The Gift in Cyberspace

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**Abstract:** With the continuing movement of social life into new types of places such as cyberspace the function and meaning of gift-exchange has emerged as being an important anthropological tool for the investigation of social relations online. In cyberspace several fascinating questions come into light, for example: what kinds of gifts are exchanged in cyberspace; how are these gifts exchanged there and what does the exchange of gifts in cyberspace signify? An analysis of the ‘gift of time’ is particularly pertinent when investigating friendship in virtual communities because gift exchange in cyberspace can be related to notions of reciprocity and trust. For example, my own ethnographic research in Cybertown, a virtual community on the Internet, suggests that one important concept for friendship in Cybertown is the exchange of the ‘gift of time’, and highlights its role in the creation of trust and reciprocity. In explaining this phenomenon, this paper examines the function and meaning of gift exchange in Cybertown in relation to contemporary theoretical notions of the gift, explains what kinds of obligations gifts engender and what role gift practices play in creating networks of friendship.

**Keywords:** cyberspace, friendship, gift exchange, gift of time, reciprocity

This article explores the meaning of gift-exchange in an Internet-based community called Cybertown. Although Cybertown might on the surface appear to be simply another text-based fantasy role-playing game that allows multiple users to play together simultaneously, the reality is very different. During the three years of my ethnographic fieldwork I came to understand that the physical reality of the environment is often less important than the social interactions that are played out between the individuals who live within it. If, as Low (1996: 384) suggests, there are many different ways to theorise cities, then in the course of my own fieldwork I have investigated a new kind of city on the Internet, the virtual city, one in which the everyday spaces of living and working are reproduced within technologically enabled landscapes of meaning (for a more in depth discussion see Carter, 2004b). As with other cities, life in Cybertown is experienced on many levels, for example in engagement with either the city or its residents, and can be experienced through distinctions between the public and private domain. These distinctions are both explicit and implicit; they are explicit in that geographically and spatially the city landscapes can be grouped into those public meeting places—the Plaza, the beach, the Fleamarket, etc., and the suburbs containing private residents’ homes—and implicit in that the distinction between public and private domains has important implications for both notions of community and the development of social relationships (particularly friendship) in Cybertown. One of the key themes to arise out of my ethnography was an understanding of the performance and meaning of friendship in Cybertown which has merited more in depth discussion in earlier papers (Carter,
However, the main subject of this article is an investigation of how gift exchanges impact on social relations online. Gift exchange practices play an important part in both community and friendship formation, and the results can be seen in an increased social capital for the residents. The notional gift in cyberspace is an interesting artefact because of the nature of the place, and the lack of physicality. But the gift of time has particular value for friendship formation, negotiation, and maintenance because giving up of ‘free’ time is often seen as a gift exchanged between friends, a subject I return to later in this paper. Interestingly, the topic of time frequently emerges out of other issues that anthropologists are dealing with in our everyday social worlds, yet its measurement and understanding can be problematic:

Like all other discourses, those about time themselves take temporal form. We cannot analyze or talk about time without using media already encoded with temporal meanings nor, in the course of doing so, can we avoid creating something that takes the form of time. (Munn, 1992: 94).

However, first I examine a range of contemporary theories of Western notions of friendship (Allan 1989, 1996; Bell and Coleman 1999; Jerrome, 1984; Pahl 2000; Rawlins 1983, 1992). This examination establishes an understanding of the nature of friendship before moving on to determine the nature of online friendship. Here I tease out some of the general themes associated with friendship as a relational and contextual notion: its nature as voluntary, informal and private; ideas of trust, reciprocity, intimacy and disclosure; and friendship as sanctuary or as a mechanism of social cohesion. The latter is explained by Pahl (2000: 5) in terms of friendship as a particularly meaningful type of ‘social glue’. I also introduce Giddens’ (1991, 1999) notion of the free-floating pure relationship, and offer Rawlins’ (1983, 1992) interactional analysis of dialectical friendship as a counterpoint to Giddens’ work.

Continuing this theme, and developing a more in-depth analysis of friendship in Cybertown, I explore how the complex interaction between trust, intimacy, disclosure and time unfolds as friendships develop there. In part, this is achieved by examining the work of other Internet researchers (Clark 1998; Parks and Floyd 1996; Whitty 2002). Explaining that time spent online is an important factor in the development of sustainable relationships I assess whether Giddens’ ideas about pure relationships are the most relevant to an analysis of relationships in Cybertown. In addition, I describe and analyse the unique friend-finding expeditions that I experienced in Cybertown. One important concept for friendship in Cybertown is the exchange of gifts, and these can take the form of gifts of time or gifts of objects and artefacts. Therefore, the next section investigates the function and meaning of gift exchange in Cybertown.

