

Chapter 5 **Simulations and individual life-worlds**

This chapter presents data and interpretations from a two stage ethnography documenting the integration of simulations in individual lifeworlds. The first part documents the earliest phase of my ethnography, and thus much of the data and interpretations are exploratory in nature. Nonetheless, they help foreground the notion of simulations as consumption objects, which is used extensively throughout the rest of the thesis. The second part builds onto the notion of simulated consumables, by exploring the role they play in consumers' lives, particularly in self extension.

Informant networks, my modes of encounter and data collection techniques for this ethnography were outlined in chapter 4.

5.1 Simulations as Consumption Objects

This study uses data from 72 Irish informants collected over a period of one year. The data collected from this network comprised formal unstructured interviews, informal accounts of lived experiences and observational field notes. This data-set was further strengthened by using field notes and observational data from venues such as public internet kiosks and video game arcades. This early data was organized around a classification of functions, activities and products used while in a CME. A selected sample list of informants, their demographics and functions and activities in CME was presented in chapter 4 as list 4.1

Data organization and analysis: Informants' descriptions as well as observations of their activities in CME became the primary data set. All descriptions of activities in CME were listed and updated with each interview, observation or field note. This

process was continued until additions to the list became very infrequent. At the end of the listing process, a very expansive and generic unbranded assemblage emerged that indicated both a range of functions and activities the informants performed in the CME, and the products they used. This raw list, which became a universal set, is presented as figure 5.1.

<p>E-mail, News, Songs, Info-seek, E-books, Industry news, Research, Product development, Musical instruments, Entertainment, Newspaper, Greeting cards, Communications, Business and industry contact, Advertising, Chat, Gaming, Video / audio entertainment, Soundtracks, Fashion, Trade info, Porn, Simulation, Audio-video, Accounts, Video-conference, Sports news, Shopping, Encyclopaedia, Recruitment service, Web-site creation and maintenance, Trade and marketing, Banking, Pictures, Composer, Picture editor, Library, Medical record, Television, Travel planning and services, Accounts, Picture album, Scheduler/planner, Alerts, synthesis, Web page, religion, , E-mags,</p>
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Fig. 5.1 Consumption Activities in the CME

Generation of Typologies: Each entry in this list of functions and activities had an attached set of emic descriptions. However, many informants used different terms for similar activities and functions and thus the list was full of entries with multiple meanings, creating connotative ambiguities. Further, in many cases there was obvious disjuncture between claimed and observed behaviour.

Osgood, Suci and Tennenbaum (1957) recommend the use of semantic feature analysis for resolution of such connotative ambiguities. Semantic feature analysis is a useful tool for reducing apparent disjunctures, and for creating standardization and coherence in descriptive data. Using Osgood, Suci and Tennenbaum's work as a guide line, these items and their descriptions were semantically feature analyzed and item denotations were grouped on the basis of similarity in characteristics or functions. Observational

data and field notes were also used as an additional input in this grouping process. This yielded five broad categories or typologies of consumables available to the consumer in a CME. While some of these consumables were easily identifiable as simulated replacements of tangible products or services (e.g. E-mail and e-cards, E-newspaper, E-books, CD-Rom versions of encyclopaedia, musical instruments, travel and banking services), others were less obvious (e.g. Web pages, search engines, eBay)

One very important feature of these emergent consumption / product typologies was that even with semantic feature analysis and efforts to resolve ambiguities, there remained a certain degree of fluidity and interchangeability in the way consumables occupied consumption categories. Such fluidity may be explained in the light of Holt's (1995) assertion that consumers embrace a variety of ways to consume a particular product, and that consumption practices are highly context dependant.

It should also be noted here that although the placement of a 'virtual product' in a certain group is only indicative and by no means definitive, they are all examples of a simulated virtual replacement of a tangible product or service. Typical examples of such replacements would be letter by e-mail, printed newspapers by online editions, books by e-books, greeting cards by e-cards, and auctions and bank visits by online equivalents. The proposed typology of consumables in the CME is presented as figure 5.2.

Reflexive Validation of the Typology: At this point rigour was applied to the study by validating the typology. In order to test the placement of consumables (both products and services) in specific categories, the list of activities and functions was reduced to the categories alone, i.e. social interaction products, experiential products, information products, service products and functional products. A selected group of informants was shown the five category headings and asked to identify any virtual replacement of tangible products that they themselves used in the CME. All were able to suggest at

least one simulated consumable in each category. They were further asked to list the consumables in CME that they thought had replaced an existing consumable for them. Surprisingly, all respondents were able to generate multiple examples of such products or services. This exercise was found beneficial in validating the categorization.

