In practice, CMC interaction is not so much a process of defining clear-cut categories, or delineating unambiguous distinctions between the virtual and the real. Hollis reminds

us that the notion of the role (or the persona) is not so clearly divorced from that of the self as the image of the mask suggests in our secular age. “The relation of actors to the characters they play does not yield an easy distinction of men [sic] from masks” (Hollis 1985: 218). Not only can we not take the development of the self as the result of a linear evolution from the notion of the role to the notion of the person and the *moi*, as expressed by Mauss (1985), but we cannot either affirm that, today, the distinction between the person and the persona is crystal clear. “Do not expect to keep your old identity: one name, one country, one clock. […] In cyberspace, multiplied versions of yourself are going to blossom up everywhere” (Stenger 1991: 50).

Realms of being are the proper objects for study. ‘Real life’ or ‘everyday life’ are not special domains to be placed in contrast to others, but merely other realms. “Each subworld has its own special and separate style of existence, and each world, *whilst it is attended to* is real after its own fashion (Goffman 1997: 564, italics in original). As we delved deeper into our ethnographic fieldwork in cyberspace, it became increasingly evident that the original question—of whether the Net is a means of reaffirming the identity of our PR or, by contrast, a world in its own right that allows for the creation of virtual identities—was misled.

Social identity is nothing else than our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and reciprocally, other people’s understanding of themselves and others (which includes us). Social identity is no more essential than meaning; it too is the product of agreement and disagreement, it too is negotiable (Jenkins 1996: 5).

This reasoning, although providing a satisfactory answer to the apparent contradiction between PR and VR identities in cyberspace, leads us to another problematic issue. If we take identity to be completely negotiable and reality nothing else than a mental process, how do we succeed in interacting efficiently with others? The individual could be easily ‘wrong’ in his/her interpretations, that is, misguided, out of touch, inappropriate, and so forth (Goffman 1997: 26). Instead of ‘*Who* are we when we are online?’ (Jones 1998: xvi), the question thus transforms into ‘*How* can we be when we are online?’

For Antaki and Widdicombe, “discourse identities are integral to the moment-by-moment organisation of the interaction” (1998: 90). Participants assume discourse identities as they engage in the various sequentially organised activities: speaker, listener, story teller, story recipient, questioner, answerer, and so on and so forth. In initiating an action, one party assumes a particular identity and projects a reciprocal identity for co-participants (ibid.). Discourse identities emerge as a feature of the sequential organisation of talk-in-interaction, orienting participants to the type of activity underway and their respective roles within it. An example of this fluid re-adaptation of

roles and identities can be found in what Goffman refers to as the transfer of a presentation of the self to the ‘backstage’, (Goffman 1969: 168). In a backstage, the person represents a different face of his/her self, more in accordance with the new context of the interaction:

[Private 09 July 1999]

<Lea24> *Iba a decirte algo, pero no… mejor olvidalo* (I was going to say something, but no… never mind, just forget it).

<Lea24> *Se me habia olvidado que estabamos en privado. El privado es el privado y el canal es el canal.* (I had forgotten we are in a private window. The private is the private and the channel is the channel).

Goffman asserts concerned that this fluid re-adaptation of roles confronts us with the “embarrassing methodological fact that the announcement of constitutive rules seems an open-ended game that any number can play forever” (1997: 6). Indeed, this is the case—discourse identities are constantly shaped by the moment-by-moment organisation of the interaction,” as described by Antaki and Widdicombe (1998: 90). However, far from posing embarrassing methodological problems, this view throws light on the processes of identity formation and makes clear that it is fruitless and vain to attempt to create a typology of frames, or contexts, because, when one engages in social interaction, the number of frames or contexts that we can construct are only limited by our willingness to accept them and validate them (or not).