**Where Are You When You Are Online?**

I just am there…I don’t really think about it I just am…sometimes if I have to answer the door I leave Cybertown for a bit or make a coffee but I go straight back…I don’t think about a boundary [Acamar].

As Grimshaw reminds us, a particular kind of vision or revelation is required of the anthropologist in the field, they have to ‘learn to “see”, to penetrate beneath the surface appearance of things’ (2000: 45). On the Internet this ‘seeing’ is also about learning how to be embodied in cyberspace, or as Markham (1998: 18) explains ‘learning how to move, see and hear’. Acamar’s response was typical of most residents when I asked the question—where are you when you are online? Basically, they simply recognised that they were there in Cybertown without wondering how they achieved it. Like Pollux who explained, ‘it just happens really’,
and many of the residents were puzzled as to why I was even asking. These included Keid who said, ‘it is an odd question, as when I’m using a PC I am still me’ and continued with their own question, ‘when you are watching the TV, do you become someone/where else?’ My answer was of course, ‘no I don’t’, but still what did come through was a shared recognition that some kind of movement across an electronic frontier between real life and Cybertown was occurring. People were definitely ‘going there’, and at the same time were dissolving any boundaries between their on-line and off-line personas.

Cybertown: The Importance of Friendship

For the majority of Cybertown inhabitants, friendship is very important. Indeed, much of the ethos of Cybertown appears to be based upon ideas about friendship (Carter 2004a, 2005). In order to gain a fuller understanding of the strength and persistence of notions of friendship and friendliness in Cybertown, I began by examining the conversations of its residents in which they often talk about being friendly, or meeting new friends. For example one day on the Plaza I started talking to a resident called Jabu, who took the opportunity to explain how friendly Cybertown is:

Cybertown has enabled me to meet, interact, and become firm friends with an amazing amount of people from all over the world and from all walks of life. I am always looking for the opportunity of making friends and getting to know people more. Cybertown gives me a place for having fun and doing that. That is why I always say ... be active and meet people... you never know who you may meet or how valuable a friendship you will make unless you try.

This tendency to highlight friendship or friendliness is also reflected in the 86 interviews that I conducted in Cybertown as an adjunct to my ethnography. These are extremely interesting since in them every single resident used the adjective friendly or some derivative, whether describing themselves as friendly, Cybertown as a friendly place, or even talking about having a friendly conversation. In fact when asked why they lived in Cybertown, more than two-thirds (71%) of my informants gave only one of two reasons. The first was making new friends, and the second was meeting established friends. Other reasons included the great community spirit, gaining knowledge about other cultures, having fun, and chatting. In addition, many Cybertown inhabitants also pride themselves that Cybertown is ‘more friendly than in everyday life’. This theme of friendship with its warm comforting overtones runs deeply through Cybertown philosophy.

Having discovered the joys of friendship, many Cybertown inhabitants wish to share this discovery with others. As a result, many Cybertown inhabitants actively encourage people to immigrate (join/subscribe) so that they too can experience the wonderful, warm, and friendly atmosphere in Cybertown. For example, one-third of the residents that I interviewed had been encouraged to immigrate by friends. Many of these in turn invite other friends or mention Cybertown when travelling around the Internet. One example is Acamar, who not only lived in Cybertown but also had a large circle of friends in a different virtual community. When that community closed down Acamar persuaded 17 of her friends to join her in Cybertown, and they duly moved in and put roots down in the same neighbourhood.

This belief in the ‘friendliness’ of Cybertown works in other ways too: not only are people being encouraged to immigrate by their friends who already live in Cybertown, but also any new immigrants or ‘newbies’ are actively encouraged to be friendly, an important and positive social accomplishment, and to make friends. This was how I
met Jabu on the Plaza as he was there looking for new friends. In my own case it was Zosma who taught me how to make friends in Cybertown.

