What Happens when a Cyberworld Ends? The case of There.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the first in a series presenting findings from a wider ethnography study of players from *There.com* and what they did when this virtual world closed on March 9th, 2010. Studies of online games and virtual worlds (or *cyberworlds,* as I prefer to call them) tend to focus in player activities during the time these spaces are open, assuming them as timeless places. *But what happens when a cyberworld ends? How do players react to its closure and what they do next?* Only a few scholars have investigated such critical events (Pearce 2009; Papargyris and Poulymenakou 2009; Consalvo and Begy 2012) and their findings suggest a determination by players to keep playing together after the closure. Players do not simply disperse and stop playing when a cyberworld ends but they actively work to form groups and relocate their activities elsewhere. I followed the movement of *There.com* players —or "thereians", as they refer to themselves— across various cyberworlds, social networks, and forums after *There.com* closed. They actively worked to keep together gathering in forums, creating *Facebook* groups, uploading videos on *YouTube,* and travelling to other cyberworlds such as *Second Life, Onverse, Kaneva, Twinity,* etc., trying to translate their play identities and activities in these new spaces. In this paper I will focus on the player responses to the *There.com* closure and what they did after the end of the world.

Keywords

Cyberworld, Cyberdiaspora, Cyberethnography, Death, Liminality.

INTRODUCTION

On March 9, 2010, the 3D social cyberworld *There.com* closed to the public. Michael Wilson, CEO of *There.com*, announced the closure a week before in a post submitted to the cyberworld's website. He stated that there just wasn't enough money to keep the world running and that Makena Technologies, the company behind *There*, was affected by the economical crisis. As Wilson said in this post: "While our membership numbers and the number of people in the world have continued to grow, there has been a marked decrease in revenue, which, in these economic times, is no surprise […] There is a business, and a business that can't support itself doesn't work". Many people were

outwardly enraged at the announcement of *There.com*'s closing, but there really wasn't much that could be done about it. Some players speculated on how to keep the world running, and offered ideas like making members pay per month to keep it all going. But the decision had already been taken and the world finally ended up closing down the announced date.

Players cited emotions such as shock, anxiety, anger and sadness to describe their feelings about the closure. They felt like they were losing something, their avatars, their friends, their objects, their houses: a community, an entire world. This world was not "virtual" at all. It was "in many ways as real as the 'real' world", as one informant said to me. The people players met there were very real and their feelings and reactions to the closure were very real too. This is why the term "virtual world" is not a good way to describe these spaces. They are "real" worlds, as real as the physical one (Boellstorff 2008; Pearce 2009; Kozinets 2010).

Cyberworld closures are nothing new.[1] *Habitat*, sometimes referred as the first graphical cyberworld, closed down in 1988. *Meridian 59* did it in 2000 and reopened in 2002 due to popular demand from their fans. *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* closed down in 2003, six months after they opened (Pearce 2009). *Earth and Beyond* did it in 2004. And *EA-land,* formerly known as *The Sims Online*, closed down in 2008. Although cyberworld closures are something players are experienced more and more, as these examples show, we have little empirical evidence regarding what people do after that. As Pearce (2009: 14) says, "With all the real and imagined success of MMOGs and MMOWs, there is another more somber side to this narrative: what happens when virtual worlds fail?" Consalvo and Begy (2012) observe that most of what we know about MMOG and cyberworld sunset[2] events has come from games journalism rather than scholarly studies. It is not strange thus that most studies of cyberworlds are about the activities and interactions between the inhabitants when the worlds are alive and running. But we do not know much about what happens when a cyberworld closes down. How users react to the closure and what they do next is the focus of this paper.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Virtual Worlds or Cyberworlds?
In this paper, I will use the term "cyberworlds" instead of "virtual worlds" and other confusing terms such as MMORGs, MMOWs or metaverses for various reasons. The first one is a wish to avoid the negative connotations that the term "virtual" inevitably carries with it. These connotations go back to the optical sense of "virtual", which refers to something double, an illusion, something fictive or nonexistent (Ryan 2001). As Malaby (2009: 145) points out, most scholars make use of the term "virtual worlds" because they acknowledge that this expression "currently enjoys precedence, despite the misleading suggestion that 'virtual' makes: that there is a clear separation of it from the 'real'". This is a clear sign that the term is not good enough to describe the type of experience users have in these spaces, an experience that is "real" and not "virtual" because "The people that we meet online are not virtual. They are real communities populated with real people […] These social groups have a 'real' existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior" (Kozinets 2010: 15).