Typology of products available in CME

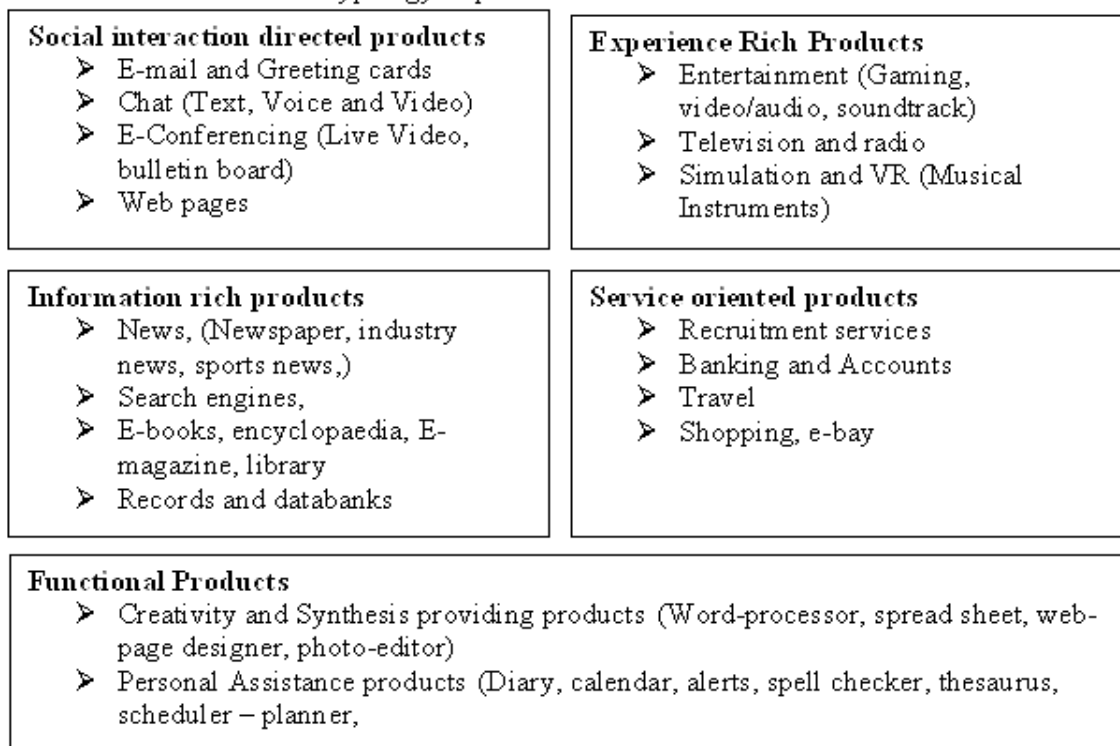


Fig 5.2 Typology of Products in CME

A Brief Discussion on the Typology: Although the typology was emergent and data driven in nature, in its final form it emerges as an etic conceptual tool. It is thus important to trace its various elements back to the emic and connect the two together. These connections are now briefly presented.

Information Rich Products: This is the broadest category of simulated consumables available in the CME. Given that some of the synonyms for CME technologies are derivatives of the term ‘information technology’, it is no surprise that a majority of informants placed consumption of information at the top of the list of their activities and functions within a CME. Many thought that a computer, due to its inherent ability

as a data storage and retrieval platform, coupled with interconnectivity and accessibility, was a powerful source of information.

Almost all informants were found using one or other form of information rich products in the CME. While only three informants admitted to going to a newspaper website to read news, many of them thought '*the internet was a great place for breaking news*'. A selection of informants tended to be very interested in sports, and used their computers to keep up with current games, scores and team positions. Many informants also thought that the internet was a '*great big library of sorts*'. Steve, a doctor, did not think his sizeable collection of books was a library because it was neither complete nor organized and catalogued. However, he called the small stack of CD's at the side of his computer his library.

An encyclopaedia is a good example of an information rich product easily adaptable to CME. One informant, Michael, was a typical consumer who bought the Britannica CD-ROM version for being '*cheaper providing the same function*' and '*much easier to use*'. On the other hand his enthusiasm for a CD-Rom version was not shared by another of my informants, Liam, who thought he could never replace his Britannica with a computer. He felt that the joy of owning the real thing, '*smelling the leather and paper as it ages*' was far greater than any reservoir of knowledge on a screen.

Though I did not find the use of E-books to be widespread (only eleven of the informants had ever used one), quite a few of the informants considered them as a qualified improvement and a possible future replacement of the printed edition. Many thought that given a choice, they would prefer an e-book over the printed version. The reasons cited for E-books preference were accessibility, cost, currency and available updates to newer editions.

Social interaction rich products: CME is a very potent social interaction platform. It provides instant multimedia interconnectivity between individuals unmatched by any other medium. Several examples of social interaction rich products in the CME were found, among which E-mail, chat forums and personal web-pages were the most commonly cited.

E-mail emerged as an almost perfect example of simulation replacing a tangible. Although some informants did not think they used their computers primarily for this function, social contact through E-mail was the most commonly mentioned activity in a CME. All informants used their computers as a means of sending and receiving e-mails and greeting cards. Most of them admitted to having reduced or altogether stopped sending regular mails. Many used the term 'snail mail' to identify regular posted mail. E-mail was thus found to be more or less a complete replacement for paper letters, and its most common uses were for personal and business communications with friends, family, colleagues and organizations.

Some informants were also found using chatting (online as well as web- SMS to cellular mobile phones) alongside e-mail as their primary means of one-to-one communications. Because of the range of variation in the way it was used, I found chatting to be an experimental and malleable mode of communication. Where many informants used cyber-chatting to maintain and strengthen relationships with very close friends and family, there were many others who only chatted on anonymous sites with total strangers. Text chatting was found to be very prevalent among the younger cohort of participants, many of whom thought SMS chatting was the most convenient and least intrusive way of one-to-one communications.

Schau and Gilly (2003) have considered a webpage as a psycho-social extension of one's self in cyberspace. Although all participants were familiar with the web pages their friends and associates had made, only four of them had established web-pages of

their own. Further, these four individuals had in fact established multiple web-pages. Many indicated that the effort and complexities of establishing a webpage had deterred them from doing their own. Jackie, who was one of the more technical minded informants, thought it was one of those '*I will get to it one day*' types of activities in the CME.

Experience rich products: CME, because of its multi-sensory captive immersive ability, is a very potent platform for experiential consumption. Many informants used their computer as an entertainment tool, and entertainment including gaming emerged as the most common form of consumption in the CME. One informant, Ted, thought that CME provided an excellent platform for multi-tasking, such as listening simultaneously to a soundtrack while engaging in other activities like writing mail or professional assignments. Many informants were observed using their computers as DVD or MP3 players, to watch movies or listen to soundtracks. 3-D simulation gaming was found to be another popular type of experiential activity in the CME, which most informants consumed at least occasionally.