Despite these explanations, it may be that the notion of friendship itself is changing. Anderson’s (1999) account describes friendship as becoming diluted as it is increasingly pushed out of the social institutions such as business and more often seen as belonging to recreation. While Anderson (1999) sees this as being detrimental, others perceive it to be a positive attribute, suggesting that one of the defining characteristics of friendship is an eagerness among friends to give up their free (recreational) time to each other in the absence of external pressures or constraints (Asher et al. 1996). This giving up of free time is seen as a gift exchanged between friends. Furthermore, this notion of friendship being mediated in the absence of external constraints seems a popular one. For example, when Jerome suggests that ‘friendship offers relief from the strains of other role performance’ (1984: 696), she explains how friendship has become a luxury whose benefits are social as well as personal. These social benefits are explained in part by Pahl, who sees the function of friendship as acting as an important ‘social glue’ (2000: 5). Yet others, for example Bell and Coleman (1999) and Paine (1999), suggest that by teaching us how others see us, friendships teach us how to view ourselves. Again, this is a notion Giddens expands on in his analysis of the pure relationship, defined as ‘The expectation of intimacy provides perhaps the closest links between the reflexive project of the self and the pure relationship (1991: 94). Thus, so far, we can see that friendships in general provide informal emotional support, advice and material help, and yet it remains true that as Allan says, friendship is ‘essentially a personal matter’ (1996: 107). It is neither formal nor institutionalised.

However, in practice not all of these elements are present in every friendship:

While there are various things that it might be helpful to know about friendship, it is only through experiencing friendship that we can begin to properly understand, appreciate and practice being a friend (Smith and Smith 2002).

There are instead a range of qualities that are open to individual negotiation and appraisal. For all individuals, ‘each of our friendships is seen by us as touching the self in a unique way’ (Paine 1999: 44). Friendship is contextual, and consequently someone we acknowledge as a friend in one setting may be denied the label in another, an important issue when looking at moving online Cybertown friendships into offline settings. This is because movement between different social settings may disrupt the inherent qualities of friendships. To further complicate the matter, friendships not only mature over time but they sometimes also ‘run their course’ (Allan 1996: 95), and generally, changes in friendship ties are routine and normal. In addition, what seems to be implicit within a traditional definition of friendship is the notion that there should be no sense of social hierarchy between friends; it is essentially a relationship ‘of equality’ (Allan 1989: 20, 1996; see also Giddens 1991). As I will explain shortly, not everyone agrees with this notion of equality, for example, Rawlins (1983, 1992) suggests instead that equality or balance is impossible to achieve. Because of this, friendships remain in a constant state of turmoil.

Friendship in Cybertown is mediated in an environment of reciprocity and exchange of trust and confidences that are constantly internally evaluated, and that it is the desire to maintain friendship, understood as the desire for intimacy and emotional communication, that fuels this obligation. Giddens addresses this when he highlights the significance of trust, intimacy and friendship as central objects of analysis when explaining the transformation of contemporary social life. Suggesting that intimacy is replacing the old social ties,
Giddens explains how the transformation of intimacy is affecting ties of friendship and uses the notion of ‘pure relationship’ to elaborate on these changes:

I mean by this a relationship based upon emotional communication, where the rewards derived from such communication are the main basis for the relationship to continue. I don’t mean a sexually pure relationship. Also I don’t mean anything that exists in reality. I’m talking of an abstract idea … emotional communication or intimacy is becoming the key to what they are all about. (Giddens 1999: 61; see also 1991: 88–98)

The literature on friendships in cyberspace (see for example, Clark 1998; Parks and Floyd 1996) has not yet progressed to the point where we are in no doubt about the specific social tasks involved in making and keeping those relationships. However, my analysis of Cybertown identifies important requirements in the negotiation of successful online friendships, particularly the requirement for both trust and time. My work also illustrates how those relationships can be sustained and moved into other social settings, usually offline.

Maintaining Friendships in Cybertown

Making friends in Cybertown tends to be a very proactive experience rather than a reactive one. For example, in offline life as we move between the different social settings of work, home, recreation, the doctor’s surgery or shopping, etc., we meet people but do not tend to actively consider them as possible friends. Yet in Cybertown, the residents learn to regard everyone sharing the same social space as a potential friend, and often go online specifically to meet someone to become friends with. This may be partly because all spaces in Cybertown appear to be social spaces. In contrast, not all of the spaces we occupy offline are social spaces. Some, as Augé (1995) describes, are ‘non-spaces’ because they are interstitial places that attain their identity from being between other significant and meaningful social spaces (for a more in-depth discussion of interstitial spaces see Vincent, 1990). Examples that Augé (1995) give include airports and interstate highways. This notion of interstitial spaces feeds back into discussions about the dichotomies between real/virtual and space/place. The privileging of spatial practice in the construction of place can be inverted to explain how the absence of spatial practice leads to these interstitial places. Fletcher (1998) suggests that this absence of spatial practice produces an echo of the virtual in offline spaces; where virtual space is not a real place but instead is a space you move through to reach another place (somewhat similar to Augé’s (1995) notion of non-place). In Cybertown, these spaces are not moved through physically; instead, at the push of a button, movement between one social place and another is accomplished. It was with one such push of a button that I happened upon acamar one day decorating her home with a new painting—about which she was very enthusiastic—it was a gift from a friend.