The key to interacting and communicating effectively, whether in PR or in VR, lies in considering the context that we construct with others to host our interaction—in arriving to a consensus over what frame of interaction we are using, the identity that each party wants to adopt, and the identities that each one is willing to validate, whether it is a VR identity in PR, a PR identity in VR, a PR identity in PR, or a VR identity in VR.

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APPENDIX 1

Glossary

Bot: Short for "robot". A bot is an interactive script or program that runs inside an IRC client or another program connected to an IRC server. X and W are the official bots for the server Undernet.

Chat Room: a.k.a. channel—the virtual space in IRC in which communication and social interaction take place between several users and virtual communities are established. (See *query*).

Client: A software package designed to provide a method of connecting to an IRC server.

Clone: One of two or more nicks in the same IRC server under the control of one user. Clones are created quite simply by opening several IRC connections through one server.

CMC: Computer Mediated Communication—any form of human communication that takes place through the use of computers.

Cyber-anthropology: The study of humans in virtual communities and networked environments.

Cyborg: A self-regulating human-machine hybrid in which the machine parts become replacements which are integrated or act as supplements to the organism to enhance the body's power potential.

Cyberpunk: The social category and body of fiction built around the work of William Gibson and other writers, who have constructed various visions of the future worlds of cyberspaces, with all their vast range of technological developments and power struggles.

Cybersex: The sharing of sexual fantasies between two parties through CMC. In certain communities, cybersex has similar social implications to engaging in sexual relations in PR.

Cyberspace: a.k.a. Matrix. The on-line virtual world of computer networks.

DoS Attack: Denial of Service Attack—a technique used to attack a system and crash it. When a system is hit by a successful Denial of Service attack, the machine is usually rendered inoperable for a period of time and the user is denied the service the machine was either offering or using.

DCC: Direct Client to Client—a type of connection in IRC between two users that bypasses the use of channels, providing a direct link for the exchange of any sort of data or communication.

DNS: Domain Name Server—the alphabetical equivalent of the numerical IP. For example, the DNS for *129.234.122.58* is *aidan-08@dur.ac.uk*.

Emoticons: a.k.a. smileys—the expression of emotional feelings through the use of characters, numbers and symbols from the keyboard.

Flood: Any large amount of data purposely or unintentionally sent to other users that might eventually cause a disconnection from their IRC server.

Hacker: One who is proficient at using or programming a computer or who illegally gains access to or enters another's electronic system to obtain secret information or steal money. Anthropologists and sociologists often refer to the Hacker culture, or sub-culture.

IP: Internet Protocol—the protocol running Internet and other computer networks. It is the most widely used computer interconnection protocol. Internet addressing is based on the IP, which is expressed through a numerical value.

IRC: Internet Relay Chat—a multi-user, real-time communication software based on a client-server model.

IRCop: An IRC user with an OP status that has validity throughout the entire IRC server, not only in a specific chat room. IRCops are in charge of listening to all users' concerns and preventing any illegal activities or abuses in IRC.

Netiquette: The etiquette governing communication on the Internet.

Nuke: A malicious application that sends OOB (out of Band) data to a particular port in another user's Windows OS, causing his/her computer to hang. Nukes include many forms of DoS attacks.

OP: Operator—any user who has a status in a chat room with a numerical value ranging from 1 to 500 that grants him/her the possibility of performing special commands and managing the virtual community.

PC: Personal Computer—a general-purpose computer equipped with a microprocessor and designed to run especially commercial software for an individual user.

PR: Physical Reality—according to Velmans (1998), the reality that exists independently of the observer, extended in space—in the world. It has tangible properties such as mass and solidity. Physical Reality replaces what has traditionally been referred to as RL (Real Life). (See *VR*).

Query: a.k.a. private window—the virtual space in IRC in which communication ad social interaction take place on a private, one-to-one basis. (See *chat room*).

Script: A program code designed to complement and enhance the possibilities offered by an IRC client. Certain scripts focus on illicit applications used as bellicose IRC tools to illegitimately get control of a chat room or to disrupt the connection of other users. Other scripts focus on defensive tools, on user-locating mechanisms, or games and pastimes.