The second reason is because the Greek prefix *cyber-* means *skilled in steering or governing* and therefore ideas of governance and control are central from the very origin of the term. It is important to keep this meaning in mind because cyberworlds are businesses governed by companies that have total control over almost everything that happens inside. They can change, close and sometimes re-open them as much as they want. Virtual worlds thus are "cyber" rather than "virtual" because the control and the effects and consequences it provokes in our final experience are very "real", as for example those related with the end of a cyberworld and the way it is announced and executed by its owners.

This idea of control is also related to the software that is the basis of the cyberworld and which allows the user to do certain things but not others. Even in the more open, free and co-created worlds like *Second Life* —which is supposed to be limited only by the imagination of their players, as its slogan clearly says: "Your World, Your Imagination"— there is a hegemonic governance framework and an implicit policy that in practice translates as: "You can do anything you want, unless we decide you can't." (Pearce 2009: 34). Thus, the software and the way it is implemented and governed by the owners of the cyberworld dictates what we can do and what we can't.

A third reason why I prefer the term cyberworld is because the term cyberspace had a sense of open space and conquering frontiers (Boym 2001: 349) and, in some sense, this is what I witnessed following the people from *There.com* and the flux of activity they developed after the closure of this particular cyberworld. These people traversed a vast part of cyberspace gathering in different websites and searching for a new cyberworld similar to *There*, exploring and conquering digital frontiers around the net. But even the experience of entering a single cyberworld has this sense of space exploration related to the term cyberspace, a sense that terms like "virtual" do not have.

Method

This paper is the first in a series presenting findings from a wider ethnography study of players from *There.com* and what they did when this cyberworld closed on March 9th, 2010. Consequently with my use of the term "cyberworlds", for the reasons stated above, I prefer to use the term "cyberethnography" instead of "virtual ethnography" to describe the ethnography conducted on the Internet. This term goes beyond the negative connotations of the term "virtual" and assumptions like the necessity of face-to-face meetings in order to understand the "authentic" and "real" social experience, assumptions that make difficult a comprehension of Internet as a cultural context in its own right (Hine 2000; Boellstorff 2008). With respect to the prefix "cyber", the ethnographer, like the users, cannot do whatever he wants within cyberworlds since they are controlled and governed by the companies that own them. Ethnographers have to accept the rules of the software and their underlying values, which will be different in each cyberworld.

The whole project can be described as a "multi-sited cyberethnography" (Pearce 2009) since it involves ethnographic explorations in more than one digital place, closely following a process of cyberdiaspora originated and developed within the Internet. Because of the nature of this research, which covers the process of a cyberdiaspora within the Internet, Marcus´s "multi-sited ethnography" can be adapted in order to "examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities" (Marcus 1995: 96) through different digital places, not only cyberworlds but also social networks, forums, blogs,

wikis, video-sharing websites, etc. The research method combined online participant-observation and interviews, and also "cyber-archaeology" (Jones 1997) in order to integrate immersive methods with the analysis of cultural artifacts, such as chatlogs, blogs, forums and user-created content (Pearce 2008).

More than a place the object of the study of this inquiry is thus a topic: *the closure of a cyberworld and what happens after that*; a topic that, in this case, caused an immense amount of activity around the Internet that can be characterized as a *"cyberdiaspora"*. A community of users, the so-called "therians" or "thereians",[3] felt "homeless" when *There.com* closed and started looking for a new one across the Internet. This implies a reconfiguration of the very method of cyberethnography which typically focuses in only one digital place, like traditional ethnography in the past (and even today). As noted by Pearce (2008: 15), there has been a tendency across cyberworlds research to look at these places "as singular and somehow separated, in the same way that anthropologists once viewed "primitive" or "native" culture". But if culture and community are not self-evidently located in one digital place, then neither is cyberethnography. The object of cyberethnographic enquiry "can usefully be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle" (Hine 2000). This is why the method of "multi-sited cyberethnography" is important here and why is the best option to study a process of cyberdiaspora such as the one I witnessed, which implied a flow of activity and connectivity around different digital places within the Internet: cyberworlds, social networks, forums, blogs, video sharing-sites, etc. Then, more than merely an ethnography of cyberworlds, this research is rather a cyberethnography about different sites across the Internet: the sites I discovered following the process of the cyberdiaspora and the movements of their members.

