Virtual Spaces in *Durarara!!*

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1 Introduction

The advent and proliferation of the Internet in the late 20th to early 21st century marked a fundamental shift in the lifestyles of billions of people. Coupled with the popularization of the *mobile camera-phone* (i.e. "cell phone"), millions, billions of people around the world now have access to the groundbreaking power of reliable, instant communication, and the ability to document any and every moment of one's perception. The Internet allows us to connect with friends, family, and strangers instantly across vast geographical distances: enabling the free and rapid flow of information. Such marvelous technological ability gave rise to a new, postmodern age in human civilization—the so-called*Information Age*—and with it we have necessarily adapted new ways of navigating our world, particularly our cities and communities.

Primarily through the lens of Ryohgo Narita's[1] *Durarara!!*,[2] I will explore in this essay how the Internet and the proliferation of cell phones have influenced and changed the ways we navigate the city, particularly through the use of computer mediated communication (CMC).

The first section discusses how the Internet has enabled the formation of virtual communities in metaphysical, or *virtual*, space that satisfy de Certeau's notions[3] of "place" and "space": that the spatial practices that shape a place perhaps need not be confined to the physical realm, but may also occur in the virtual realm of the Internet.

We then proceed to a discussion on how the interactions that occur within such virtual spaces bleed over into the physical, manifesting tangible consequences in physical as well as virtual space. In this section, we also discuss how the mobility of the cell phone shapes how we view the city, and how it blurs the barrier between the virtual and the physical, through a comparison with Ira Ishida's *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*.[4]

In the third section, we refocus on *Durarara!!* to discuss issues of identity resulting from participating in such virtual spaces, as well as the limitations of primarily text-based computer mediated communication.

Throughout the essay, we also touch on those that reject the notion of virtual space, and do not believe that the spatial practices done in the virtual are meaningful. We

1. I will be using a surname-last order when refering to Japanese names, both real and fictional within this essay.

2. Ryohgo Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, trans. Stephen Paul (Kadokawa Corporation, 2004; Yen On, 2015).

3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1983).

4. Ira Ishida, "Ikebukuro West Gate Park," in *Digital Geishas and Talking Frogs: The Best 21st Century Short Stories from Japan*, ed. Helen Mitsios, trans. Jonathan W. Lawless (Cheng & Tsui, 2011), 47–90.

also discuss those that have adopted the virtual, with those that are native to the virtual: whom Prensky calls "Digital Immigrants" as opposed to "Digital Natives",[5] and how the virtual has changed the way they experience the city and form relationships with others. To sum up, this is an essay about relationships, and how virtual space mediates our relationships in physical space.

2 The Virtualization of Space

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau delineates the difference between "place" and "space": a place is "an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability",[6] and space "occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities".[7] While de Certeau almost certainly was speaking of physicalities and physical urbanities, he does not restrict his definitions to preclude the non-physical. Indeed he summarizes (emphasis mine)

> In short, space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. **In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text**, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs.[8]

I thus propose that if one can define a book and the act of reading in terms of space and place, such definitions lend themselves even more easily to the Internet and the communities that exist within. If the Internet itself is a place, administered by the myriad of nodes, networks, and protocols that implement it, then it is practiced by its users: the communities within that form the spaces of the Internet itself. Unlike the city, the barriers to forming a space of one's own are next to nil, for anyone can set up a community for any topic of discussion, and allow anyone to join, free of physical and geographical restrictions. Derek Foster writes in *Community and Identity in the Electronic Village*

> The Internet is a real example of a broadband, wide-area computer network that allows each individual user an equal voice, or at the least an equal

5. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001), doi:10.1108/10748120110424816, https://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf.
6. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

> opportunity to speak. Increasing numbers of people, upon discovering the Internet, are enamored by the technology's ability to publicly legitimate their self-expression and by the freedom it provides from traditional space and time barriers[9]

Much like the city as a place, the users of the Internet utilize it in such ways that were never imagined by the engineers that defined its protocols and implementations (the administration in this analogy). Howard Rheingold writes, "[...] populations of citizens almost always use [computer mediated communication] to communicate with each other in new ways unforeseen by the system's original designers.[10]" Indeed, The Internet allows anyone to form a community, and by doing so simultaneously creates a space through the practice of discussion, as well as demarcating a place within the Internet, both in the de Certeauan sense, as well as the Augéan sense of "anthropological place" as the community gradually builds up history and character by its participants (users). Online forums and discussion boards fulfill many of the characteristics of a place: with a fixed web *address* and administrators and moderators defining rules and boundaries, it is through acts of discussion by users that space, and thus anthropological place forms. Foster tries to define such virtual communities as follows:

> The conceptual space in which [computer mediated communication] occurs is referred to as cyberspace, an environment in which face-to-face communication is impossible. A form of virtual co-presence, however, is established as a result of individuals' electronic interactions not being restricted by traditional boundaries of time and space: this is the basis of what is commonly referred to as "virtual community."[11]

Further augmenting this definition, he quotes Rheingold:

> Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.[12]

9. Derek Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (Routledge, 1997), 22.
10. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (MIT Press, 2000), 231.
11. Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," 24.
12. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, xx, quoted from foster 24.

It is here, in the creation of virtual communities, do we begin our discussion of *Durarara!!*, and its protagonist Mikado Ryuugamine[13].

Mikado Ryuugamine is by all appearances an ordinary high school boy. Having recently move to Ikebukuro from a small rural town, he has kept in touch through the internet with his childhood friend Masaomi Kida despite Masaomi having moved to the same Ikebukuro years earlier during elementary school.

> [I]t was his dream to live in the big city and an invitation from a childhood friend who moved away years ago that convinced him to make the leap.
>
> This friend might have transferred away during elementary school, but Mikado had the Internet already at that age, and they chatted online nearly every day once in middle school. They hadn't seen each other in person during that time, but they weren't distant in any real sense.[14]

Growing up with Internet access, we can easily consider Mikado to be a "digital native". He is already intimately familiar with the usage of the Internet; that is to say he is comfortable with the concept of the Internet as a place, and comfortable with performing spatial practices (i.e. chatting with Masaomi) within the virtual. Contrast this to how his parents are described in the following sentence.