Server: A computer in a network that is used to provide services to other computers in a network. The IRC *server* for channel #rudos is Undernet.

Social Engineering: Among hackers, the interaction with others adopting a particular pose, or role, with the aim of obtaining information or services. This role is defined by Goffman as the development of a strategic secret (1969: 141).

Voice: The capacity of a user to send text to a particular chat room and participate in it. This right can be denied to a specific user by channels OPs as a sanction or an expression of hostility.

VR: Virtual Reality—an artificial, interactive environment which is experienced through sensory stimuli provided by a computer.

Wingate: A multi-protocol proxy server and general purpose Internet connectivity tool. An Internet connection through Wingate will conceal our DNS and IP address to other users.

APPENDIX 2

An Introduction to IRC

The format of IRC is similar in many aspects to a playwright's script. Each line of text begins with the user's nickname (nick, or alias) and is followed by the text the user wishes to broadcast to other users. As the conversation progresses, each line of text rolls off the top of the computer screen to make room for the new lines of text being transmitted through the bottom of the screen (Shaw 1997: 134).

In IRC, most people are 'regulars' of a chat room and adopt a defined nick, although this can be changed at any time by performing the command */nick [new nick]*. In addition, one can belong to more than one chat room, speak simultaneously in more than one chat room and engage at the same time in private conversations and open chat room conversations.

Chat rooms, or channels, are virtual communities formed by several IRC users. These communities can be registered with the administrators of their corresponding IRC server (and therefore considered official, recognised chat rooms), or simply improvised, non-registered chat rooms. It is not possible for two chat rooms to coexist in one server under the same name, though. Registering a chat room will therefore consolidate its identity and presence, and prevent other users from establishing homonymous communities.

In private windows (or queries), conversation takes place in a private, one-to-one basis. Chat rooms, however, are potentially open to any user that wishes to join in. The social organisation of these communities is complex. A number of users in the chat room are assigned a status with a numerical value that grants them a series of rights within the community. These users are known as operators (or OPs). Thus, the founder of the chat room has the highest OP status—God status (500). S/he has the possibility to manage his/her chat room as s/he wishes and to grant other users lower OP statuses (ranging from 499 to 1).

OPs in IRC have a wide range of possibilities—they can, for instance, kick a user out of the chat room, ban him/her from the chat room for a certain period of time, set the topic of the conversation, limit the number of users that can enter the chat room at once, invite users from other chat rooms and even prevent a user from sending any message to the chat room whilst being in it.

These actions and others are carried out through the use of commands.[9] Two commands of particular relevance to us are */dns [nick]* and */whois [nick]*, both of which can be performed by any user regardless of his/her status. */whois [nick]* will display on

our screens broader information on the individual identity of a user. In theory, this includes the server the user is connected through, the chat rooms s/he is participating in, the user's real name, and his/her IP number:

sara1 is ~sin@194.204.248.83 * Mon nom
sara1 on #beauce #quebec #montréal #paris #maroc
sara1 using Flanders.Be.Eu.Undernet.org Planet Internet, Vlaanderen
sara1 End of /WHOIS list.

In practice, however, users decide which information they want to make available, and whether they wish to make it appear as part of a PR identity, or a VR identity. Thus, sara1, on the example above, has chosen not to include his/her real name in the */whois* information, and has substituted this information by the phrase *Mon nom*.

The command */dns [nick]* will display on our screen the DNS (Domain Name Server) and the IP Number (Internet Protocol Number) of a particular user. The DNS and the IP can be used as fix, standard tools to locate and identify a user throughout the Net regardless of his/her nick, chat room, server, or any other volatile information. In practice, however, it is the user once again who decides whether s/he wishes others to have access to this information or not. Logging on to IRC through a Wingate connection, for instance, will conceal our real DNS and IP Number and substitute them by new, unrecognisable ones.