Some participants were also found playing simulated musical instruments on their computers. One individual, Garry, was a budding composer specializing in string instruments, but confessed to being ham-fisted when it came to percussion instruments. For practice sessions he used computer based percussion and rhythm tunes, which he composed and pre-recorded on his computer, as an accompaniment to his Yamaha synthesizer guitar. He confessed to spending as much time on his computer perfecting his compositions as he did on his guitar and thought the experience of a 'plugged-in' session was far richer and rewarding than his unplugged ones.

Service oriented products: Service consumption is by far the most common commercial activity in CME in this study. CME lends itself well to many types of services. It allows service providers to offer service ingredients online, which can be

channelled into an on-demand, pull type automated service by the consumer. Such an arrangement in CME not only reduces the cost of providing such services, but also makes them temporally and spatially flexible.

Several diverse examples of service consumption were observed in this study. Many informants were found maximizing their time and resources by using online services and finding bargains. Travel arrangements, accounts and banking as well as utility services were found to be the most common types of online services consumed at the time of this study. However, internet shopping, which was a prominent category in the emic list, was found to be a deceptive activity; most of what consumers thought and called shopping could just as easily be characterized as browsing or window shopping.

Banking along with travel planning were the most frequent uses of computer based services. Several informants stated that they had stopped going to the local bank branch altogether. It is significant to note in the context of the study period (early 2004), that many Irish frequent travellers had started using internet based travel planning and booking services as their preferred means for booking flights, hotel reservations and car rental.

Functional products: A computer in the hands of a consumer comprises two separate essential components; hardware and software. While the hardware determines the performance of a computer, software determines the functions it can perform; all software represent the functionality of a computer. In fact where the computer was introduced as a glorified calculator, software was introduced to convert a computing machine into a consumer product. These functional products in the CME deserve a little more attention than they have enjoyed thus far in marketing literature. Functional products providing word processing, composing and account maintenance features have now become primary components of a computer. Although I found all of informants had purchased and were using such functional products (software) on their

computers (such as composer, editor, browser, spreadsheets, diary, calendar, spell checker etc.), initially none of them could identify and associate with them precisely as products and thought of them as integral components of the physical 'computer'. Interestingly, however, in the later part of the study when a select group of participants was shown the category list of the typology, there was a unanimous identification of one Microsoft product or the other with this category.

The Narratives Beyond Typology: Thick description: This early phase of ethnography was the beginning of my effort to see beyond the micro-world of computers as linear and logically acting machines and networked technology, by focusing instead on the macro-world of CME in which the consumers live. Very early in my study I had found that since all informants used their computers for a few hours daily, all had lives within CME. They related to their computer as a tool of efficiency, as a toy for recreation and as a necessity. For many it was a source of strength and empowerment, as well as of recreation. There was also a certain malleability between their real world and their world in CME, and both of these worlds contained similar patterns of consumption.

Many informants were increasingly using the simulation technologies available through their computers to consume the virtual in place of the real. The more time they spent on their computers, the higher was their tendency to perform all or most of their functions within the CME. I found that on a typical day, some informants were spending up to 10 hours in front of their computers. Their computers were both centre and origin of many activities; many real life acts of consumption were derivatives of their actions in CME.

It was also easy to detect that many consumption choices were slowly migrating to this mediated environment. Many consumers were reading breaking news, listening to satellite radio or watching online television. Almost all of them were sending and receiving emails, pictures and cards, checking and managing accounts or ordering

pizzas while online. Some of them were staying home in the evening, socialization online, or debating on issues of significance on chat forums, or playing multi-player online games. All these acts were parts of these individuals' own worlds in the cyberspace, full of meanings, emotions, collections and possessions.

CME–Beyond consumables: The foregoing section deals with identification and categorization of simulated consumables in CME. It is worth noting that at this point in my study I began to understand how my informants were using CME as another platform for consumption, parallel to or in addition to the other platforms of consumption in their lives. For example my informant Sarah was an avid collector. She had collected personal memorabilia all her adult life— postcards, letters, envelopes, newspaper clippings, calendar pictures, dried flowers among many others. As a very active and social individual, she also described herself as '*a real world person*'.

Although Sarah's introduction to the world of CME was rather late, at 40 she became an avid computer user. She read her news on the screen, sent and received e-mails and E-cards. I also found that she had recently upgraded her hard disk to accommodate the archive she accumulated on a daily basis, and that she routinely made a CD to unload some of her virtual possessions from her hard disk. For Sarah, cyberspace appeared to be just an extension of her physical world. She performed the same functions of clipping, saving and collecting on her computer like she did in her physical world. Among all my informants, she possessed the largest collections, in both tangible and virtual forms. With less than two years of computer usage, she had two hard-disks in her computer as well as a stack of backup CDs of her clippings and collections.

At the end of this early phase of my immersion I had begun to see that the CME was brimming with simulated consumables. Where some of these were virtual 'replacements' of tangible or materially existent forms of products and services, others were entirely new products, services and functions in cyberspace that consumers used

and experienced on a daily basis. My broad based typology of consumables was a useful reference point, but it gave little understanding of emic narratives attached to the consumption of such consumables in the CME.

At this point my informant network was regrouped and accessed again to more holistically explore the role these simulated consumables play in their lives, particularly in self extension.

5.2 Simulations as possessions and their role in self-extension

Introduction: The thick descriptions generated during the first phase seemed to question the traditional notion of extended self. It appeared as if the theoretical dividend of the ‘extended self’ construct was being problematized in a world where consumables and possessions were increasingly being replaced by simulations in the CME. The obvious question was: if consumers partly existed in cyberspace, consuming simulated consumables, did their selves too become cyber-psychically extended?