> Mikado's parents weren't used to the Internet, and the invitation of someone their son hadn't seen since elementary school was not a satisfactory reason to send him off to Tokyo. [...] Mikado convinced them by saying he'd raise his living funds outside of tuition by working jobs, and at last he was allowed to start a new chapter of his life in a new place.[15]

It is interesting that Mikado's parents are explicitly described as *not being used to the Internet*. This description is made even more explicit in the original Japanese text: "*Netto ni utoi Mikado no ryōshin niwa sore ga*[16] *pin to konai*."[17] The usage of the idiom *pin to konai* here heavily implies that Mikado's parents, who grew up without the Internet—those who Prensky calls "Digital Immigrants"[18] (and perhaps even not so in this case!)—can

13. Romanizations of Japanese names for characters in *Durarara!!* are as they appear in the translation by Stephen Paul.
14. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 32.
15. Ibid.
16. Referring to how Mikado has kept up, and is still close with Masaomi despite not having seen each other face-to-face since elementary school.
17. Ryohgo Narita, *Durarara!!* [In Japanese] (Kadokawa Corporation, 2004), 56.
18. Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants."

not even conceive of such a relationship as Mikado has with Masaomi to be meaningful: they do not understand the virtual space. Nevertheless, we see that Mikado has been intimately familiar with Internet communities since early childhood. As a result, despite *never having set foot in Ikebukuro*, Mikado already has some idea of what life in the city looks like, despite being mediated through text—through discussions had with strangers on Internet chat rooms. The first chapter[19] opens with an Internet discussion about the Dollars, a rumoured "colour gang" operating within Ikebukuro, before Mikado has even arrived in Ikebukuro.

> Kanra[20]: 《I'm telling you, Ikebukuro's all about the Dollars right now!》
>
> Setton: ［The Dollars are that team people are talking about these days? I've never seen them.］
>
> Kanra: 《Sounds like they're keeping it on the DL in public. But people on the Net are all into it!》
>
> Tarou Tanaka (Mikado): 【Oh, really? Sounds like you know a lot about Ikebukuro, Kanra.】
>
> Kanra: 《Not that much really!》
>
> Kanra: 《Oh, how about this? Have you ever heard of the Black Rider?》
>
> Tarou Tanaka: 【Black Rider?】
>
> Setton: ［Ahh.］
>
> Kanra: 《The one people are talking about in Shinjuku and Ikebukuro. It was even in the news yesterday.》 [21]

Before continuing, I would first like to point out the usage of aliases or handles in the chat room. Mikado uses the alias of "Tarou Tanaka" in this conversation, and the usage of such aliases create an interesting dichotomy between one's virtual and physical identity, but I will postpone discussion of this subject until the final section.

Returning to our prior discussion of virtual spaces, through this Internet chat room, Mikado seems to be perfectly at home and interested in this discussion about Ikebukuro

19. Excluding the prologue chapter.
20. In the original text, chat room sessions such as the one quoted here do not explicit specify the speaker. The reader is meant to infer the speaker from context, with the style of brackets used (preserved here) consistent for the same speaker. For clarity, I will explicitly specify the handle of the speaker for quoted chat sessions.
21. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 11.

while having lived in a rural town for most of his life. Despite the geographical distance, he is interacting with the city through this virtual space; by having conversations and building relationships with strangers in the chat room he too is participating in some small part of Ikebukuro. Even before his first steps off the train, he has already experienced the city through text in this virtual space. Foster writes,

> Peculiar forms of community exist even in these electronic villages. Observing these, one must ask whether the problem lies in technology or the uses to which individuals put that technology. Technology could be considered the root of the problem if one considers virtual communities a postmodern form of the spectacle-driving people indoors and making them think that virtual communities are real communities. This belief, however, obscures that fact that all reality is essentially a matter of perception. This includes the degree to which we associate aspects of our daily life with a sense of community.[22]

Even being mediated through text, despite not having met face to face, Mikado's bonds with Kanra, Setton, and Masaomi (who Mikado has not seen in years) can not be denied: upon meeting Masaomi for the first time in years, Mikado remarks that "We were talking in chat just yesterday";[23] rather than meeting up with an old friend, the encounter strikes more familiar. To Mikado, his online bonds are just as real, if not more real (for he has since left his life in the rural town behind) than his prior, real bonds (which must be assumed, as they are never mentioned), something his parents can not easily comprehend. This chat room, and other chat rooms like it, easily constitute space for Mikado and other participants.

In fact, Mikado has actually long since become an active participant in city life, years before he has ever set foot in the city. The Dollars mentioned by Kanra are a "colour gang" shrouded in mystery that seem to have massive influence throughout the neighbourhood. Masaomi warns Mikado to stay away:

> "Oh, speaking of guys you shouldn't mess with...you should steer clear of the Dollars."
>
> "...Dollars."
>
> "Yep. Not the Wanderers, the Dollars."

22. Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," 31.
23. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 33.

> "Umm... whatever you say. So what kind of gang are they?"
>
> Mikado pressed, now driving the conversation rather than listening passively.
>
> "I don't really know much about 'em. All I know is there's a lot of them, they've all got a screw loose, and they're supposed to be a gang. I don't know what color they rep, though. Then again, like I said, they're cracking down on the color gangs, so they might have broken up already for all I know."[24]

Unbeknownst to both the reader and most of the characters in the story, Mikado is the founder and administrator of the Dollars, long before ever moving to Ikebukuro proper. Revealed in the final chapter, we are shown the origin story of the Dollars.