‘Do you think it looks better here or there?’ said Acamar, one day as I called at her home to visit. She was hanging a painting on the wall above the fireplace, where it could be seen if you sat in the Dragon Chair. The living room in her six-roomed house was full of objects that she had bought in the Mall, but this painting had a special value because it was one of many gifts given by her friends. ‘Yes I like it there, it makes the room feel like home’, she said, ‘are you coming to the Mall? I need to buy a gift for Canopus, I know she likes those little flying butterflies’. Strictly speaking, Acamar was in her 3D home, manipulating images on the computer screen with her mouse. By doing this, she could position her objects exactly where she wanted. Not only that but she could label her objects too. For example, her painting might have been sold in the Mall under the title ‘The Sunflowers’, but when displayed in her home it was labelled ‘gift from Canopus’. Although these labels can only be seen by moving the mouse cursor over an
object and then right-clicking, visitors to your home regularly peruse them (excerpt from field notes, September 2004).

This example illustrates how for *Acamar*, the desire to maintain friendship with *Canopus* fuelled the obligation to exchange gifts. In Cybertown friendship is not confined to the exchange of trust and confidences, there is also a thriving practice of gift giving as that between *Acamar* and *Canopus*. This is particularly interesting given current and historical anthropological arguments that debate the importance of gifts in establishing and maintaining social relationships. In Cybertown, the gifts are at the same time ‘virtual’ with no monetary or commercial value outside of Cybertown, and ‘real’ in that they are highly visible and recognisable signs or tokens of friendship. What is interesting is the perceived value or meaning assigned to these gifts by Cybertown residents. These gifts are highly valued and treasured by both the givers and the receivers, their value being fundamental to the friendships that they support and define. Gift giving can also be very visible, and gifts received are often ‘on show’ as in the example above, providing an outward display of friendship. The first point I am making here is that in Cybertown, gift exchange assists in creating and maintaining the conditions for reciprocity and friendship. The second point is that friendship and community have similar roles in terms of making people feel secure. Many of the attributes and meanings applied to these two concepts are thus similar, acting to reinforce ties between individuals. Furthermore, the values and meanings given to gifts in Cybertown are the same as those assigned to gifts offline, reinforcing the strong relationship between online and offline life.

The giving of gifts is often associated with an unselfish action, and gifts are given without the expectation of receiving something of corresponding value in return. Malinowski (1922) initially employed this concept of the ‘pure gift’ in anthropological debate, an altruistic exchange where little or nothing is returned or reciprocated, a private gesture. He argued that men in the Trobriand Islands make free or pure gifts of magic to their sons (1922: 177–79). In contrast, Mauss (1950) suggested that a truly free gift could not create obligations or connections between individuals, explaining how while ‘in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily’ (Mauss 1950: 2–3).

Leaving the notion of the ‘pure gift’ aside for the moment, gift exchange has often been described as being associated with reciprocity, equivalence and obligations. Mauss’ (1950) foundational essay, *The Gift*, is an exploration of the function and meaning of gift exchange in non-western, or as they were often referred to at the time, primitive societies. He argued that the meaning of the gift is not a product of economic relations (see also Gregory 1982, 1983). Gregory emphasised that gifts and commodities create different kinds of obligations, and therefore different kinds of relationships between individuals. Instead, for Mauss, gift exchange demonstrates the connections between individuals and others and between individuals and things that are created by the transfer of possessions. He identified three obligations in exchange—giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Where these exchanges take the form of gifts, Mauss also established the notion of the spirit in the gift, that he named after the Maori *hau*, explaining how all objects contain *hau*, the spirit of the donor. In this context, giving an object to someone means giving a piece of oneself. According to Maori conventions the *hau* is the source of exchange rather than the gift in which it resides, ‘in reality, it is the *hau* that wishes to return to its birthplace, to the sanctuary of the forest and the clan and to the owner’ (Mauss 1950: 15).