Changing faces of possessions in the age of Simulacra: The first task in this renewed focus was to generate a universally acceptable and comprehensive list of such simulated consumables that could then be explored as possessions in the CME. The typology of consumables was an obvious starting point, as it indicated that in terms of consumption, consumers had come to accept simulations in lieu of the real. However, as the typology was data driven, it did not contain all possible simulated possessions.

At this time the research approach was modified by adapting the evolving ethnographic method, and by referring back to the literature. This began first of the many emic-etic interplays in this evolving ethnography. To generate a more comprehensive list, all possible and available consumables in the CME, that were part of the original list of

simulated consumables, were charted on a continuum, their positions were determined on the basis of their functions, contents and complexity of medium.

At one end of this continuum, there were simulations that could be used on a basic standalone computer with audile and visual interfaces, for example e-books and encyclopaedia, digital photographs, traditional games like chess or cards as well as virtual reality (VR) gaming like PlayStation and X-box and musical instruments. In the middle of this continuum were products and services such as electronic newspapers, banking, airline tickets, E-mail and greeting cards, libraries and similar products that needed interconnectivity in addition to audio-visual interfacing. At the farther end were the cutting edge VR experience-rich products such as motoring, flying or water sport simulators that went beyond the basic audio-visual interfaces and networked environment by incorporating multi-sensory or haptic interfaces, such as electro-mechanical simulators, 3-D interaction consoles or VR headsets. At the extreme end of this spectrum was a somewhat futuristic realm where the virtual world, created in the CME replaced the real world entirely. This was the realm of the 'Matrix' (Warner Brothers 1999), 'Cyborgs' (Biocca 1997) and 'Posthuman' (Venkatesh et. al. 2001) – where ultimate man-machine interfaces will perhaps one day result in experiential simulation at a giga-level in a micro-machine embodiment.

In quest of Cyber-possession: It was evident from the first part of the study that, for most Irish consumers, consumption in a CME and its associated phenomenon of replacement of tangible by virtual possessions was emergent in nature. Replacement of some possessions by their virtual counterparts, although indicative of an incremental trend, was not a revolutionary upheaval. At that time only a few traditionally tangible possessions had been directly replaced by simulations.

Further, even in such a transitional phase there was a certain degree of fluidity and interchangeability in the way consumers made their consumption choices at different

times. This context-dependant switching resulted in many informants employing both tangible as well as hyperreal modes of consumption and possession for a single product at any given moment. Informants were found possessing and cherishing a digital photograph as well as a yellowing childhood album simultaneously, and many of them read an online newspaper as well as the local daily.

This observation necessitated a methodical examination of consumption and consumables in the CME to identify possible contenders for virtual possessions. After initial scrutiny of the list of functions and products (as presented in list 5.2), a refined list of possible virtual possessions, which could be applied to Irish consumers, was drafted. This list was then used to explore emic positions, and was continually refined and updated with each interaction, observation or field note. This refinement was essentially an exclusion process that continued until a relatively stable list of simulated possessions emerged. This generic unbranded assemblage indicated the range of simulated replacements of tangible possessions within my informant network. Seven of the more prominent items that enjoyed widespread presence in this network represent the main focus of findings. These are e-mail, e-cards, e-books and journals, pictures/photographs, newspapers, audio/video files and musical instruments.

In the following sections I first contrast real with virtual, and outline how real objects are being replaced with simulated possessions. This is done through representations of photographs and books. I then look at collections of virtual possessions through examining emic narratives on email and e-cards, newspaper clippings and audio video tracks. Finally, I discuss a number of paradoxical themes that emerge from the data.

Photographs: Proponents of material culture such as Daniel Miller (1998) argue that consumers' identities may reside in objects more than they do in individuals. Objects act as frames, reminders and containers of identity, and even loved ones are confined in and remembered through object associations. A vivid example of such objectification is

a photograph. A personal album or video, beyond its own material existence, can be an everlasting reminder and reservoir of personal emotions and associations. It can also be a documentation of progressive emergence of the current sense of self; for older consumers it may represent nostalgia, for most others it charts the course towards becoming 'me'.

For many consumers photographs are permanent statements and reminders of self, non-transactable but highly displayable possessions. I found various ways in which photographs became a part of my informants' extended self. In the private domain the statement of self was achieved through a display on a mantle piece or wall, on a desk, or by loading such self-defining photographs as a background on computer or cell phone. Where a slightly more controlled exposure was desirable, these photographs were placed in private albums that were shared with special people or at special occasions. In the public domain self-extension was achieved through publication in print format or by posting them on a website.

Martha was one of my more expressive informants. She was also very reflective. She narrated her own meanings behind displaying photographs:

When you come into my house, see my house and the things in it –well they tell you about us, what I like and what I have. Here sitting on the couch, when I show you my album, I mean this way I can tell you what I have been. (Martha 48)

Prominent display of photographs in the visitor areas of my informant houses also represented the ceremonial nature of these possessions. All my informants could narrate elaborate tales about the significance of these photographs, and many could even trace the various steps and decisions leading up to such a display, such as selection of photograph, size of enlargement, style of frame, and position and placement on the wall. Many could also identify steps in creating an album as well, from selecting the right book with the right colour, texture and number of cards to the

sequence and layout of the pictures in the book. It was apparent that for many display of photographs was a highly involved process.