As most ethnographies (Hammersley 1990) and cyberethnographies (Hine 2000), the account that I present here is necessarily *partial* because "a holistic description of any informant, location or culture is impossible to achieve" (Hine 2000: 65) although it always remains an intellectual aspiration. I followed some of the users of the cyberworld *There.com* across different Internet platforms once this world closed. By doing so, I tried to understand not "the practices of *all* users, but […] what it is to be *a* user" (Hine 2000: 54; Papargyris and Polymenakou 2009:10), in this case a user immersed in a process of cyberdiaspora. The main goal is therefore trying to understand the experience of the *There.com* cyberdiaspora in the terms some of their members experienced it.

About There.com
There.com, typically referred as *There*, was a 3D open-ended social cyberworld that first launched in 2003, the same year as *Second Life*.[4] It was one of the most popular social cyberworlds along with *Second Life* and *Habbo*. As with these cyberworlds, in *There* you could create your avatar, meet and hang out with friends, and talk to each other using text chat or real-time voice chat. The cyberworld's homepage said that *There* was an "everyday online hangout where people can meet friends, play games, and have fun in a cool, non-violent 3D world". *There* members had access to many games and hobbies. They could drive buggies and cars, fly helicopters, hovercrafts and hoverboards, train cyberpets and play games such as card tables or paintball. Basic *There* membership was free, but *Basic* members could upgrade to *Premium* membership paying a one-time fee then becoming a "lifetime member". Premium members could purchase Therebucks (the

currency used in There) which could be exchanged for clothing, houses, cars, and even property.

Geographically, *There* had 14 main islands and dozens of smaller islands. Vehicles were so important in There because players usually travelled and explored these islands with them. When you signed up, you got a hoverboard, a kind of surfboard or skateboard that hovers a few feet of the ground, just like the fictional hovering board used for personal transportation in the films *Back to the Future Part II* and *Back to the Future Part III*. Other vehicles players could use to travel around were hoverbikes, hoverpacks, hoveraboats, dune buggies, coupes, muscle cars, scions, etc. As with cars in real life, these vehicles were extensions of the avatar's personality, ways of expression and communication within the cyberworld.

The avatars in *There* featured a unique cartoonish style different to other cyberworlds. The ways these avatars expressed and communicated with each other was also cartoon-inspired, for example, having cartoon-bubble conversations. As Jeffrey Ventrella, one of the founders of *There*, said to me regarding his preference for this cartoonish style: "Realism can distract from expression. This is explained well in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics.* It is also explained by the uncanny valley theory[5]: too much realism can become creepy, and it is easier for people to use their imaginations when the graphical style is less realistic".[6] Finally, as in other cyberworlds, players could change attributes such as hair, head, body, skin, eye color, clothing, etc., but the avatar's name and gender were permanently set.

Players could also create their own content using *There*-provided tools and traditional development software such as *Adobe Photoshop, Paint Shop Pro, The Gimp* and *Gmax.* The content could then be bought, sold and trade. But *There.com's* content creation policy was more controlled than in other cyberworlds. If developers wanted to see any of their creations *in-world* they had to submit items for review by the company paying a fee. Items were vetted if they fitted into one of the following categories: Inappropriate (the custom content is deemed inappropriate or offensive), Copyrighted (the custom content contains copyrighted material) and Technical (your material does not conform to technical requirements).

There also encouraged an "all ages" philosophy in which young people over 13 could log and enjoy the world together with older people. This is different from what we find in cyberworlds like *Second Life*, which has a strict over-18 policy. Being an over-13 world, *There* had to protect the PG-rated standards by constraining inappropriate content and monitoring sexual or violent behavior.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CYBERWORLD ENDS?