> At first, the Dollars were nothing more than a silly idea.
>
> On Mikado's suggestion, a number of friends on the Internet decided to work together. They created a fictional team in Ikebukuro and spread the tales solely on the Net. [...]
>
> When the tale of the Dollars began to gain legs of its own, Mikado and his friends got a little carried away and created an official Dollars site. It was password protected, and they wrote a huge mass of "member posts" within. Then they began to leak the address–if anyone wanted the password, they'd send it along in an e-mail, claiming they got it on the down low from a friend within the group.
>
> In this way, they created a fake organization. The only rule was listed on the website: "You are free to claim membership in the team."
>
> Of course, at first people claimed there was no such team in Ikebukuro. But strangely enough, over time posts appeared that called out such opinions as the work of trolls or accused them of never having been to Ikebukuro in the first place. None of Mikado's original group were making these posts. In other words, people who weren't in on the original joke were speaking up to defend the Dollars.[25]

Perhap inadvertently, Mikado created a *virtual community* through which he begins to (and does to great effect as we will see in the next section) hold real power within the *real city* of Ikebukuro. The only rule being "self-identification" entails the formation of an

24. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 39.
25. Ibid., 181.

identity itself, and ensures the consolidation of a community with said identity at its core. Augé writes of the formation of 'anthropological space'

> Collectivities (or those who direct them), like their individual members, need to think simultaneously about identity and relations; and to this end, they need to symbolize the components of shared identity (shared by the whole of a group), particular identity (of a given group or individual in relation to others) and singular identity (what makes the individual or group of individuals different from any other).[26]

And the online community of the Dollars, *who all share the identity of being a part of the Dollars*, form a virtual anthropological place through the spatial practice of communicating on the Dollar's message boards. Such a community may be sparse and its members faceless, but it constitutes community nonetheless. As Foster asserts, the only difference is in how they are imagined:

> Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities is insightful on this point: "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined".[27] The context of [computer mediated communication] necessarily emphasizes the act of imagination that is required to summon the image of communion with others who are often faceless, transient, or anonymous.[28]

As we will explore in the next section, these imagined communities often spill out from the virtual into the physical; in other words the virtual space begins to form in the physical. Such is one method by which the city becomes mediated by technology.

3 The Digitalization of the City

The experience of the city has always been mediated by technology. From the wheel, to the chariot; the streetcar to the personal automobile; the gas lamp to the electric streetlight, technology and technological advancements affect the way the city is traversed, and has

26. Marc Augé, "From Places to Non-Places," trans. John Howe (1992; Verso, 1995), 51.
27. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1983), 6, cited in Derek Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (Routledge, 1997), 25.
28. Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," 25.

fundamentally influenced the design and structure of cities. Yet the effect that digital technology—that is to say, *information technology*—has on cities may not be quite as obvious as streetcar tracks or streets illuminated throughout the night. While I do not say that the administration can not take advantage of information technology (for it certainly can through technologies such as mass surveillance), information technology is unrestricted in that it can be used against the wishes of the administration. Cars can only be driven upon predefined roads, trains and streetcars run only on routes laid out by city and transit planners, streetlamps are installed and controlled by the administration, but the instant communication and documentation abilities afforded by the cell phone and the Internet are unbounded in the same way. Let us recall the importance of walking according to de Certeau:

> The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk–an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it.[29]

The mobile cell phone augments the experience at the ground level; after all it is quite dangerous to use one's phone while driving. In this way is the cell phone democratizing, and its proliferation among walkers what I call the Digitalization of the City—when the walls between the virtual and the real blur by walkers at the ground level that simultaneously participate in both the real and virtual, forming space in both realms at once, and intimately bridging the two together. The ability to instantly communicate via the virtual, to produce or coordinate some action in the real amongst walkers is a remarkable shift in organizational power. For the first time, it is not only the administration that controls the crowd through architecture, but individuals within the crowd that hold this power by being networked through the virtual to other individuals in the physical.

Let us now pivot to Ira Ishida's *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*[30], which also happens to take place in Ikebukuro (and is in fact referenced in *Durarara!!*[31]). Particularly, I will focus on the significance of the PHS or "personal handyphone system", an early form of cell phone popular in Japan in the late 1900s to early 2000s.[32] Indeed the opening sentence makes

29. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

30. IWGP is structured as a collection of short stories, only the first of which is readily available in English. We will thus focus primarily on the translation of this first side story (also titled *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*) by Jonathan W. Lawless.

31. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 34.

32. Kotobank, "PHS" [in Japanese], accessed December 12, 2020, `https://kotobank.jp/word/PHS-7592`.

mention of protagonist's PHS perhaps to foreshadow its importance to the narrative later on.

> There is one *purikura* stuck to the back side of my PHS. A faded sticker with the five members of my team bursting from a tight frame..[33]

The first time we see the utility of the PHS is when the protagonist Makoto Majima schedules a meeting with Hikaru, a high school girl he befriended at the titular "West Gate Park".

> The next day I called up just Hikaru on my PHS. Our meeting place was the east gate's P' PARCO. I sat on the shrubs near the entrance and waited. In the small sky above Ikebukuro I could see thunderheads. Hikaru came right at the agreed time.[34]

The ability to schedule such a meeting in such a short timeframe, without being *physically present to exchange words* is undeniably a modern phenomenon. When introduced, the telephone was revolutionary in enabling this unprecedented high-speed communication, but until the introduction of the mobile phone, it was a fixed invention, limited to houses, businesses, and street phones (which often are one-way devices—they can send calls, but for the intended recipient to receive a call on a street phone is highly unlikely). In *The Media City*, Scott McQuire writes,

> By the 1990s, the impact of smart buildings was matched by the growing urban effects of mobile media. In what is now clearly an earlier phase of the media city, devices such as telephone and television were primarily fixed. They were usually located in either the office or the home, and in fact were pivotal to the negotiation of the gendered boundary between public and private space. This phase has now given way to an era in which media technologies have become ubiquitous, mobile and scalable, generating new possibilities for social interaction in which information flows are increasingly able to act on and shape social activities as they occur.[35]

One can argue that there is nothing inherently special about this one particular interaction that precludes other forms of non-mobile communication, and indeed mobility is not

33. Ishida, "Ikebukuro West Gate Park," 47.
34. Ibid., 54.
35. Scott McQuire, "Performing Public Space," chap. 6 in *The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space* (SAGE Publications, 2008), 146, doi:10.4135/9781446269572.

fundamental to this first interaction. However, the mobility of the PHS is fundamental to coordinating the G-boys' investigation and later confrontation of the Strangler. Consider the urgency with which Makoto organizes Shun's forensic drawing (emphasis mine).