In IRC, commands like */whois*, */dns*, and many others can be combined with the use of a script. A script is a program designed to complement and enhance the possibilities offered by an IRC client. Certain scripts focus on illicit applications such as nukers and flooders, used as bellicose IRC tools to illegitimately get control of a chat room or to disrupt the connection of other users. Other scripts focus on defensive tools, on user-locating mechanisms, or games and pastimes.

The intermingling of IRC and script commands with traditional day-to-day speech has given rise to a very particular use of the language in IRC. Thus, whether we are speaking in English, Spanish, Russian or any other language, TIA will always mean "Thank You in Advance." BFN will stand for "Bye For Now," LOL for "Laughing Out Loud" and ROTFL for "Rolling On The Floor Laughing." Moreover, the absence of physical contact and bodily presence in IRC is counteracted by the use of emoticons (from *emotions* and *icons*). Emoticons are the expression of emotional feelings through the use of characters, numbers and symbols from the keyboard. The emoticon **=)** for

[9] See Appendix 3 for *A List of Commands*.

instance, represents a smiley face, **=(** a frown, **=o)** a clown, **=”(** tears, **=*** a kiss, and so on and so forth.

Lázaro Carreter (2000) affirms in rather hyperbolic terms that:

[t]his new, succinct and pseudo-universal language that is still in its gestation process, has already threatened our traditional, normal speech. […] As soon as the Internet Language acquires three or four other expressions, it will take over from the idea of Esperanto and be valid to communicate no matter which language we use.

IRC is one of the most versatile and social of the CMCs. The vast amount of commands and options available can be enhanced by the use of specialised scripts. IRC allows the identification and location of other users in various ways, it provides a flexible medium for users to engage in real-time, nick-to-nick conversation in private windows or open chat rooms, as well as the possibility of participating in active social interaction of different types—from the establishment and leadership of a virtual community to the commencement of an IRC war with nukes and flood. These characteristics make of IRC an excellent medium to study processes of identity formation in a virtual environment.

APPENDIX 3

List of Commands

/ Recalls the previous line entered in the current window.
/! Recalls the last command typed in any window.
/action {action text} Sends the specifed action to the active channel or query window.
/add [-apuce] {filename.ini} Loads aliases, popups, users, commands, and events.
/ame {action text} Sends the specifed action to all channels which you are currently on.
/amsg {text} Sends the specifed message to all channels which you are currently on.
/auser {level} {nick|address} Adds a user with the specified access level to the remote users list.
/auto [on|off|nickname|address] Toggles auto-opping of a nick or address or sets it on or off totally.
/away {away message} Sets you away leave a message explaining that you are not currently paying attention to IRC.
/away Sets you being back.
/ban [#channel] {nickname} [type] Bans the specified nick from the curent or given channel.
/beep {number} {delay} Locally beeps 'number' times with 'delay' inbetween the beeps.
/channel Pops up the
channel central window (only works in a channel).
/clear Clears the entire scrollback buffer of the current window.
/clearall Clears all text in all open windows.
/ctcp {nickname} {ping|finger|version|time|userinfo|clientinfo} Does the given ctcp request on nickname.