The Death of a World

There.com service ceased operation at midnight on March 9, 2010. The forums closed even days before, on March 2, without any kind of warning. The same day, the announcement about the closure was posted on the website. The membership was shocked, confused and angry.

For some thereians, the end of *There.com* was like a death. And death, as Klastrup (2008: 143) argues, "is important as a pivotal design element and something that every player experiences several, if not many times during her time in a gameworld". Death —and the stories players told about death and dying— is another element of the gameworld experience and one that we need to analyze if we want to understand this experience in all its complexity. When a cyberworld comes to an end is not only the world that died but also the avatars that inhabit it. And players develop stories about it, stories about death and dying. As Pearce (2010) says "When virtual worlds close, one of the points of trauma my research subjects have cited is the "death" of their character, particularly if they have invested many years in creating it. This is particularly tragic for those of us who use this 'second body' to overcome physical, social or geographical limitations".

Death references were common in the narratives developed by thereians when *There.com* closed. As one informant said: "My first reaction when I heard *There* was closing... About 30 seconds of shock and then the tears took over. It felt like a part of me was being destroyed. It was like a death. There had been such a huge part of my life for so long and I'd met so many really friends there, I couldn't imagine losing it". Another user said that "When There.com died a piece of me did too. There was no world like There.com". And another said the following: "To some extent it was like a death. My avatar wasn't just 'a character' and There wasn't just a game. My avatar is an extension of me. She's a virtual representation of me".

This sense of "death" is not specific to cyberworlds but something that we can find in other media. As Murray (1997: 174-175) observes, especially in encyclopedic narratives such as television series or movie trilogies, the ending can be painful to the creators and to the audience. She cites examples such as Dickens and his audience crying when the last number of one of his two-year serials was finished; or the end of the television series *Cheers,* which "provoked an orgy of public nostalgia, as if the actual neighborhood bar of millions of people were closing". She concludes that "the refusal of closure is always, at some level, a refusal to face mortality". In digital games, this denial to death appears when we start over or when we replay an event and try for a different solution. "In this respect, electronic media have the advantage of enacting a deeply comic vision of life, a vision of retrievable mistakes and open options". But what happens when we cannot access to the gameworld anymore? Then this *comic* vision of life and death become *tragic* because we are not able to start over and replay and try for a different solution, at least in that particular gameworld. The world has died and we cannot log in anymore. It has disappeared in the vast ocean of cyberspace.

This is paradoxical if we realize that the very essence of a cyberworld is a world without ending, a world of endless play, social interaction and communication, since they are by definition *persistent* worlds, worlds always alive. It is ironic thus that players have to face the closure of these so called persistent/endless worlds. They are not designed with an end or a dramatic conclusion in mind but as timeless places where the player is able to discover new people and objects every day. It is even more ironic that cyberworlds like *There.com* offered up "lifetime memberships", memberships that are supposed to extend every day, every month, every year, until the day the owners of the cyberworld decide to close it and then this "lifetime" status simply disappears.

Post-World Communications

After *There.com* shut down, and even in the days before, thereians started to gather at different places around the net, trying to be together after the passing of their world and developing all kinds of *post-world* communications. *Facebook* was an important element at that time due to its increasing popularity and most thereians started to gather there. People who had not made a *Facebook* account before made one and began to add anyone that was from There.com. They built these accounts with their *There* names and with photographs of their former avatars in it. A significant number used names such as "Mike There", "Susan Therian" or "Sally Thereian", which functioned as identity markers that may seem odd to those who did not play *There.com.*

Lots of *Facebook* groups started up in order to provide a means of communication for thereians. They served as a means to stay in touch, especially through "remembrance groups", like "Remember There ", "The Lost Thereians" or "Thereians Unite!", to name a few. Through these groups, thereians shared their favorite moments in *There.com* writing comments and attaching pictures and videos. As one of these groups stated on its *Facebook* profile: "In this page, we would discuss about our favorite moments in *There.com*. We all would like to hear your great moments in *There*. We all know it's been difficult to lose our favorite virtual world, but we can still keep in touch with this page".