> "Well, it might sound a little strange, but Rika said she had this customer who was really loose with his money. She called him 'sensei.' Because she said she was scared, I walked with her to the place they were going to meet sometimes."
>
> "Do you remember his face?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> I called Shun on my PHS. **He was still in Ikebukuro.** I told him to bring his sketchbook and pencils and come back to Kawaguchi.
>
> [...]
>
> Shun said that this was the first time he'd ever drawn a likeness by description only. I asked Hikaru about the sensei's features, and Shun drew a little, then showed it to Hikaru to confirm.[36]

Neither Makoto nor Shun were at a fixed location during the call—Makoto was at the gate of Kawaguchi station, and Shun at Ikebukuro, having just split up earlier.[37] It was a *spur of the moment idea* that led Makoto to contact Shun. If neither of them had mobile phones, Makoto would have had to chase Shun down—or worse, wait until they both had access to wired telephones, perhaps later in the evening or even the following morning. It appears to be that the mobility of the cell phone not only facilitates instant communication, but also creates the expectation of carrying one on one's body at all times—for otherwise you would be disconnected, unable to be contacted at a moments notice. McQuire makes the observation

> The new capacity for micro-coordination has not only exerted significant effects on social protocols among friends and acquaintances, including the negotiation of accepted notions of punctuality and presence.[38]

The immediacy allowed by the mobile phone is further shown in the very next interaction as Shun finishes his forensic drawing of the Strangler and goes to make photocopies.

36. Ishida, "Ikebukuro West Gate Park," 64–65.
37. Ibid., 65.
38. McQuire, "Performing Public Space," 147.

> As Shun dashed out of the family restaurant, I called up [Takashi] on my PHS.
>
> [...]
>
> "Hello?" Takashi's leisurely voice flowed from my PHS.
>
> "It's me, Makoto. Can you get the heads of all the teams together for me tonight?"
>
> [...]
>
> There was a short pause. I listened to the noise from the street coming through the PHS.
>
> "Sure, let's meet tonight at 9:00 in the lobby of the Hotel Metropolitan. I'll assemble the rest of them."
>
> The phone hung up on Takashi's end. I nodded at Hikaru, who was looking in my direction with concern.[39]

As a quick aside, to "liste[n] to the noise from the street coming through the PHS."[40] illustrates well how Makoto's experience of the city is being mediated through information technology; quite literally he is experiencing the city through a technological filter. As a result, the fidelity of his experience is reduced compared to experiencing the sounds of the city in person—we will discuss more about such barriers in the next section.

To call on multiple people to suddenly show up at some hotel in the evening on such short notice is no easy feat; without the PHS, it might as well be impossible. The meeting that occurs was directly facilitated by the digital technology of the cell phone—a act of space-forming in the real caused by an action in the virtual, across time and space. Nowhere is this more obvious in *IWGP* than how the PHS is crucial to Makoto's confrontation of the Strangler. After being sighted by one of the G-boys, Makoto is instantly in the know.

> One of the cell phones rang inside my backpack. Hikaru sprang on the bag and got the phone out. Bingo on the second try. She handed it over to me.
>
> "This is Makoto."
>
> "Makoto, this is Killer Zoo's Yoshikazu. Right now I'm in front of the couples café 'Mezzo Piano,' behind Marui. A man that looked exactly like the sensei just went in with a young girl."

39. Ishida, "Ikebukuro West Gate Park," 65-66.
40. Ibid., 66.

> "Got it. Stay where you are. We'll be there in five." I hung up the phone, then said to everybody, "Let's get to the couples café 'Mezzo Piano.'"[41]

Once Makoto confirms Yoshikazu's sighting, he reports back to Takashi and gets further instruction on how to proceed.

> I quickly called Takashi on my PHS.
>
> "Takashi? It's definitely the sensei. We confirmed it. What do we do from here?"
>
> "First, send the girl home. I've prepared several cars and scooters, and they currently have the building surrounded. Makoto, it's not 'what do we do from here.' What do you want to do?"
>
> [...]
>
> "I want to make sure whether he's the Strangler or not directly. It might get a little rough though. I'd like to ask for enough backup so that he can't get away."
>
> "Alright, go on Makoto. Go bag yourself a Strangler."[42]

This level of coordination is only made possible by the immediacy afforded by the mobile cell phone. Had there been any delay, the Strangler would have left the couples café, and Makoto would have lost his chance at revenge. Whether Makoto and the G-boys have realized it or not, their familiarity and usage of the PHS is as fundamental to their experience of the city and the actions they perform within as the city itself. As Rheingold has written, "[computer mediated communication] enables people to do things with each other in new ways, and to do altogether new kinds of things just as telegraphs, telephones, and televisions did.[43]" The difference between telegraphs and telephones is primarily the speed at which the information is delivered. There is an apocryphal tale of an Ancient Greek sprinter who ran from Marathon to Athens to deliver a critical message, only then to promptly die from exhaustion: when minutes matter, nothing can compare to the speed of the mobile cell phone. Indeed it is this speed that qualifies mobile communication as virtual—without regard to physical nor temporal boundaries, one is afforded the ability to reach and communicate with another within moments.

The way that Makoto and the G-boys seem to be constantly connected to one another begs the question—do the G-boys constitute a *virtual community* as the Dollars do? To an-

41. Ishida, "Ikebukuro West Gate Park," 71.
42. Ibid., 74.
43. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, *[xxi]*.

swer this question, we return to our discussion on *Durarara!!*, and compare how Makoto utilizes his network of G-boys to Mikado's influence over the Dollars.

The climax of *Durarara!!* involves a similar confrontation as in *IWGP*—Mikado confronts Namie Yagiri, a pharmaceutical executive responsible for the disappearance of one of his classmates. Through his influence as the founder—the administrator—of the Dollars, he literally summons the crowd.

> When he felt the moment was right, Mikado tensed the finger waiting on his phone button.
>
> *Once I press this button, theres no going back. I'll be entering a place one should never go. I wanted to avoid this if possible, but based on her reaction, I don't have another choice. I don't have the strength or intelligence to challenge someone who doesnt respond to logic. And I dont have the time to try, because Ive got to find a way to survive this situation first.*
>
> Mikado sucked in a deep breath of determination and pushed the switch as he let it out.
>
> *So my only choice–is to rely on numbers!*
>
> [...]
>
> [One of Namie's subordinates] noticed something and checked with his partner. "It's like...eleven o'clock, right?"
>
> "Yeah."
>
> He felt a subtle chill creep over him.
>
> "Then...where'd all these people come from?"
>
> Just as the first man burst out of the crowd and smoothly, naturally made his way closer to Mikado—
>
> *Beebeebeep, beebeebeep.*
>
> It was the sound of a cell phone receiving a text.
>
> At first, the man thought it was his own, but then he realized he didn't have his phone on him. It was just someone else's message tone coming from very close by.
>
> [...]
>
> He turned in yet another direction and saw several people of an entirely different type, each one busy reading an e-mail off of their phone.
>
> "...?!"