/closemsg {nickname} Closes the query window you have open to the specified nick.
/commands [on|off] Sets the Tools/Remote/Commands setion on or off or checks its status.
/creq [ask | auto | ignore] Sets your DCC 'On Chat request' settings in DCC/Options.
/dcc send {nickname} {file1} {file2} {file3} ... {fileN} Sends the specified files to nick.
/dcc chat {nickname} Opens a dcc window and sends a dcc chat request to nickname.
/dde [-r] {service} {topic} {item} [data] Allows DDE control between mIRC and other applications.
/ddeserver [[on [service name] | off] To turn on the DDE server mode, eventually with a givem service name.
/describe {#channel} {action text} Sends the specifed action to the specified channel window.
/disable {#groupname} De-activates a group of commands or events.
/disconnect Forces a hard and immediate disconnect from your IRC server. Use it with care.
/dlevel {level} Changes the default user level in the remote section.
/dns {nickname | IP address | IP name} Uses your providers DNS to resolve an IP address.
/echo [nickname|#channel|status] {text} Displays the given text only to YOU on the given place in color N.
/enable {#groupname} Activates a group of commands or events.
/events [on|off] Shows the remote events status or sets it to listening or not.
/exit Forces mIRC to closedown and exit.
/finger Does a finger on a users address.
/flood [{numberoflines} {seconds} {pausetime}] Sets a crude flood control method.
/flush [levels] Clears all nicknames from the Remote/users list that are currently not on your channels.
/font Activates the font selection dialog.
/fsend [on|off] Shows fsends status and allows you to turn dcc fast send on or off.
/fserve {nickname} {maxgets} {homedirectory} [welcome text file] Opens a fileserver.
/groups [-e|d] Shows all (enabled or disabled) groups defined in the remote sections.
/guser {level} {nick} [type] Adds the user to the user list with the specified level and address type.
/help {keyword} Brings up the Basic IRC Commands section in the mIRC help file.
/ignore [on|off|nickname|address] Toggles ignoring of a nick or address or sets it on or off totally.
/invite {nickname} {#channel} Invites another user to a channel.
/join {#channel} Makes you join the specified channel.
/kick {#channel} {nickname} Kicks nickname off a given channel.
/list [#string] [-min #] [-max #] Lists all currently available channels, evt. filtering for parameters.
/load {-apuce} {filename.ini} Loads Aliases, Popups or Remote items into mIRC.
/log [on|off] Shows the logging status or sets it on or off for the current window.
/me {action text} Sends the specifed action to the active channel or query window.
/mode {#channel|nickname} [[+|-]modechars [parameters]] Sets channel or user modes.
/msg {nickname} {message} Send a private message to this user without opening a query window.
/names {#channel} Shows the nicks of all people on the given channel.
/nick {new nickname} Changes your nickname to whatever you like.
/notice {nick} {message} Send the specified notice message to the nick.
/notify [on|off|nickname] Toggles notifying you of a nick on IRC or sets it on or off totally.
/onotice [#channel] {message} Send the specified notice message to all channel ops.
/omsg [#channel] {message} Send the specified message to all ops on a channel.
/part {#channel} Makes you leave the specified channel.

/partall Makes you leave all channels you are on.
/ping {server address} Pings the given server. NOT a nickname.
/play [-cpqmrlt] [channel/nick] {filename} [delay/linenumber] Allows you to play text files.
/pop {delay} [#channel] {nickname} Performs a randomly delayed +o on a not already opped nick.
/protect [on|off|nickname|address] Toggles protection of a nick or address or sets it on or off totally.
/query {nickname} {message} Open a query window to this user and send them the private message.
/quit [reason] Disconnect you from IRC with the optional byebye message.
/raw {raw command} Sends any raw command you supply directly to the server. Use it with care !
/remote [on|off] Shows the remote commands status or sets it to listening or not.
/rlevel {access level} Removes all users from the remote users list with the specified access level.
/run {c:\path\program.exe} [parameters] Runs the specified program, evt. with parameters.
/ruser {nick[!]|address} [type] Removes the user from the remote users list.
/save [-apuce] {filename.ini} Saves remote sections into a specified INI file.
/say {text} Says whatever you want to the active window.
/server [server address [port] [password]] Reconnects to the previous server or a newly specified one.
/sound [nickname|#channel] {filename.wav} {action text} Sends an action and a fitting sound request.
/speak {text} Uses the external text to speech program Monologue to speak up the text.
/sreq [ask | auto | ignore] Sets your DCC 'On Send request' settings in DCC/Options.
/time Tells you the time on the server you use.
/timer[N] {repetitions} {interval in seconds} {command} [| {more commands}] Activates a timer.
/timestamp [on | off] Sets timestamping on or off for all your conversations.
/topic {#channel} {newtopic} Changes the topic for the specified channel.
/ulist {level} Lists all users in the remote list with the specified access levels.
/url [-d] Opens the URL windows that allows you to surf the www parallel to IRC.
/uwho [nick] Pops up the user central with information about the specified user.
/wavplay {c:\path\sound.wav} Locally plays the specified wave file.
/who {#channel} Shows the nicks of all people on the given channel.
/who {*address.string*} Shows all people on IRC with a matching address.
/whois {nickname} Shows information about someone in the status window.
/whowas {nickname} Shows information about someone who -just- left IRC.
/write [-cidl] {filename} [text] To write the specified text to a .txt file.