Members of *There.com* came together through *Facebook,* forums and other existing websites, which allowed them to keep in touch beyond their world of origin. Another popular site for them was *Thumdar.com. Thumdar* is a social network connecting people with friends involved in social cyberworlds. It was created by a *There.com* member in April 2004 purely as a resource for thereians but now is open to all users involved in cyberworlds. As its website says, the latest version offers "a true community experience where members can communicate through profile, article, blog, and gallery commenting, private messaging, emailing and chat". Although it is open to users from all cyberworlds and sees itself as a "virtual worlds social network", *Thumdar.com* (originally called *Thumdar in There*) "has always been, and always will be, a place for thereians to come and find free enhancements and to hopefully have some fun along the way", as the website says. It was a natural course for thereians to gather in *Thumdar* and share their feelings there when *There* closed.

YouTube, the popular video-sharing website, was another place in which thereians started to gather when *There.com* ended. Having closed the forums on March 2 and the entire world on March 9, *There.com* started deleting their hosted *YouTube* videos on March 12. This decision was a complete surprise for many thereians, which realized that all the official things related to *There.com* were being destroyed by the owners of the company. But players had their own videos and photographs and they started to upload and share them on *YouTube*. They were videos of their best moments in *There*, machinima creations, and sequences of photographs taken when the world was still alive. Thereians watched these audiovisual texts and wrote comments about them, remembering the people, actions and places these pieces showed, sometimes "with tears in my eyes", as many thereians said.

A Diaspora across Cyberspace

In all of these sites users expressed words of sadness and unhappiness. They wrote about the homesickness they felt for having lost their cyberworld. By writing about their

feelings and watching and commenting other player's words, photographs and videos, they shared the trauma of the closure and the situation of displacement they were experiencing. Phrases like "I miss my second world" or "I miss my avie", sometimes accompanied with sad emoticons ("I loved it soooooo much :'(") were common during the first weeks after the end of the world, giving to the community a collective sense of nostalgia similar to other involuntary displacement situations such as diasporas. In fact, the situation that Thereian people were experiencing can be interpreted as a diaspora, rather a *cyberdiaspora,* since it was originated and developed across cyberspace.

According to *The Merriam Webster*'s Dictionary, a diaspora is "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland". This homeland can be "real" or "fictional", as in the case of *There.com*, which was interpreted as "homeland" by many thereians. "There was a magical place… it was home", as one informant said. "I really do still love There.com. I have not felt at home since it closed. I am still homeless", in the words of other. This supports findings by Pearce (2009), the first specific study of a "game diaspora" (the Uru Diaspora), whose informants also used terms like "homeland" and "refugee" to describe their experiences of losing a cyberworld.

There are as many definitions of diaspora as there are people trying to define it. But here I understand diaspora in a postmodern sense of the word, rejecting any type of essentialism, that is, any definition with reference to one or two necessary characteristics, and preferring a broader, more encompassing view that would include various refugees, guest workers, immigrants, racial minorities, and overseas communities (Clifford 1994) —and, in my case, those users that have lost their cyberworld of origin and find themselves in a situation of involuntary displacement around cyberspace. Clifford also acknowledges that in the late twentieth century, almost all communities have diasporic dimensions (time, tactics, practices, etc.) and that they develop diasporic forms of nostalgia, memory and (dis)identification. A community that lost their cyberworld and feel displaced around the net and nostalgic[7] about this world can be interpreted as another manifestation of the variety of contemporary diasporic forms we can find nowadays, whether it be offline or online.

Lost in Translation

Some thereians cited a feeling of being lost on cyberspace when *There* closed its doors. As one informant said: "There was so much more than a game. It was a community and a big part of our lives. When There closed we felt cut off, adrift, even lost. We are homesick. We miss our home". Another thereian expressed his feeling of being "adrift on the vast ocean of cyberspace", and another expressed that "I have an avatar all over the Internet and I am not happy in any world".