That's when they noticed something. As several different chimes played on, more songs started up, forming an ugly, clashing harmony.

Beebeebeep, beebeebeep.

More text notifications, at least a dozen from every direction.

"...?!"

At last, Namie and her men realized that something strange was happening.

The mixed crowd of countless milling figures had grown into what would more accurately be termed a mob. Even those whose phones hadnt gone off were pulling them out of pockets, drawn by the vibration setting. But the vast majority were beeping and ringing incessantly.

And then...

Too late to do anything about it, the little group was *drowned in waves of ringtones.*

[...]

And as the ringtones gradually calmed and faded out, Namie's group found they were the center of attention.

Dozens, if not hundreds, of people in the surrounding crowd were all turned in their direction, staring—sometimes speaking with the person beside them—casting them into sharp relief, as though they were the players of some kind of theater, performing in a special space cut out of the surroundings...

[...]

But the stares did not stop. It was as though they had made enemies out of the entire world.

Lost in the terrible shock of the moment was the fact that the boy shed been negotiating with had slipped into the crowd, disappearing into the sea of gazes.

The *founder of the Dollars* turned into one of the mob, unbeknownst to anyone.

[...]

At a glance, it didnt look like a meetup at all. Each person wore their own outfit and stood where they were without order or reason. They were simply there as they were—on their own or in small groups of like-minded friends.

Some were office workers, some were teenage girls in their high school uni-

> forms, some were exceedingly plain college students, some were foreigners, some fit the image of a color gang perfectly, some were housewives— Some were— Some were— Some were—
>
> [...]
>
> Even the police could easily be fooled if called. That was exactly the point of the group, and thus it melted into the town without suspicion.
>
> Until a single e-mail reached the entire group.
>
> Mikado waited for the right moment and sent a preprepared message to essentially every member of the group with a mail address on their cell phone, all at once.
>
> *"Right now anyone not looking at messages on their phones is an enemy. Do not attack, just stare silently."*[44]

Unlike the individual teams of the G-boys who mostly knew one another or were otherwise friends of friends, the Dollars turned out to be a substantially larger group, many of whom were unaware of each other's membership, yet consider themselves Dollars nonetheless. McQuire notes pointedly that "Mobile media also have the potential to alter the dynamic of public interactions among crowds of erstwhile strangers".[45] He quotes Rheingold, who states

> Location-sensing wireless organizers, wireless networks, and community supercomputing collectives all have one thing in common: *They enable people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before.*
>
> [...]
>
> The "killer apps" of tomorrow's mobile infocom industry won't be hardware devices or software programs but social practices. The most far-reaching changes will come, as they often do, from the kinds of relationships, enterprises, communities, and markets that the infrastructure makes possible.[46]

The Dollars are an example of what Rheingold refers to as a 'smart mob':

> Smart mobs consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other. The people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways

44. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 167–175.
45. McQuire, "Performing Public Space," 147.
46. Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Basic Books, 2003), [*xii–xviii*].

> never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities. Their mobile devices connect them with other information devices in the environment as well as with other people's telephones.[47]

The Dollars constitute a crowd, but they are a crowd with identity, coordinated through the virtual space of the Internet—indeed a 'smart mob'. Through self-identification as a member of the Dollars, the coordinated crowd creates an other—that of Namie and her goons. Mikado, while the founder of the Dollars and holding considerable influence as in shown over the Dollars, is by definition a member himself, and he is able to blend in, and become part of this coordinated crowd—to do so requires one to participate both in the virtual space of the Dollars, and the physical space of the meet-up location, something Namie and her goons are unable to do. While the Dollars are perhaps strangers to one another, they share an identity; a digital bond that perhaps marks them just a little more than pure strangers.

What started out as an online joke became a sizable force that can exert real influence in the world. While still rooted in the virtual, the Dollars are no longer limited exclusively within the barriers of the virtual: "The Dollars were apparently growing through more mediums than just the Internet".[48] The organizational power of virtual space has broken down the barrier and exerted its influence over the physical—every member of the Dollars that showed up to the meet-up on Mikado's request was simultaneously performing spatial practices in both the real (by physically being at the meet-up) and the digital (by participating in an event as part of a virtual community).

Returning to the question at hand—do Makoto and the G-boys constitute a virtual community? Regarding a survey involving mobile phone usage, Kobayashi et. al distinguishes between 'strong-tie' networks and 'weak-tie' networks,

> One type of network involves 'strong ties' among a small number of intimate and significant others. The others are 'weak ties', or less intimate ties, with a large number of geographically dispersed people whom respondents meet less frequently.[49]

47. Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, [xii].
48. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 174.
49. Tetsuro Kobayashi, Ken'ichi Ikeda, and Kakuko Miyata, "Social capital online: Collective use of the Internet and reciprocity as lubricants of democracy," *Information, Communication & Society* 9, no. 5 (2006): 585, doi:10.1080/13691180600965575.

One can characterize the Makoto and the G-boys as a strong-tie network (as they mostly know one another), whereas Mikado and the Dollars as a weak-tie network (as they are all strangers to each other, and indeed geographically dispersed throughout Ikebukuro and possibly beyond). Nevertheless, the core difference between the two is their primary place of meeting. Makoto often meets with his network in very physical places—Ikebukuro Nishiguchi Koen ('West Gate Park'), the Hotel Metropolitan, McDonald's[50]—his preferred use of the PHS seems to be scheduling *real life* meetings. Mikado on the other hand, is fairly comfortable with interacting purely in virtual space, through discussions in his chat room (which, separate from the Dollars also constitute a virtual space), the Dollars' website, and text messaging, without having ever to meet his conversational partners in the flesh. In this way are the G-boys less *virtual* than Mikado's chat room or the Dollars; whereas the G-boys are rooted in the physical, the other two communities are at their purest form virtual. The G-boys are undeniably *networked through the virtual*, but they do not constitute a virtual community—no such virtual/physical barrier exists for the G-boys, as they are all in touch with one another through the physical as much as they are through the virtual.

