

# Virtual Places

**Erik M. Champion**

*University of Melbourne, Australia*

## INTRODUCTION

Communities identify and are identified by not just the clothes they wear or by the language they speak, or even by the way they greet each other. Communities are often identified by where their activities take place, how they use spaces to construct meanings, and the traces left by their social interactions. These “trigger” regions are thus not just points in space; they are also landmarks, havens, homes, ruins, or hells. Communities, then, are identified and identify with or against, not just space but place. For places do not just organize space; they orient, identity, and animate the bodies, minds, and feelings of both inhabitants and visitors.

Presence researchers have often cited and used, the sense of “being in a place” as a test of virtual presence. For example, Biocca (1997) says people feel present in real imaginary or virtual places. Slater (1999) says one aspect of presence is feeling that one is in another place, and not just viewing a set of images. Researchers often use the term “place” in their presence questionnaires (Lessiter, Freeman, Keogh, & Davidoff, 2000; Schuemie, van der Straaten, Krijn, & van der Mast, 2001; Slater, 1999).

While much debate has centered on the meaning of virtual “presence,” there has been far less debate on a virtual “place.” Presence in virtual environments is often defined as the subjective belief that one is in a place even though the participant knows the experience is mediated by digital media (Slater, 1999). Yet presence can only be clearly defined when relating it to place, if place itself is clearly defined and understood.

Place itself may mean many different types of location, the feeling that one is in or surrounded by a type or kind of location, or the intensity of that feeling of being in a particular place. One may well feel spatially surrounded, or be able to say an event happened in a certain position in a virtual environment without feeling that one was experiencing a strong or unique experience of place. To understand how and why people can feel a sense of presence then, we need to have a clear and appropriate sense of place.

And if we do not have a strong sense of place, then perhaps we do not have a strong sense of presence. Many writers (frequently from architecture) have made the distinction between place and cyberspace, and suggested

that virtual environments usually lack the former (e.g., Benedikt, 1991; Champion & Dave, 2002; Coyne, 1999; Johnson, 1997; Kalay & Marx, 2001, 2003; Kitchin, 1998). Given the premise that place is a necessary part of creating a meaningful virtual environment, the question is raised as to how we can best gain a sense of place via virtual environments.

## FIVE TYPES OF PLACE

Writers in architecture, urban planning, philosophy, and geography have defined place in a myriad of ways. Edward Casey (1993, 1997) and Ed Relph (1986) have both written extensively on the definition of place. Casey focuses on the experiential sensation of place as an extension of the body. On the other hand, Relph tends to view place as that which surrounds the viewer existentially, in terms of attitude and intention. Relph defined many different types of place and how each offered a mix of experiences.

The usefulness of “place” can be considered a key feature of virtual communities in at least five major ways. The notion of place can identify and describe elements of a virtual environment either by uniqueness, by its power of evoking memories and associations. A place may impress itself upon us by its ability to identify and reflect individual participants, by its ability to induce sheer awe, or by its capacity to act as either stage or framework on which communal and individual activity can “take place.”

Place as a field or center of unique associations and memories has been suggested by many writers (Coyne, 1999; Johnson, 1997; Kalay & Marx, 2001; Lukermann, quoted in Relph, 1986). Massey (1993) made the further interesting point that a place may be unique not because of individual elements, but due to either the history or the combination or selection of those objects. Some indicate geography indirectly highlights our schemas of place—be they telluric, projected landforms, or urban (Hartshorne, quoted in Relph, 1986). When triggering mental associations to these schemas, place is evocative, evoking remembered sensations of its previous self, or reminding the visitor of related activities or even of similar places (Johnson, 1997).

By linking to “heavenly” architecture, Benedikt (1991) may have foreseen “cyberspace” in the third sense, as an environment that awes and inspires or as a unique artwork. There seems to be several types of place that awe, through infinite scale and size or possibility (Gibson, 2000), through immutability, through materialization of perfection, demonstration of unstoppable vast force (Kant, 1987), or through complete indifference to human visitation. For example, Edward Casey (1993) wrote of sites as noninhabitable and therefore nonplaces, as well as defining place scapes as places that surround and dwarf us.