This situation of being lost on cyberspace can be equated to the "liminal phase" studied by anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner. The term liminal is an anthropological term taken from the latin word for "threshold" and it is used to described a fluid, malleable situation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants stand at the threshold between their previous way of structuring their sense of identity and a new way of doing it. As Turner (1969: 81) says: "The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous". It is a transition from one phase of life to another, during which "Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magically-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of

time: he wavers between two worlds" (Van Gennep 1969: 18). The dissolution of order during liminality creates disorientation, but also the possibility of new perspectives.

This sense of being lost if something we also find in the discourses about diaspora. Having lost their world, their home, and looking for a new one, diasporic people are liminal people moving between worlds. One of the main features of diaspora is a double conscience, a double exposure of different times and spaces, a constant bifurcation. As with nostalgia, a cinematic image of diaspora is "a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images –of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life" (Boym 2001: xiv).

When *There.com* closed, thereians became liminal *personae*, *liminal avatars*. As diasporic people, they were living in a constant bifurcation between the past and the present, remembering their digital homeland and dreamed about a possible homecoming while searching for a new home across cyberspace. As one informant said: "These days I spent time on Second Life. But I still hope that *There* returns…". In some sense, many thereians were experiencing a well-known diasporic feeling, that of seeing "everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home", and "trying to cohabit with doubles and ghosts" (Boym 2001: 251).

Searching for a new (3D) Home

Sites such as *Facebook, Thumdar or Youtube* served as a way for Thereians to communicate and keep in touch after the closure of their world. But they were not worlds at all. They were networking sites where they could not live in the bodies of avatars and traverse a 3D world. They wanted to find a similar embodied an immersive experience like what they had in *There.com*. They wanted to live in another 3D cyberworld.[8]

Along with their presence in sites such as *Facebook, YouTube* and *Thumdar*, thereians started to explore other cyberworlds searching for a kind of experience similar to what they had in *There.com*. They started to visit cyberworlds such as *Second Life, Twinity, Onverse, Kaneva, Blue Mars, IMVU, Gaia Online, VSide, Active Worlds,* etc. They shared their opinions and experience within these worlds in *Facebook, Thumdar, YouTube* and other websites, talking about the advantages and disadvantages of every cyberworld and comparing them with their world of origin. In general, people felt that these cyberworlds failed in comparison with *There*. They were those "doubles and ghosts" I cited before. As one thereian said: "Tried Kaneva, tried Onverse, tried Secondlife, tried IMVU, tried Gaia Online, NOTHING WILL REPLACE THERE.COM!". Other user said me that after having tried Kaneva, IMVU and Second Life "I miss There.com terribly. There's been nothing out there to rival it… :(". These reactions were common when thereians reported back on their experiences in other cyberworlds trying to find a new home.

Feeling displaced and lost on cyberspace, thereians looked like a potential market to other cyberworlds. When the announcement of the closure of *There.com* went public, various cyberworlds started to offer possible solutions to this situation. Then, as someone said, "the recruiting began" and every social cyberworld available at that time tried to attract the Thereian population with different offers and strategies. For example, *Twinity* wanted to attract *There* users by exchanging some Therebucks for Twinity Globals, the currency used in this cyberworld. They also offered an area for thereians called "There Lounge".

The cyberworld *Blue Mars* developed a new region called "Pavonis" with the same tropical archipelago theme of There. *Kaneva* offered an entire "There Channel" and *Moove* created a special sign up area for *There* users. Sometimes, the owners of the cyberworld developed an entire discourse about the closure of *There.com* and the situation of their ex members. That was the case of the cyberworld *Activeworlds*, which accompanied its offer of 6 months free to former *There* players with the following text:

COMMUNITY PROGRAM FOR THERE.COM USERS

Activeworlds is very sorry to hear about the closing of the THERE.com virtual environment. We understand what it means to be in a community for many years only to have it go away without warning. Your friends that you have made in the world will no longer be accessible to interact with and the many memories you all had will slowly fade away. Activeworlds is offering all dislocated THERE.com users a free account for 6 months as well as a THERE world to be managed and run by former THERE users. In this world you can build the environment to replicate anything you want including your former home. We feel that while this may not replace your previous virtual home that it might at least serve as a gathering place where you and your friends can get together once again.