Fiona thought that preparing a photograph for display was a process of creating a representative persona, '*the very best of me*'. She narrated,

Oh it is difficult indeed, I mean selection of the album – and I never tend to agree on it anyway! (glances at her husband) Then picking the pictures to put in, and obviously you don't want to offend anyone, I mean there are considerations – you cant just get a book and stick photos in it, can you?.. but at the end of the day, it's worth it.....No think I value it highly... (Fiona)

There were marked variations in the way photographs were displayed in the visitor areas of 17 homes observed. A third of these dwellings did not display any personal pictures prominently, but did have paintings or commercial products in designer frames. Another third displayed family or children's portraits in living areas such as kitchens and family dens, while the remainder prominently displayed multiple pictures depicting emotions, dreams and accomplishments of members of the household. Both the display as well as the content of the pictures was found to be age-dependant. While early adulthood appeared to be the time to possess pictures of '*wana-be-me*', middle adulthood was more a depiction of '*me-now*', and late adulthood was more likely to feature '*that-was-me*'.

Informants valued and possessed photographs for different reasons, and thus displayed them in varying manners. There were indications of self-defining '*pride of my life*' pictures – such as wedding or graduation pictures, the '*current-me*' (hobby pictures) or '*my fascination*' photos such as those with a role model or celebrity, or *capturing the good moment* pictures from holidays or social gatherings.

Pictures also seemed to have been assigned representative value according to what they meant to informants. The more a picture depicted their entire sense of self, the more they were likely to be treasured. For example, Fiona thought that her family portrait was her most valued possession. This very large picture which was very prominently

mounted in the family room showed her in a floral dress holding her new born baby beside her sports convertible parked in front of her, then newly acquired, house. Taken on the day she brought the new baby home, the picture also showed her husband standing beside her, and her two other children can be seen running in the background.

It was obvious that the self-extension value of a picture was a function of its ability to depict the whole desired self. Theresa went through a few of her albums with me, narrating their emotional significance. She talks about one of her wedding photos,

This one? Yeah, wedding reception – friends, family, atmosphere, nice dress – I mean yes it does depict the very best of times doesn't it – bit of a fairy tale really – I like it a lot, I mean not for me looking pretty or something – but I do anyway, ha ha ha, no I mean because it reminds me of that very happy day when everything was perfect – quite unreal – still like a dream to me. (Theresa 42)

Many informants considered their pictures as prized possessions, which could not be disposed off, or given away, and the only way to share them was to exhibit them. Pictures had a place, framed and mounted on a wall, or safely tucked in plastic pouches of an album, or on the desk, or in a wallet.

However, pictures, which have been a traditional way of documenting the present and creating a sense of past, are also becoming intangible. For Sarah, who thought of herself as a real world person, digital pictures had a different set of meanings.

Now with digital pictures, ok, now that's different, they are easy to share, aren't they. I mean now my son has put all the good ones on the website he has made, and my sister, and my friends, I mean they can all see them there. If they want a copy, I can email it to them, if they want a print, they can print it out themselves – I think its definitely much easier this way (Sarah, 40)

Where Sarah found the fluidity of digital pictures a valuable resource in terms of sharing, Michael was doubtful of their possession value, and the sense of ownership.

Here they are, seventy six pictures, printed yesterday, and two copies on CDs. I know it may seem strange but somehow I don't trust the CD alone. I know many people never get to print digital pictures, but I do, and make multiple copies on CDs (Michael 44)

It appeared from Michael's case that in these transitional times some consumers find it difficult to shed the material limitations of tangible possessions by completely switching to the virtual. Even the very technologically adept informants still wanted to keep a printout as well as multiple copies of pictures.

It also appeared that the possession value of digital photographs was circumscribed in consumers' minds, and was accorded a somewhat inferior status by some.

I for one am not sure if my pictures on my computer are safe – I mean I will sure not send my topless holiday pictures to my sister in an e-mail. (Linda 31)

Its not really the same, is it, I mean I can send this picture to everyone and they would all have a copy – not mine that much any more is it? I mean with a print picture I decide where to keep it and if I want to show it to people or make copies or not. My digital pictures, I mean a hacker in India, or Alaska for that matter may get into my computer and everyone in universe may have it, without me knowing (Catherine 27)

Both Linda and Catherine appear concerned about their own agency in terms of possession of these virtual objects. Catherine's concerns with ownership and security of her digital photographs perhaps also echo the control aspect of possessions highlighted by Belk (1988a). Belk posits that the greater the control exercised over an object, the closer it is associated with the self. He argues that agency and empowerment are determinants of control, and that the degree of control over a possession also dictates its role in self extension. By having concerns with agency and control, both Linda and Catherine feel disempowered in this virtual realm. As self-extension is linked to empowerment, these concerns question the role of virtual photographs as tools for self-extension. It was still however true that for some informants the picture was no longer on their desk, but on their desktops, where it disappeared behind the screen-saver the minute a visitor entered.

Books and Magazines: This appeared to be one of the most potent categories of possessions in the CME. Many informants thought of their computer and internet as a 'great big library of sorts'. Many others possessed CD-Rom editions of books,

encyclopaedia and other compilations. An encyclopaedia is perhaps a good example of the virtual replacement of a self-extending tangible possession. In my study I found divergent modes of acquisition, possession and consumption of encyclopaedia.

On the one hand there was my informant Liam, who proudly displayed his 1987 edition of Britannica in a large book-case as the centrepiece of his living room; he thought he could never replace his Britannica with a computer. He felt that the joy of owning the real thing, *'smelling the leather and paper as it ages'* could not be equalled by any reservoir of knowledge on his computer. To him the *'pleasure'* of holding a heavy volume in his lap in front of the fire on a winter's night was *'one of the privileges of life'*. Collectively, these sentiments serve to underscore what can only be seen as a visceral attachment to the physical, tangible possessions.