The use of place as an evoker of previous or imagined places is used by many virtual environments including computer games. Yet writers who have noted the atmospheric sense of place have not yet fully described how it may be created (Johnson, 1997; Kalay & Marx, 2001; Neumann, 1996). To understand what builds atmosphere, we may need to wrestle the attention of game designers and cinematic directors away from their consoles and cameras.

Cultural geographers, anthropologists and archaeologists often view place as an artifact that records traces of its owners. For them place is the interpretable staged slate on which historical interactions are inscribed by intent accident or by ritual and habit. Some writers have described a place as a storehouse of users’ meanings and identity rather than the architects’ intentions. Others remark that places as artifacts are “trace” museums (Beckmann, 1998; Cantor, 1974; Crang, 1998; Rapoport, 1982; Schiffer & Miller, 1999; Tuan, 1998).

Place as stage has been posited by architects such as Coyne (1999) and geographers such as Relph (1986). Coyne actually suggests deliberately constructing constraints to force people to act in certain ways, a clear change from the suggestion of Novak (1991) that virtual environments be “Liquid Architecture.”

Place as constraint for the body is a common feature of three-dimensional games, yet it also has a central place in theoretical writings. For example, Casey (1997) seems to favor the definition of place as that which provides boundaries, affords rest, is unique, and is related to the human body. Ponti and Ryberg (2004) argue that a virtual place should act as a playground and space for negotiations in order for a sense of community to develop.

Place as stage can be a metaphor for either place recording significant ceremonial actions or choreographing (restricting) ways in which we move while inside it. For the cultural geographer Doreen Massey, place is not static but a dynamic matrix or series of social interactions. Place is a process not a product, and hence can consist of multiple interpretations, conflicts, and a unique combination of borrowed histories (Massey, 1993). For Crang (1998), place is a cultural setting, it

gives cultural interaction a time and a place. Crang believes place is time based. He notes that “Spaces become places as they become ‘time-thickened’ (p. 103). They have a past and a future that binds people together round them.” By extension, then, virtual environments need to remember what “takes place,” as “worlds” they need to be “persistent.”

The effect of place on humans has obviously had a variety of interpretations, but the next question is which elements are needed to create a “sense of place” in virtual communities.

## VIRTUAL PLACES AS WORLDS

Early 3D technology such as VRML was difficult for nonprogrammers to learn, required a great deal of effort to make interactive worlds, and was very slow. VRML lacked a “killer” application; it never had a distinct commercial purpose (Parisi, 2001).

However, in the last decade or so, virtual environments have split off into online game worlds (role playing, text-based “interactive” fiction worlds or “shooter” games), social encounter worlds (via text and sometimes personalizable “avatars” for dating or for classroom and language learning), to semi-inhabitable or buildable worlds (such as Active Worlds). The more successful online worlds tend to have a real world-related activity, via trade of items or “level” design (such as EverQuest or Lineage). Such large-scale worlds raise interesting questions of both navigation (Jiang & Ormeling, 2000) and social interaction (Jeffrey & Mark, 1998).

Even in text-based worlds there is scope to use spatial patterns to denote speaking mode, activity, privacy, and visibility of the participants (Erickson, 2004). One limitation of many virtual communities is that text and sound does not often locate the speaker or writer in a useful or thematically meaningful way (Jakobsson, 2002).

Coyne (1999) wrote that virtual places needed to afford association, authenticity, activity, and task-based criteria. Laurel (1994) spoke of the need for engagement and personalization. Inspired by both the Memex and the Memory Palaces of Simonides, Johnson (1997) argued that the most engaging three-dimensional environment would be socially associative, interactive, and task oriented with a “recall” or a “trail” of the users.

In their paper “Cyber-Placemaking,” Kalay and Marx (2001) identified eight types of virtual places or cyberspaces by extrapolating from architectural and urban design theory. For them, places are settings for events, are engaging, afford relative location (i.e., orientation), are imbued with authenticity, are adaptable,

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