4 The Virtual Mask and the Textual Barrier

It is important to note that the barrier between physical and virtual as discussed in the previous section indeed does exist. Kadota, another member of the Dollars makes the observation that "[The Dollars' website] was designed to reduce conflict between the various members of the Dollars, but it was almost unheard of for members to run into each other on the street.[51]" One does not usually flaunt their membership in an online community, as if there is a separation between one's online identity and real life identity. Only upon occasional circumstances such as Mikado's text message do the barriers blur and break down, and one walks with one foot in the virtual, and one in the physical—while this seems to be becoming more and more common in our Internet-centered lives, in this section I discuss the separation of online and offline identity, as well as the limitations of online communication in virtual space.

Let us summarize our discussion so far. Mikado and Masaomi have been keeping in touch with each other through Internet chat; such an action form space in the virtuality of

50. Ishida, "Ikebukuro West Gate Park," 54.
51. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 174.

the Internet, and results in a close bond between the two despite not having met face-to-face in years. In addition, through Internet chat rooms and the Dollars' forums, Mikado has long since been an active participant in Ikebukuro city life without being physically in the city, through the virtual space that becomes intertwined with the physical space by walkers that participate—form space—simultaneously in both the physical and the virtual. However, Mikado's experience of the city, and his bonds formed in the virtual, are mediated by the Internet—the default mode of communication in said medium being *text*. While Mikado may be a participant, and his bonds undeniable, one can argue that he himself is not necessarily at the ground level: he does not experience the full sensual fidelity of the city until he is physically within Ikebukuro to experience it in person.

Let us now examine Mikado's first meeting with Masaomi in more detail. While they have been chatting every day, Mikado is nevertheless surprised at Masaomi's appearance.

> He glanced closer at the stranger and began to recognize the features of an old friend.
>
> "Wait, um...Kida?"
>
> "You have to ask? Okay, multiple choice: three answers. Am I, one, Masaomi Kida, two, Masaomi Kida, or, three, Masaomi Kida?"
>
> For the first time since reaching Ikebukuro, Mikado smiled.
>
> "Wow, Kida! Is that really you?"
>
> "Thanks, just ignore the joke I spent three years crafting... Anyway, good to see you, man!"
>
> "We were talking in chat just yesterday. Sorry, you look so different, I couldn't be sure it was you. I wasnt expecting your hair to be dyed! Also, that joke sucks"
>
> Though they talked nearly every day online, there was no way for him to know how his friends face had changed over the years. His voice was lower now, so it was little wonder he Though they talked nearly every day online, there was no way for him to know how his friends face had changed over the years. His voice was lower now, so it was little wonder he failed to recognize it at first.
>
> Masaomi Kida smiled shyly and objected, "Well, it's been four years. And its not that Ive changed too much; you havent changed enough. You look exactly the same as you did in elementary school...and don't slam my jokes." He smacked the top of Mikado's considerably more-youthful head a few times.

> "Ack, knock it off. As if you've ever been shy about telling bad jokes in chat..."[52]

Earlier I argued that this meeting was not so much a reunion between old friends, but something much more familiar; in depth, it is much more *weird* and complex than just that. Between the two friends, they have naught to catch up on; having been in constant contact throughout the years they are familiar with each other's personality and goings-ons as if they had never separated at all. Yet at the same time, Mikado has no idea what his friend looks or sounds like! Up until now, his relationship with Masaomi has been restricted to what can be conveyed through text, and vice versa with Masaomi's image of Mikado. The *textual barrier* of online communication has created an identity for Mikado and Masaomi that is not quite separate, but not entirely the same as one's real life identity.

The dichotomy between one's real life identity and one's online (i.e. virtual) identity is blurred in the case of Mikado and Masaomi's relationship as they have a previously established real life relationship that was brought online and made virtual through geographical and temporal distance. However, the textual barrier is thicker and more obvious when such bonds originate purely within virtual space, as in those Mikado has with Setton and Kanra in his chat room.

Consider this abridged chat transcript, which occurs soon after Mikado's move to Ikebukuro.

> *Chat room (late night)*
>
> **–TAROU TANAKA HAS ENTERED THE CHAT–**
>
> Tanaka Tarou: 【Good evening.】
>
> Setton: ［Evening.］
>
> Tanaka Tarou: 【Aha, Setton. I saw it today!】
>
> Tanaka Tarou: 【That Black Rider thing!】
>
> Setton: ［? Are you in Ikebukuro, Tarou Tanaka?］
>
> Tanaka Tarou: 【Yes. As a matter of fact, I just moved to Ikebukuro today. I'm logging in from a friend's house right now, but tomorrow I'll be living in an apartment next to the station. I've already signed up with an Internet provider, so I should be connected to the Net in no time.】

52. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 33.

Setton: ［Well, congrats. Living on your own?］

Tanaka Tarou: 【Yes.】

Setton: ［Ah, I see. So did you see the Black Rider around seven in the evening?］

Tanaka Tarou: 【Oh, you know already? I saw it right outside Sunshine.】

Setton: ［Yep. I was there.］

Tanaka Tarou: 【?!】

Tanaka Tarou: 【Really? Wow, we might have passed right by each other and never realized it!】

Setton: ［Possibly.］

Tanaka Tarou: 【Wow! Crazy! I should have mentioned this earlier, then!】

Setton: ［At any rate, welcome to Ikebukuro. If there's anything you want to know, don't hesitate to ask.］

[...]

Tanaka Tarou: 【Do you know someone named Izaya Orihara?】

Tanaka Tarou: 【I was talking to my friend, and he said I should stay away from that guy.】

Tanaka Tarou: 【Is he scary? Oh, what am I saying, you probably don't know him. Sorry.】

[...]

Setton: ［[...] You really shouldn't mess with Izaya Orihara. He's seriously bad news.］

Kanra: 《Oh! Good evening, Tanaka!》

Tanaka Tarou: 【?! Kanra, have you been here all along?】

Kanra: 《I was just on the phone. Oh, I read the backlog, are you here in Tokyo? Congratulations! We should have an IRL[53]welcoming party soon.》

Tanaka Tarou: 【Oh, no need to go to all that trouble. I would like to hang out in person, though.】

53. In Real Life.

Kanra: 《Yeah, I know.》

[...]