On the other hand was young Michael, a member of the generation which grew up with computers. He was a student working through his college with an evening job as a bartender, and lived in a shared accommodation. Given his life situation, an electronic version of an encyclopaedia was almost an automatic choice. As a typical computer user, he bought the Britannica CD-ROM version for being *'cheaper and the same function'* and *'much easier to use'*. He narrates,

"I wanted the Encyclopaedia. Ok, I know it gonna sound nerdy, but I mean I really did, since childhood I suppose, I never had the money and my dad didn't care that much for books anyway. Since my last job, had this little bit extra (money) – I considered it, but here (gestures around), don't have enough room – buying it is one thing, but keeping it, I mean that's a different story. Then I checked on the internet, the whole deal was 1300, that's a lot of money for someone like me you know, so I got this CD instead, from the internet, I think it was 44.50 or something thereof – same thing, I mean I don't know who would buy the real thing now for that sort o money" (Michael 23)

Michael represents a generation of Irish consumers who grew up in a flourishing economy where consumers have the means to acquire anything at a price. Liam, on the other hand, represents a slightly older cohort of Irish consumers. These are the consumers for whom financial prosperity is only a recent phenomenon, and who often

reflect back to the days of simpler joys of life. For many of these consumers object associations and emotions go far beyond the element of cost. Michael's enthusiasm for the CD-Rom version was not shared by Liam,

It's for young chaps, you know, who have been born with computers. Maybe they don't even think about books anymore – everything is the internet you know. It's not for me. I remember, in my pub, if there was a bet and they needed a decision, I mean not an opinion, a decision, with money on the table, they'd call me. Not that I am a know all, but because of this (gestures to the cabinet). Was a big thing then, and to me still is (Liam 47)

Liam's verbatim captures his emotions and associations with the encyclopaedia and represents his true sense of self. Because of the social use of his Britannica (in settling quiz night bets at the local pub) it can also be seen as a collective possession, and the ownership extended to all the users at the pub. In this light, it provides him with means to reinforce his bonds and position with this social group.

However, in contemporary urban Ireland, where physical space is at a premium, books are losing out simply because consumers no longer have the means or the inclination to keep them. Many of my younger informants considered E-books not only a replacement, but a qualified improvement over the printed edition, and thought that given a choice, they would prefer an e-book over the printed version. Jane, offers her reasons for preferring e-books,

I kinda like them, it's easier, at least for me it is, searching and reading and yeah – I specially like the hyper-linking – the hot connections to related stuff.....Well I only read books when I have to, don't really keep them long anyway, my dad does, and he collects them too – yeah it's kinda nice collecting books.Would I keep my e-books? Who knows, maybe I would, but then would they not get outdated? Newer windows or something – I am not too sure if they would work forever like the real ones (Jane 24)

This is a telling verbatim, with multiple levels of meaning. Jane starts off with a positive emotion for e-books, she likes the features and finds them easier to access as well as to dispose off. She then further reflects on the practice of keeping and collecting books, through the example of her father, and questions her own practices. At this point her fear of agency, control and authority in terms of virtual possessions

enters her thoughts. Now she is not so sure, but she feels disempowered in front of technology. She expresses her fears that if she decides to keep and collect e-books, her possessions would be at the mercy of technological changes beyond her control. The second part of this verbatim oscillates between the two universes of the real and virtual, where the idea of tangible versus virtual possessions is contested. Unlike ownership in the material world, she does not feel confident of controlling possession of these virtual objects in the CME, and thus denies them the potential of self-extension by not owning them emotionally.

Steve, a doctor, possessed a sizeable collection of e-books. He had hundreds of professional references and books in CD-Rom format, on his PDA as well as his on his laptop. As a very rational, objective person, he considers that functional, and not emotional, motives drive his choice for e-books.

I think for us doctors it's the best thing since sliced bread – put it on your PDA, take it to the patient's bed to consult – now if I were to take a real one (reference book), the patients would perhaps doubt my credentials, on a PDA it is just another cool gadget the doctor is using to treat him (Chuckles).. it does make my job easier. (Steve 37)

Functional rationality seems to be the motif of this verbatim. It gives empowerment as the reason for choosing e-books. This empowerment is not accorded by the knowledge, but by the technology that conceals and reshapes this knowledge. He has other books, but e-books empower him by becoming a part his physical self – he can take them around and consult them at will. In his life he plays the role of a doctor, and this empowerment enhances his stature in front of his patient audience. For Steve, his e-books certainly emerge as self-defining possessions. However, technologically reshaped objects may not have the same possession value to connoisseurs of the real. My informant Nora registered certain ambivalence towards technology and sought refuge in the ink and paper version.

I can understand the attraction of e-books, they are cheaper, easier to use and easily updated – but I am a paper person, I love paper! (laughs). I mean my reading time is normally between the sheets late at night. And then, how do you share them, or pick one up (e-book), I mean going to the bookcase to pick a book up to read, to have it there waiting for you. If I bought an e-book now, would it be there in ten years time? I am not too sure.... no I don't think e-books would ever be my thing (Nora 34)

Nora starts by rationalizing the need for new technology and simulated products in general. She can understand and narrate the reasons why a technology is there, but she also questions if it is the right technology. For Nora the function of a book is in the practices she has learnt to apply to its consumption. For her the knowledge function, or content of the book does not have the same value as the object associations, the sheer physical allure she has with the artefact and its consumption rituals. It is her physical interaction with the object that matters to her. It is the consumption ritual of going to a bookcase and picking out a book that defines its possession value. In the second part of her verbatim, Nora too narrates her concerns about agency, authority and power over simulated possessions. She too feels disempowered by technology and dismisses simulated objects as possessions.

Consumer technologies are aimed at consumer empowerment, but in narrative after narrative this notion of empowerment kept emerging as a paradox associated with simulation technologies. Most informants 'really liked' the idea of simulated consumables, at the same time considered them to be fickle and non-permanent. Many were found replacing longstanding tangible possessions with simulated objects, learning the new consumption practices and engendering new rituals, but at the same time were also concerned about their own agency and authority over these new virtual possessions.