The substantivists who later drew on Mauss’ work to formulate an economic theory of modes of exchange for Western societies included Polanyi (1957) and Sahlins (1972) for
whom the gift is the origin of the social contract and the end of war, meant to create peace and bonds of trust (Sahlins, 1972: 183). Sahlins also rejected the notion of the hau as the spirit of the donor, arguing instead that Mauss had wrongly translated the term, and that hau signifies the interest accumulated by the gift that must be returned to the original giver. Sahlins stipulated there is really a range of reciprocity, with generalised, balanced, and negative as examples of this range. At one end of this range are examples of pure gifts between close kin (sometimes known as altruistic gifts), and at the other a more economically rational practice of exchange where manipulating the system is the aim. This latter has been explored by writers in the late soviet and post-Soviet social systems where blat is the translation of unlawful use of personal influence to access resources (Nazpary 2002: 77; see also Hivon 1994; Ledeneva 1998).

The most problematic area in gift giving is the notion of the pure gift, where no reciprocity is incurred or triggered. The pure gift is characterised by the fact that it does not create personal connections and obligations between the donor and the receiver (Laidlaw 2000). This has been explored in the medical arena where Titmuss (1970) characterised blood donorship as ‘creative altruism’. He claimed that the main reason for voluntarily donating blood was an altruistic desire to help others. Others have disagreed with the possibility that such a thing as creative altruism among blood donors exists (Badcock 1986; Rapport and Maggs 2002). More recently Copeman has incorporated notions of the gift of time into their examination of blood donation, where the donor gives their own time (in blood donation) in order for others to receive the ‘precious gift of time’, an extension of life through the receiving of blood transfusions (2005: 473). Indeed, Copeman also recognises the gift of time inherent in the treatment regime itself where Doctors receive ‘time out’ from their normal hectic routine (2005: 482). This has important implications for my own research, where these notions of the ‘gift of time’ can be fed back into wider discussions about modernity and the routinisation and universalisation of time.

More generally, Derrida (1992, 1995) claimed that the genuine gift is impossible because from the moment an object is recognised by the recipient as a gift, it becomes weighted with obligations, and is no longer a pure gift. In other words the genuine gift must exist outside of the dichotomy of giving and taking. It can also never be recognised as a gift, where even a simple ‘thank you’ can annul the genuine gift by acknowledging its presence. In other words saying ‘thank you’ removes the obligation of indebtedness provoked by the gift, and draws the gift into the cycle of giving and taking (Derrida 1989: 149). In what Bell calls the ‘logic of reciprocity’ (1991a: 253), he deduces that where there is a stable exchange relationship between two parties, and where each party prefers to maintain that relationship, then both parties must be satisfied with the bargain (1991a: 253). Clarifying the difference between a gift and a commodity he states, ‘a gift implies an intention to develop or maintain a social relationship between parties to the exchange’ (Bell 1991b: 156, original italics) even though sometimes these exchanges are ceremonial, involving items of little value (Bell 1991b: 155).

In Cybertown the central theme running through these accounts of the gift come together on several counts: first the mutual recognition of the gift by the donor and the recipient; second, the demand for reciprocity and equivalence; and third, the obligation incurred through the exchange of gifts (re)affirms friendship between individuals. This obligation emerges from the desire to maintain a friendship because ‘a free gift makes no friends’ (Laidlaw 2000: 617). The nature of the gift in Cybertown has a variety of forms that include giving (virtual) objects or artefacts, providing help, or giving one’s own companionship and time. Relations are created
and maintained through giving gifts, and also gifts are sometimes given specifically in order to create these relations. Crucially, time itself is an important factor in the complex interaction between trust, intimacy and disclosure, where time can relate to the amount of time spent online. Furthermore, the gift of time has an important role to play in the construction and maintenance of Cybertown friendships.