Tanaka Tarou: 【So these Dollars really are famous around town.】

Kanra: 《The Dollars are crazy! Apparently they just had a run-in with the Chinese mafia, and when a yakuza got stabbed recently, it was supposedly the work of one of the Dollars' low-level guys!》

[...]

Tanaka Tarou: 【Argh, I wanna know more, but I have to get up early tomorrow, so that's all for now.】

Kanra: 《Ah, good night, then!》

Setton: [Good night, Tarou Tanaka.]

Setton: [I have some business of my own, so I'm out as well.]

Tanaka Tarou: 【Sorry to leave... [...]】

Tanaka Tarou: 【So long!】

Kanra: 《Well, I guess that's it for today. No one else is going to show up.》

Kanra: 《Good night. ☆》

–TAROU TANAKA HAS LEFT THE CHAT–

–SETTON HAS LEFT THE CHAT–

–KANRA HAS LEFT THE CHAT–[54]

There are some interesting dynamics that can be seen in this online conversation. At a higher level, all three participants treat the chat room almost as a physical space—they exchange pleasantries as they show up, and excuse themselves as they leave, as one would when meeting up with friends at a bar or restaurant. Kanra mentions that "No one else is going to show up"[55] as if one arrives at the place of discussion, but since it is late no one else will bother to come. This is a good example of virtual space as was discussed in the first section.

Note also that all three people involved are strangers that have never met up in real life, yet are comfortable enough with each other to share details about their personal lives.

54. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 41–43.
55. Ibid., 43.

Mikado shares that he has recently moved to Ikebukuro, and Kanra offers to *meet up in real life*. They hide their real names and faces behind aliases—handles, or nicknames—to maintain this strange balance between being strangers and having known each other for a long time in this virtual space. Rheingold writes of chat nicknames,

> An artificial but stable identity means that you can never be certain about the flesh- person behind an [internet chat] nickname, but you can be reasonably certain that the person you communicate with today under a specific nickname is the same one who used that nickname yesterday.[56]

The handle one chooses in an online chat room becomes an identity unto itself; an identity that one creates for and is aware of themselves, outside of their identity presented in real life. Foster posits that "[computer mediated communication] mediates our interactions in such a way that our social cyberspatial selves are far more likely an extension of our conscious selves than a representation of self-conscious being.".[57] This artificial identity—this virtual mask—creates a barrier of separation between the virtual and the real. Mikado (or rather, Tanaka Tarou) mentions to Setton that they "might have passed right by each other and never realized it".[58] It is this virtual mask that makes the dynamics of this conversation interesting, for Mikado is in fact the leader of the Dollars, Setton is later subtly revealed to be the Black Rider, and Kanra is in fact Izaya Orihara himself. The participants of the discussion are unaware that they are discussing themselves, *except for when they become the subject of discussion*, where they *do not acknowledge their real life identity*. Of course Mikado passed by Setton—Setton is the Black Rider herself! But while Setton mentions that she was at Sunshine, she does not acknowledge this at all. Neither does Kanra acknowledge that he is Izaya Orihara when Setton calls him "bad news",[59] nor does Mikado acknowledge his status being the founder of the Dollars—instead he indicates his interest in more information about the Dollars ("I wanna know more"[60])[61].

56. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, 182.
57. Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," 32.
58. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 41.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 42.
61. As we now know following the discussion of the Dollars in the previous section, anyone can claim to be a member of the Dollars, and it has little organizational structure other than posts on the message boards and Mikado's text messages, which individual members are not obligated to follow; indeed the Dollars can be said to be the crowd itself. It is likely that the events which Kanra describe were attributed to the Dollars by a third-party, or were done by someone self-identifying as a member of the Dollars, or perhaps never occurred at all—a story created to boost the profile of the Dollars. As the narrative proceeds, it is made more obvious that Kanra's (and thus Izaya Orihara's) statements should not be taken at face value.

Why then, do the three participants construct this identity, never revealing their real names in the virtual space? For some internet communities, even using such fixed pseudonyms is taboo. Nozawa provides the example of *sutehan* (disposable handles) in the Japanese image board 2ch.

> Entry numbers and IDs used [to identify the speaker] are sometimes called 'disposable handles' (*sutehan*; *sute[ru]* = 'to throw away'). More generally, a *sutehan* is any name that is not 'fixed' to a person like a *kotehan* [fixed handles]; thus it could be linguistically manifested. The point here is, first, that a *sutehan* is construed as being extemporaneously created, either by the person using it or by the technological arrangement, to be discarded after use in a particular context.[62]

Distinguishing between the "pseudonymous" and the purely "anonymous" he quotes Judith Donath (emphasis mine)

> Full anonymity is one extreme of a continuum that runs from the totally anonymous to the thoroughly named. **A pseudonym, though it may be untraceable to a real world person, may have a wellestablished reputation in the virtual domain; a pseudonymous message may thus come with a wealth of contextual information about the sender.** A purely anonymous message, on the other hand, stands alone.[63]

In the case of Mikado, his alias of "Tanaka Tarou" is one such fixed pseudonym, a *kotehan*, as is Setton and Kanra are for their respective, real life holders. While untraceable to their real life identity, the name itself (which is self-chosen) conveys with it history and context within the community of the chat room, *and only within the community of the chat room*; such aliases are never used outside in real life when these characters inevitably encounter each other in real life. Mikado himself only makes the realization near the very end of the novel,

> Then Mikado remembered one of his chat partners, a person who had invited him to a specific chat room, and claimed to know various things about Ikebukuro and the Dollars.

62. Shunsuke Nozawa, "The gross face and virtual fame: Semiotic mediation in Japanese virtual communication," *First Monday* 17, no. 3 (March 2012), doi:10.5210/fm.v17i3.3535.

63. Judith Donath, Karrie Karahalios, and Fernanda Viégas, "Visualizing Conversation," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4, no. 4 (June 1999): 51, quoted from ibid., ISSN: 1083-6101, doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.1999.tb00107.x.