Along with this text, *Activeworlds* created an interesting picture depicting an avatar of this cyberworld welcoming the new *There* users.

Figure 1: Activeworlds Welcomes There Users (Image: Activeworlds).

Second Life created a similar text in the form of a farewell and it offered a special greetings area within *Second Life* just for thereians. The farewell was written by a member of the Linden Lab staff as follows:

> *The end of any community platform is an unhappy moment, and we certainly feel for the community. Although it may not be the same as the world you know and love, we hope you will come and explore another online world of possibility and engaging experiences. We are working on creating some new places for you, so look for news of those in a future post. We'll look for you inworld.*

As we can see, these strategies tried to lure in *There* users by offering them all kinds of opportunities and advantages. These recruitment efforts are similar to the different policies designed to attract migrants that have been developed throughout history, which also proceeded to the provision of certain resources and privileges designed to attract people on the move: free transportation, food supply, land allocation, etc. (Livi Bacci, 2012).

However, some thereians felt like they were being tricked because, for them, some of these environments were not cyberworlds at all. That was the case of *Frenzoo*. In this environment, you could change your position by clicking on what they called hotspots. But for thereians this was different from what they had in There, where the avatar could freely move around the world, without necessity of clicking on hotspots. Also, the clubs in *Frenzoo* were more like chatrooms, not 3D chatrooms. As one thereian said regarding the *Frenzoo* attempts to attract them: "It is a new community that is fine, but they should not try to trick There users that their community is similar. It is a cheap way to get more users".

There.com members continued to report back on their experiences in the cyberworlds they visited investing significant amounts of time and energy in it. Although they explored almost every world available the majority of them ended up in *Second Life* because it was the largest cyberworld at the time and the one closest to the experience they had in *There.com*. As one user clearly said: "Despite many There.com members initially refusing to accept SL, there is a general acknowledgement that nothing else out there currently offers anything close to what members had in There.com except Second Life".

Cyberworlds like *Twinity* were still in beta and had some technical problems and only a few users. Thereians sometimes referred to it as a "ghost town" and some of them said that there was very little to do except admire the buildings and the arquitecture. Thereians met in the "There Lounge" area that the owners of the cyberworld built for them but, as one thereian said, all they did in that area was to talk about how all other cyberworlds suck and how there will never be another place like There.

Other worlds like *Onverse* did not offer the possibility to user-created content and did not have vehicles or other means of transportation, which were so important for thereians, especially the popular hoverboards. Others sites such as *IMVU* or *Frenzoo* were more 3D chatrooms than cyberworlds for thereians. As one of them said: "I always hesitate to call certain virtual environments "worlds", even if they call themselves that, because most are not free-roaming and the way I see it, if you can't drive/walk from place to place, it is not a "world".

By contrast, *Second Life* offered them the possibility to create their own content and added it to the world without all the constraints they had in *There.com*. It also had free objects and avatar designs all over the world and a large amount of users that made the life *in-world* exciting, or at least more exciting that what they found in other cyberworlds. Thereians also liked the possibility to exchange the virtual money for real money, one of the main features of *Second Life* and one of the most cited in the news. As one informant said: "SL has free things all over the place… I haven't put 1 cent in this world… In *There.com* thousands thousands… you see to buy anything on *There.com* you must buy tbux [Therebux] with real money… well I feel should of exchanged our tbux to real money. They didn't. SL has an exchange here from Lindens to real money".

Second Life also had things that some thereians did not like at all such as lag, crashes and login problems or the realistic nudity and other kinds of sexual content available in this cyberworld. But in general many of them found in this world the type of experience they were looking for: a vibrant cyberworld with all kind of possibilities for travelling, socializing, creating and playing, just what they had in *There.com*. They could even recreate in *Second Life* some visual and social aspects of their cyberworld of origin, as for example t-shirts and decorations featuring the *There.com* logo and activities such as playing cards, driving vehicles or dancing. This cyberworld even offered better possibilities in terms of dancing, as one informant said to me, because here the dance moves were more elaborated and the avatars could dance together, something that was not possible in *There* due to their condition as a PG environment and their limitations in matters of touch. They could also try more adult avatar designs, such as the condom outfit depicted in Figure 2, something impossible to imagine in the more control-oriented world *There.com*.