**The Gift of Time**

Time spent with friends in Cybertown is managed in different ways. As a global community that spans several time zones, meetings with friends physically living on the other side of the globe have to be carefully planned. Zosma was one resident who took her friendships in Cybertown extremely seriously and invested a lot of time and effort in them. We were talking one Wednesday in her Cybertown home, and she was relating a meeting with Gacrux the night before. Knowing that Zosma was from Denmark and Gacrux was from Texas I asked when they met, ‘oh last night’ she explained, ‘I set my alarm for three in the morning because that was the only time Gacrux could make it’. Cybertown time is set at Pacific time (GMT minus eight hrs), and Denmark is at GMT plus one hour, therefore at the time of their meeting it was six in the evening for Gacrux. For my own part, I would regularly go to Cybertown at about six in the morning (GMT) to find Acamar who was also from the US, when it would be late evening for her (10 p.m.) and so there was always a good chance of seeing her. This pattern was typical for many residents, because time spent in Cybertown is a finite resource and spending time on developing and maintaining networks reflects the high value of friendship.

This issue of time being both valuable and a finite resource feeds back into general debates about the western concept of time. In pre-modern societies, time was defined by the rhythms of nature. This changed with the invention of the mechanical clock. The clock was the first machine that separated time from human events. Mumford (1934) contrasts the differences between what he calls organic time and mechanical time. The first represents the natural rhythm of the seasons and the birth, growth, death and decay of humankind. The second represents an artificial time that has routinised and subjugated social life to the rule of the clock. Eating is accomplished at prescribed mealtimes, not as a result of hunger. Sleeping, working, educating and leisure all have their little time slot. Most importantly, as Harvey’s (1989) analysis illustrates, the mechanical clock not only constructs time as linear, but also as universal, with time across the globe being synchronised. This was uniquely demonstrated during the global celebrations for the new millennium, but is also evident in the example that I drew on earlier—in Cybertown everyone is aware of time as being routinised (hence the need to ‘organise’ time to be with friends) and the universal nature of time (through their knowledge and understanding of time-zones).

As a result, finding time to be together is an important issue in friendship relations. It is not enough to rely only on chance encounters because the chance encounter versus the arranged meeting can be equated with what can be seen as two different types of time. I call these ‘accidental time’ or ‘intentional time’, not because of a set of absolute differences between the two, but to differentiate the amount of effort involved in gifting them. Of the two, accidental time does not signify as being a highly valued element of an effort-bargain as is illustrated by one of my own experiences. When I first lived in Cybertown, I would regularly check to see if anyone I knew was online with the intention of pursuing our relationship, and one of these was Phad whom I later got to know very well. But in the early days of
our relationship, he was quite difficult to pin down because he worked full-time and only managed to spend odd hours in Cybertown. I mentioned to Zosma how difficult it was to meet up and she explained:

But duty¹—you must go to his house and leave a message, then he will know you have been looking for him ... things are different here in Cybertown, you must not wait for things to happen—you must make things happen. If he doesn’t know you are looking for him, he won’t know that you want to be friends.

Outside of Cybertown, Phad and I might have exchanged addresses, phone numbers, or email addresses in order to keep in touch. In Cybertown, we did not do that because it is generally quite easy to find someone again. What this really illustrates is yet another difference in the mechanics or ‘cultural mores’ of meeting, making and maintaining friendship in Cybertown. Friendships there are pursued quite forcibly, with first the friend-finding expeditions, then the follow-up messages. When I use the term forcibly, I do not mean that friendship is forced on unwilling parties, rather that friendship is not left to chance. It is more calculated in the sense that residents actively work to expand their social networks rather than just relying on chance encounters and opportunistic meetings.

Not only is time spent with one another considered as a gift, but also the promise of time spent together; it is therefore important to recognise and acknowledge this time. For example, the time that I visited Acamar and found her hanging a picture, I was not invited; I checked the online citizens list to check she was home and then went to her house. It was a friendly visit, made with the aim of catching up on news and reacquainting myself with Acamar. If she had not been at home, I would have left a message in her inbox; she would then have known that I had invested time in our relationship thus inviting an equivalent response, perhaps by initially acknowledging my message and then later arranging a time to meet. In this respect messages might also be seen as gifts, resonating with Miller and Slater’s analysis of e-greetings cards in Trinidad as being in a ‘latent sense’ gifts since they both demand a response and create the conditions for reciprocity (2000: 57).

In addition to time and messages being seen as gifts, giving objects or artefacts is another important aspect of friendship in Cybertown. Like Mauss (1950) I was impressed by the sentiments of the Havamal, which stresses both the need to spend time and exchange presents with friends:

> You know, if you have a friend
> In whom you have confidence
> And if you wish to get good results
> Your soul must blend in with his
> And you must exchange presents
> And frequently pay him visits
> (Mauss, 1950: 2, quoting the Havamal).