Virtual Collections: Self-extension through possessions is often manifested in collections. Belk (1995) defines a collection as a construct, as the practice of acquisition and completion of a set of related items. He also notes that it has been

viewed as a compensatory behaviour for the completion of self; the completion of a collection connotes a sense of closure, a complete self. A general broadening of the conceptualization of collectibles (Belk, et.al. 1991) has resulted in almost anything becoming collectible. It is quite common to find consumers with sizeable self-defining collections of newspaper clippings, letters, greeting cards and music. In this section I look at virtual replacements of such collectibles.

It became apparent early on that many participants were experimenting with new simulation technologies, and using their computers as a platform for collection, parallel to or in addition to other platforms of collection in their lives. Sarah, for instance, was a true collector at heart. She collected personal memorabilia all her adult life: postcards, letters, envelopes in which they came, newspaper clippings, calendar pictures, dried flowers, Christmas ornaments. She had her husband build two large sheds in her backyard to house those collections. She learnt to use a computer at 40, and soon started her collections in cyberspace as well.

Soon after purchasing her own computer, Sarah had it upgraded by adding a secondary hard disk as well as a DVD writer to accommodate the archive that she accumulated on a daily basis. For Sarah, the CME was just an extension of her physical world. She performed the same functions of clipping, saving and collecting on her computer that she did in her physical world. Among all my informants, she possessed the biggest collections, in both tangible and virtual forms. With less than two years of computer usage, she had two hard-disks in her computer as well as a stack of backup disks of her clippings and collections.

Why and how an object assumes the significance to be 'collectible' for a consumer is a complex process and Belk (1995) argues that such object associations can often be perceptual distortions. However, personal artefacts like letters have always been

cherished as possessions, and private collections of letters and greeting cards often become family heirlooms, at times even turning into public exhibits.

When these hand written letters are replaced by electronic messaging and emails, their value as a collectible may become questionable. My informant Jane belonged to a generation that grew up with computers, but came from a literary minded family. She expressed her mixed emotions about the validity of electronic messaging:

Letters and cards – the real ones, each one is different, the way it is written, the way it's folded, the whole deal. I mean my grandfather used thick yellow ruled paper and a real ink pen to write personal letters – now that's class, My aunt Ruby used creamish scented paper and she would always fold the paper in a way that crease was between the lines, I mean getting those letters you know, you can tell by looking at the envelope what it says.These days? Well they look the same, email and things, I mean you see them on screen, and if you want you print them, but then it all turns out the same isn't it, I mean it's the same like your bank statement and holiday brochure – to me it is a lot mechanical in many ways. (Jane 23)

This is a multi-layered verbatim. In the first part Jane distinguishes between electronic and traditional letters. To her it was the physical attributes of the letter that made a big impact; choice of the paper, pen, envelope, its calligraphy, all were the ingredients that went a long way in establishing its emotional significance. Her verbatim does not have any reference to the content, but delves deep into the person and object associations based on physical properties of the object. In the second part of her verbatim she contrasts electronic mail with hand written letters and argues that because of the lack of unique physical attributes, electronic mails could not become collectible. For her, the possession and collection value of an object is determined by its physical attributes which can not be transferred to the realm of the virtual.

None of the participants reported any personal emotional ties to e-mails or e-cards. It may appear that for many consumers the collectible value of a personal possession stems more from its aesthetic and material nature than from its semiotic potential, and that emotions invested in objects originate primarily from their physical existence.

Sarah, who considered herself a real world person, was equally found collecting in her cyber-world. Her reasons for preferring tangible cards and letters over e-cards were as follows:

(Cards) they are works of art – aren't they, well at least some of them are. And then you never feel like tearing one up and tossing in the bin like you do with an e-card. Well there are practicalities, like only so much you can keep in your in-box, whatever, but what I am saying is that it would be much easier to delete an e-card from someone special than the real one. (Sarah)

In this narrative Sarah compares e-cards to paper cards and finds two shortcomings. First she thinks of paper cards as works of art. Although she does not elaborate on why she thought so, for her, the physical presence of a card has an element of emotional attachment; it is emotionally difficult for her to destroy or dispose of her greeting cards. The second shortcoming is their lack of ownership and permanence; she thinks she does not own the cards she receives, but some other entity (company) in cyberspace does. She thinks that because she does not have a permanent title to them, these e-cards are easier to destroy. Once again this view resonates with similar recurring themes of lack of ownership and permanence of these simulated possessions.

Like many other self-defining possessions, greeting cards also have rituals of possession and consumption attached to them. Jack describes his rituals in the following verbatim:

Seems like the time has shortened, you know, I mean e-card, you receive it, and before long it is gone. I mean some companies give you fifteen days, others a month. A real card, I mean you get it, then if it is important then it stays on the TV for a while, then perhaps go alongside the other cards on the shelf – it might be years before it is 'deleted' (gestures). Now here's a thought – I mean, now, look at my daughter's case – I remember before she left for college, she had hundred cards on the wall, first birthday up. I bet you ask her now how many e-cards does she have saved now. (Jack)

There are a number of issues at play here. First, Jack comments on the ephemeral nature of virtual consumables, and contrasts it against the permanence of material objects. To him the non-permanence of a virtual consumable reduces its possession and collection potential. He then applies a number of distinctions to the 'real card' – that it

can be displayed, placed at various places and stored till a planned 'deletion' is executed – all of which portray the control element of possessions.