Figure 2: A thereian encapsulated in a condom outfit in *Second Life*
(Image: Márquez).

It is not strange thus that some thereians found a new home in *Second Life*. As one informant said regarding his new life in this cyberworld*:* "Home is where your heart is. My heart is here now".

CONCLUSION

The deaths of cyberworlds have implications beyond the companies that create and control them (Fairfield 2009). What is striking about the case of *There.com* is the astonishing flux of Internet activity related to its closure. Thereians worked to maintain their friendships even when their cyberworld of origin disappeared. They actively worked to keep together developing all kinds of *post-world* communications across the Internet, gathering in forums, creating *Facebook* groups, uploading videos on *YouTube*, and travelling to other cyberworlds looking for a new home. Feeling displaced and lost on cyberspace, thereians looked like a potential market to other cyberworlds and many of them tried to attract the Thereian population with different offers and strategies. Thereians explored almost every cyberworld available at that time and many of them finally ended up in *Second Life* because it was the largest cyberworld and the one closest to the experience they had in *There.com.*[9]

During their particular *cyberjourney*, thereians developed a collective sense of nostalgia similar to other involuntary displacement situations such as diasporas. The whole experience can be described as a *cyberdiaspora*, since it involves experiences of displacement across cyberspace; a movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established cyberworld. Previous research on "game diasporas" (Pearce 2009; Papargyris and Poulymenakou 2009; Consalvo and Begy 2012) found similar patterns of behavior when users lost a cyberworld. As a result, it can be argue that these phenomena transcend a given community or cyberworld and we can see similar trans-ludic patterns in different communities and worlds.

This line of research also calls for studies of other closing cyberworlds or online games to see if their closures cause a similar flux of Internet activity and if their users develop similar displacement or diasporic situations as in the case of *There.com*, *Uru* (Pearce 2009), *Earth and Beyond* (Papargyris and Poulymenakou 2009) and *Faunasphere* (Consalvo and Begy 2012).

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ENDNOTES

[1] The ability to move and migrating to other cyberworlds is also nothing new. It dates back to MUDs (Turkle 1995: 12; Boellstorff 2008:197) where residents who were friends or romantic partners maintained their relationships across platforms, something users continue to do nowadays in the modern 3D cyberworlds, whether it be by personal choice or due to involuntary displacement situations such as diasporas.

[2] "Sunset" is the term used in the game industry to describe these closures.

[3] *There.com* users called themselves "Thereians" or "Therians" interchangeably. As one informant pointed out: "Thereians or Therians. We've never really consistently settled

one on or the other. I think I like Therian better, but usually type Thereian, so either works."

[4] For those interested in *There.com* see Pearce (2009), the only prior work about this cyberworld.

[5] The "Uncanny Valley" is a term coined by the robotic professor Masahiro Mori in 1970 and refers to a creepy discomfort or revulsion that people experience in reaction to robots or 3D animated characters that look an act almost like actual human beings.

[6] Email communication, July 2011.

[7] Here I do not agree with Boym (2001: 258) when she says that she does not know "any nostalgia for a homepage; rather, the object of nostalgia is precisely the nonvirtual low tech world". As the case of *There.com* clearly shows, the object of nostalgia can be a cyberworld and the avatars, objects and spaces that we can find and create within it.

[8] Although the vast majority of the players I interviewed expressed their determination to stay in touch and migrate to other cyberworlds, reacting as a kind of one, harmonized collective, there were also other users that decided not to participate in this process. As expressed by one of them: "I have belonged to the Virtual World There.com for many years and will truly miss this place with all my heart and by choice will not be migrating to any other virtual world. This is the third VW [Virtual World] that I have belonged to that has closed its doors and can't see devoting time to building a Second Life. I feel this is my sign to get out there and build my Real Life the way I built my There life".

[9] *There.com* reopened in May 2012 and although some people came back, many who had settled in other cyberworlds, especially those in *Second Life*, did not return. I will address the consequences of the reopening in a future paper.

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