APPENDIX 4

Official Message from Undernet Administrators
With Reference to the DoS Attacks

11 January 2001

Notice to our users (updated)

This is an update on the current status of the Undernet IRC network. It is intended to help clarify any confusion surrounding full service disruptions.

This is an official statement from the administration of the Undernet. Any and all communications or information that have been provided prior to this release should be considered personal opinion and not a representation by the administration of the Undernet.org IRC Network. All communications will be made publicly available via this medium.

The X and W service bots continue to be offline. Currently, there is no projected date for their return. In recent days, network resources of U.S. and European Internet service providers (ISP's) who host Undernet IRC servers have been subjected to continued DoS (denial of service) attacks. The sources of these attacks are systems within large bandwidth networks, which have been unwittingly compromised for destructive purposes.

Unfortunately, when an IRC server is attacked, it impacts the provider's ability to carry on normal day-to-day network operations. DoS attacks have been an inherent problem with IRC servers. However, these recent attacks have been so severe, that some providers have terminated their agreements to host IRC servers on the Undernet network. However, this has not stopped the attacks. Some providers continue to be the subject of extensive DoS attacks, even after disconnecting their IRC servers. It appears that the intent of the subject(s) orchestrating these DoS attacks is not only to destroy an IRC network, but also to adversely impact the business enterprise of individual ISP's that have hosted Undernet IRC servers.

These recent attacks on individual Undernet IRC servers have been intense, often in excess of 100 mbps.To demonstrate a frame of reference, an OC-3 line is a 155 mbps data pipe with an average monthly cost of $45,000.00 - $60,000.00. Many of the ISP's hosting IRC servers are utilizing resources of at least a multi-homed DS3 data pipe (45 mbps), costing $18,000.00 - $35,000.00 per month. Most dial-up modems are 56 kbps. 1024 kbps equals 1 mbps.

The Undernet is one of the largest IRC networks, providing real time text based communications world-wide, to over 2.2 million users per week. All Undernet IRC servers are privately owned and operated. The server administrators, who provide IRC network resources without charge to users, have made the Undernet the success that it is.

There are numerous issues that complicate a swift resolution to the current dilemma. To effectively back trace and terminate DoS attacks of this magnitude, the cooperation and assistance of Internet backbone providers is required. To date, providers hosting Undernet IRC servers are working with upstream providers to obtain the needed resources to effectively address this problem. Another difficulty is dealing with the complex laws of many different countries. We are continuing to cooperate with U.S. Federal law enforcement authorities in their criminal investigation.

So what does this mean? At this point, the future of the Undernet and IRC remains uncertain. While providers are currently paying for the resources to provide a free IRC environment, they cannot continue to do so if they suffer substantial losses of business revenue. The destructive actions of a few irresponsible people can effectively remove forever an Internet communication medium that millions of people worldwide have come to enjoy and love.

We are working diligently in attempt to resolve this current dilemma. Your patience and understanding is appreciated during these trying times. We will continue to keep you informed of ongoing developments.

The Undernet IRC network (http://www.cservice.undernet.org/)