Newspaper clippings with a personal tie have always been a collectible, and most consumers would have a clip file containing such mementos of the past. Newspaper clippings of personal significance are tangible manifestations of self presentation, and would usually become part of a personal collection. With the advent of new media technologies cyberspace has become the publishing house of the 'newsworthy'. Schau and Gilly (2003) claim that in cyberspace, '*we are what we post*'. However, for many informants such self-presentation in cyberspace had little collectible value. John was one of the more mature informants. He was an avid angler and frequented the lakes on weekends. His view of cyber-presentations was as follows:

No you don't, I think you don't, I mean when your name with a picture appears in a paper, you cut it out, show it round and save it for posterity's sake. I am sure everybody does name and a picture on a website – what do you do with it? take a printout?, and tell you friends..... I mean I remember when Midland Post printed the story about me landing that fish, that monster pike, everybody in town knew it. That was in the eighties you know, we didn't have computers then. I step out in the morning and Mr. James from across the street howlers 'great catchin' Andy'. Now I land a 50 pounder, it's been on several websites, and all I got was a couple of emails..... no, I don't think it's the same, I would much rather have a teeny snippet in the daily. (John)

This verbatim is quite detailed if somewhat self explanatory. It contrasts a local mode of public presentation with a cyber-global, and claims that the self relevance of local publishing is far greater than that of the global in cyberspace. John does not consider cyber-publication of his feat collectible, and claims that for him local, grounded publication is still more significant.

Music Collections: Shankar (1999) holds that music and its collection have been established means of creation of a profound sense of self. Because of its seamless, geographically unbounded interconnectivity, the CME has lately become a potent platform for music collection and consumption. Beyond collection and consumption,

consumers use CME for determination, negotiation and subversion of meanings of cultural products like music (Taylor et. al. 2002). As a polysemic revolutionary sign of music collection, distribution and consumption, Napster has received ample attention in the literature (Giesler and Pohlmann 2002). Molteni and Ordanini (2003) argue that in terms of acquisition and collection of music, CME only acts as a facilitator.

Since the shape of music collections is technology dependant, and has been changing regularly, I found the shape and form informants' music collections reflected their age. While some older music collectors had cabinets full of 33 RPM records, tape-spools and their associated paraphernalia, others harboured stacks of cassettes. Young adults were found with racks full of CD's and the younger still felt cool only while carrying 1,000 songs on their iPods.

Reflections on virtual collections: Belk 1990 points out that physical possessions like collections, as tangible manifestations of identity, and as a part of one's physical environment, are sources of meaning, creating a sense of past. It is evident from the data and interpretations presented above that intangible possessions and collections, such as pictures, letters, songs and cards on a hard disk, do not necessarily comport the same potential as the tangible. Seemingly, such simulated consumables do not have the same possession and collection value for consumers.

Since simulated consumables and possessions do not have the same consumption meanings, the two types of collection seem not to rival each other at all. However, predictably, in these transitional times consumers are neither pure materialists nor entirely digital. The two types of possessions and collections do vie for consumers' emotional attachment as well as time. I asked Sarah, whose case has been detailed earlier, how her collections in CME had affected her collections of the real and tangible. Her reflection conveys the true impact consumption in cyberspace has had:

“Well, I didn’t realize it before, but now when you ask me, I have packed and stacked a lot the stuff lately”. (Sarah, 40)

It is interesting to note that although consumers have many concerns about the consumption and collection potential of simulations, they are still ‘packing and stacking’ years of emotional investment into tangible collections, and replacing it with immersion into a mediated environment. Although simulations may not replace tangible possessions yet, such repositioning of emotional attachment and energy in cyberspace is perhaps the beginning of consumers’ quest to create a new sense of identity and past.

Virtual possessions – some paradoxical themes: In reflecting the self-extension potential of simulated products, four somewhat paradoxical etic themes emerged. This chapter concludes with considering each of them in turn.

Longevity: As a temporal dimension of possessions – longevity of possession is a value determinant. Strahilevitz and Loewenstein (1998) hold that the length of ownership is a determinant of the self-extension potential of a possession, such that the longer we own, control and possess an object, the more it becomes ‘me’ (Kliene, Kliene III and Allen 1995). Because of constant revision and upgrade of the technological order, many informants thought that simulated replacements of consumables may not have sufficient longevity. Many seemed extremely wary of the fact that the constant changes in the technological environment may limit their access to their virtual possessions in future, and thus resisted major emotional investments in such simulated possessions.

Forced Disposition: Disposition of a virtual possession necessitated by the demands of changes in technological order was another paradoxical theme. Even though many of my informants upgraded their computer systems routinely in order to hold on to their virtual possessions, there were times when they were forced to abandon and start afresh.

Such disposition may appear to be voluntary, but in reality was occasioned more by the technological environment than by consumers' intention. Examples of self restoration after such complex voluntary but enforced disposition were apparent in the scenarios where younger members in a family adapted to CD-ROMs in lieu of books or digital pictures in lieu of photos. The friction and anxiety of the senior members of the family – who continually strove to hold on to the familiar but outdated modes – was apparent in their rejection of the newer form of possessions.

Objectification and exhibition: Possessions which can be socially exhibited contribute more towards self-extension than those which can not. Where many of my informants accepted virtual possessions in lieu of the tangible, they did acknowledge that the change in form from tangible to virtual altered the social visibility of their possessions. Since most self-extending possessions are social and cultural exhibitions, dematerialization presents a paradox by altering the social visibility of a possession, and thus also dictates its role in self-extension.

Duplication / multiplicity: Originality and authenticity are crucial value determinants of a possession or collection. Many of my informants realized that they did not have ultimate control over their virtual possessions to establish either their originality or authenticity. For instance an e-book or a digital photograph can have multiple copies. Consumers are free to circulate such virtual consumables, and thus the notion of originality and authenticity does not hold. This theme too emerged as an indicative of paradoxes associated with consumption in cyberspace.