> *Can it be? Can it be? Can it be?!*[64]

Nozawa notes the term *sumiwake* to describe this unwillingness to reveal one's online identity,

> [T]he Japanese subcultural sphere, even while it is also under the influence of such idioms, more saliently relies on a different principle of boundarymaking epitomized by the vernacular (i.e., legally not codified) notion of *sumiwake*, 'partitioning of residence.' That is, one needs to learn the boundary of communicative 'residences' across which some things, especially names, should not be circulated, not just between the virtual and the actual, or between old and new media, but within the virtual itself[65]

Indeed, *sumiwake* as we have seen refers not only between the 'residences' of the virtual and the physical, but also entirely within the virtual itself—Mikado's identity of Tanaka Tarou does not overlap with his identity as the Dollars' administrator. Neither do Mikado's real life friends (e.g. Masaomi) know of either identities. To Masaomi and his other real life friends, he is the regular high-schooler Mikado Ryuugamine, not Tanaka Tarou, and definitely not the founder of the Dollars. It is ironic (and perhaps intended to be so) that the very fanciful name "Mikado Ryuugamine" embodies such a plain identity, but the plain to the point of satirical name "Tanaka Tarou" embodies someone who is in frequent contact with characters such as the 'legendary' "Black Rider" as "Setton" and the 'dangerous' "Izaya Orihara" as "Kanra".

The notion of layered identity is also shown in Setton—the Black Rider herself. Her real name being Celty Sturlson, she is a Dullahan, a mythological headless rider from Ireland who carries her head on her horse—or should have had she not had it stolen years ago. Her search for her head led her to Japan, where she lives with and becomes romantically involved with Shinra Kishitani, a brilliant underground surgeon. Being without a head, her only method of communication is through text, by typing messages out on a PDA. On her first real life encounter with Mikado, she is asked to remove the motorcycle helmet she uses while in public to conceal her lack of a head.

> "Uh...well, actually, there's something I'd like to ask the rider in black..."
> Celty pulled a PDA out of the shadow riding suit and typed, *"What is it?"*
> [...]

64. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 185.
65. Nozawa, "The gross face and virtual fame: Semiotic mediation in Japanese virtual communication."

> "Uhm...can you show me what's inside your helmet?"
>
> [...]
>
> Celty hesitated, then typed in her PDA.
>
> *"Do you swear you won't scream?"*
>
> [...]
>
> His head nodded vigorously, and at the same time, Celty pushed the visor of the full helmet upward.
>
> Darkness. There was nothing before his eyes but empty space.[66]

Celty's identity is even more layered and multifaceted than Mikado's and unlike Mikado, who was only limited to a textual experience of the city until he was able to move physically to Ikebukuro, Celty has always had a textual barrier mediating her experience, *despite having physical presence in the city*. Because her mode of communication is so limited, she is *always* with one foot in the virtual, and one foot in the physical. Indeed, the Internet allowed her to learn, through computer mediated communication (i.e. chat rooms and discussion boards), what it means to be human, *vis-à-vis* the relatively emotionless experience of being a dullahan.

> [I]n the last few years, as the Internet gave her increased opportunities to contact people, she couldn't help but wonder how close her feelings and values were to those of humans.
>
> At first, she found it frightening and needed Shinra's help, but now Celty was at the computer virtually at all times when not working or searching for her head.
>
> [...]
>
> Celty increased her contact with others over the Internet. People separated by their PCs did not know each other's faces or pasts. Which was fine with her, because she didn't even have a face. And yet, the connections were real. In real life, she only knew a few people through Shinra, and only he and his father knew exactly what she was. Rumors had spread about the headless rider, but the rumors didn't identify her as a woman or a dullahan.
>
> She didn't feel a particular need to hide these things, but neither did she plan to reveal them.[67]

66. Narita, *Durarara!!, Vol. 1*, 156–157.
67. Ibid., 148.

At home, when with Shinra, she does not keep her helmet on; to Shinra, she is not Setton, she is not the Black Rider, she is just Celty. Her virtual mask as Setton also manifests physically (albeit in a different identity), as the riding helmet she wears in place of a head, the very one that forms her identity of "the Black Rider" in public life; it is a mask that she wears to avoid the public gaze as a woman and as a mythical creature. Cutting through these three layered identities—Celty Sturlson, Setton, and the Black Rider—is her identity as something not quite human, a idea that she struggles with regardless of which identity she chooses to take on at the time. It is also interesting to note that Celty is by definition a "Digital Immigrant".[68] Nevertheless, she has adopted to the networked world, and it is the virtual space of the Internet that allows her to face this struggle and by performing spatial acts in the virtual, by communicating with others across time and space, she is able to learn what it means to be human.

5 Conclusions

It is undoubtable that the forms of communication enabled by the mobile phone and the Internet have changed society permanently in profound ways. Children born after the advent of this connected world can hardly imagine what it was like before everyone carried on their person a small handheld device that connects them to not only a wealth of knowledge, but millions and billions of other people.

Durarara!!'s themes of Internet communication and identity shows that spatial practices can indeed occur on the Internet, forming virtual space. Within these virtual spaces, the bonds created are no less real than bonds created in physical space. However, they are mediated by text, and one's experience is limited by this barrier.

Furthermore, it is because of this barrier that one can choose their identity within virtual space, apart, but not entirely separate from their identity in the physical; this is done by self-naming, and perhaps discarding such names should one wish to let go of an identity. This process is conscious, and one shapes their online identity consciously as compared to the more subconscious process of offline identity-shaping. Yet as with bonds, these identities are no less real than those in the physical; they are the demarcated facets of oneself that one chooses to display in a certain context.

However, the barrier between virtual space and physical space can blur, and this occurs when one participates in both spaces at once. When virtual space-forming induces

68. Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants."

physical space-forming, often through the power of the mobile phone, the city becomes digitized for such walkers—half virtual, half physical—but for those less privy to the act of virtual space-forming, they may become an other; being in only one of two spaces that are being formed at that moment. Not only that, there are those that can not conceive of, or even reject virtual space-forming, especially those that were not born in the networked world, but there are others that embrace it despite having to learn and adopt to the methods of virtual space-forming rather than having such skills be innate as those that were exposed in childhood.

While I lack time for a discussion, the issues of identity faced by each of the characters in *Durarara!!*, and how those identities are mediated through the Internet and computer mediated communication, is further explored in later volumes in interesting ways. Nevertheless, the impact of technology in our experience of the city can not be denied. The relationships technology creates are real as are the spaces it enables. Those that deny it do themselves a disservice, for the virtual, unlike the physical, is infinite, with no regard for geographical or temporal limitations. They will simply become those left behind.

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