**Gift Exchange in Cybertown**

The exchange of presents in Cybertown is in itself interesting because the objects and artefacts are themselves 3D (three-dimensional) representations of objects and artefacts that are generally used to decorate the 3D homes of residents, such as the painting given to Acamar by Canopus. They are not physically available or transferable outside of Cybertown. However, following Mauss (1950), what is transferable is the spirit of the gift; the obligation that the gift incurred to its donor is remembered. When we consider the gift of a ‘virtual’ painting given to Acamar by Canopus, we also know that it provoked the need to reciprocate by going to the Mall and getting a gift to give in return. However, the act of gift exchange does not end with the return gift because the memory, or story, or spirit of the gift remains, permanently on display in her online residence.

The label on the picture additionally tells part of the story of the history of the giver, so
that these stories are shared with the audience of others living in Cybertown. By focussing on the Maussian idea of the gift this can be read in a particular way: gifting is symbolic as well as physical. In other words, the giving of gifts is about establishing identity and maintaining social relations but it is also about remembering those social relations and the obligations incurred between individuals. Although the value of gifts is never discussed between friends it is necessary to come to an agreement on value, since any reciprocal exchange must reflect the value of the donor’s gift. If it does not reflect the value of the gift, it may be seen as rejection of the gift—and, more importantly, the rejection of the friendship.

In Cybertown there is not a huge divide between incomes that could lead to the creation of social divisions. Consequently, no one is too poor to buy gifts (this is made possible in Cybertown by the city’s economic system, in which all residents bank money daily for going there). Sometimes however, gifts are assigned a higher value because of the time and effort that has gone into their giving. For example, in her life outside of Cybertown Zosma is a graphic artist. Translating this skill into a usable commodity in Cybertown she designed paintings and sold them in the Mall. Sometimes she restricted these paintings to a small run of special issues, thus their rarity gave them a higher value. On one occasion, she presented one of these limited edition paintings to me as a gift, and I hung it in my online home. To me, as the recipient, this gift reflected the high esteem we shared, and the well-developed friendship that Zosma and I enjoyed. Although difficult to reciprocate with a gift of equal value, I did eventually receive her as a guest in my offline home in the UK, thus capping the value of her gift. While sitting side by side at my computer, we visited Cybertown together, greeting friends, and generally celebrating the movement of our friendship into an offline setting.

Conclusion

Gift practices in online communities are interesting due to the nature of the place, and the lack of physical presence. Nevertheless, anthropological theories about gift exchange, while primarily dealing with physical objects, may also be useful to help explain gift exchange in non-traditional settings. In particular, it is important to remember that Mauss’ seminal essay *The Gift*, drew attention also to the symbolic nature of the gift. The most modern technical societies are symbolically produced through notions of gift exchange and reciprocity. In my own research in Cybertown, I therefore explain how gift exchange practices can be related to issues of obligation, reciprocity, trust and friendship formation in online communities.

Similarly, the analysis presented in this article resonates with Gregory’s (1982, 1983) discussion of how gifts and commodities create different kinds of obligations, and thus different kinds of social relationships. The importance of time spent together and the efforts made to spend time with those located in different temporal zones neatly demonstrate that these considerations are central to the particular friendship obligations created between individuals in cyberspace. The weight accorded to the ‘gift of time’, demonstrates that gift exchange is emerging as an important anthropological tool for the investigation of friendships and other social relations online.

This paper has also explored several fascinating questions. What kinds of gifts are exchanged in cyberspace? How are these gifts exchanged there; and what does the exchange of gifts in cyberspace signify? As this article shows, gift exchange in cyberspace can be related to wider sociological and anthropological discussions of reciprocity and trust; and contemporary theoretical debates about pure relationships, social capital and community building. In conclusion, the ‘gift of time’ can be
fed back into wider discussions about modernity and the routinisation and universalisation of time. Indeed, the issue of time frequently fragments into all the other dimensions and topics anthropologists deal with in the social world. With the continuing transformation of social life yet more work on gift exchange and the gift of time is needed to help explain how norms of reciprocity, mediated through gift exchange practices might maintain the fundamental building blocks of social life such as families, communities and friendships.

Denise Maia Carter is one of the guest editors of this special edition, her biography can be found at the end of the editorial.

Note

1. Dutypigeon was my online name during my research. Here Zosma has shortened it to the more friendly ‘duty’.

References


