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Online Social Sites as Virtual Parks: An Investigation into Leisure Online and Offline

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Abstract

The Internet is perceived as undergoing a new era termed Web 2.0, a new generation of websites characterized by social networks and user generated content. This shift is predominantly social versus technical in nature. In particular, online social sites are characterized by its leisure properties which this paper argues is by no means novel but deeply rooted in historical, economic, social and cultural spaces and practices and intrinsically tied to offline practices. Thereby, to understand the nature of *cyberleisure* spaces and its offline/online, transnational/transcultural and historic/contemporary relationships, this paper proposes the metaphor of *virtual parks* as a critical and comprehensive lens for analysis, making the argument that *parks* best reflects the *rhetoric* of online social spaces—that of being open, non-utilitarian, public and free for all.

Keywords: cyberspace, leisure, metaphor, social network sites, parks

Introduction

We should be careful not to fall into the trap of either declaring that cyberspace provides new public spaces or that cyberspace further weakens public spaces in the geographic domain. Instead, we should seek to document the socio-spatial relations of cyberspace, the interplay between public and private concerns, and how these intersect with geographic space...they are spatialisations utilising a geographic metaphor to gain tangibility – (Dodge and Kitchin, 2001)

Social network sites such as *FaceBook*, *YouTube*, *Cyworld*, *Orkut*, *Second Life*, *MySpace*, and *Twitter*, unlike other sites of the Internet, are often viewed primarily for its leisure purposes with no overt goal in mind but to ‘hang out,’ share and experience. Within such spaces, people are seen to idle away their time in diverse and complex ways. This paper conceptualizes such shared ‘leisure’ spaces that have marked this new generation as that of *virtual parks*. Here, the nature of such practices is explicated by relating them to activities within spaces offline that best reflect its rhetoric of being social, non-utilitarian, open, public and free for all- that of *parks*. In both such spaces, the core defining characteristic is that of leisure. This paper looks into historical to contemporary constructions and practices of parks to gain insight into the nature of leisure spaces in contemporary society, particularly that of cyberleisure: the architecting and regulating aspects that structures and shapes leisure spaces; the range of transnational and transcultural leisure spaces that are inhabited, constructed and enjoyed and its enabling and disabling features. In this approach, action is seen as context embedded and thereby in talking of spatiality, the nature of the activity is revealed and vice versa. Further, in pursuing the understanding of leisure, this paper confines itself to those activities and spaces that are social over psychological, public over private and yet, by this very scope, it caters to a much needed pursuit of comparative leisure study that is intrinsically linked to the study of online spaces/activities.

In viewing such cyberspaces through the lens of *parks*, transnationally and transculturally, the intent is to reveal the complex polity in accomplishing the creation and sustenance of such spaces in society, disrupting a common notion that leisure is non-contentious, with little overt economic, utilitarian and/or ‘productive’ value or predetermined goal at hand. In doing so, this paper investigates the nature of park spaces to make transparent the diverse needs and accomplishments of a range of actors in this tremendous social accomplishment of leisure, both offline and online.

Part I starts with the understanding of leisure followed by the explication of metaphors as a strategic methodology to make the unfamiliar familiar, particularly in situating cyberspace and specifically the need to conceptualize online leisure through the lens of parks. Part II draws on a range of park spaces, its structuring and activities to highlight specific aspects of cyberleisure as well as to understand the dynamism of leisure spaces itself across time and space. The concluding section challenges the reader to broaden what constitutes as common leisure spaces to best situate contemporary online social activity and spaces.

PART 1

Leisure for the Commons

One can say that we have come a long way from the Puritan perspective of leisure as sin to that of a luxury in lifestyle and now perhaps the prime commodity of the next century where the luxury of yesteryear becomes present day necessity (Chudacoff, 2007). There are faint memories of leisure spaces and practices as contentious but for the most part, this memory remains buried away in the chronicles of a bygone era. Thereby few will question the presence of parks and fewer will see its buried controversies and struggles as one strolls through its manicured landscape. On the other hand, much attention is being paid to leisure social spaces online where people check each other out, share their views on movies or just ‘mindlessly’ browse through texts and hypertexts. This is seen as the mark of the 21st century, the arrival of a new kind of movement, a novel means of experiencing, producing and consuming leisure. What is more, these activities are seen as perhaps the most democratic of all, as such common social spaces appear to serve as open platforms for all to participate, circumventing gender, class, nationality and culture (Wellman and Hampton, 1999).

In fact, technology and leisure have been much debated by the belief in new technology as birthing a new kind of leisure unique to this time and age where traditional practice gives way to novel acts of leisure else in the predication of deteriorating social ties and lifestyle through what constitutes as remote and isolating leisure practices (Selwyn, 2003) to the opposite end of saturation of virtual leisure spaces diluting social interaction and relationships (Roberts, 2006). And then there is the perspective that “new technologies will simply facilitate and supplement long-established social relationships and activities” where leisure practices “hardly change in scale or composition” (p.38) given that leisure in some kind or form has been practiced across cultures and geographies prior to any of these new technologies (Markham, 1998, Leander and McKim, 2003, Woolgar, 2002). Of course with this perspective, there is no denial that with new technologies comes some novel social forms of leisure that finds expression through new means of thought and action, shaping its geography that in turn shaping further action. The goal here however is to focus on similarities between offline and online leisure and less on differences.

Thereby, while it is apparent that leisure is prevalent across societies and cultures, what is at issue here is how it is experienced, who experiences it and for what purposes and in doing so, to unravel its deep ties to histories and cultures. As Roberts states:

...the best explanations of how people use their leisure are not in terms of how they are manipulated from above but in terms of the different combinations of constraints and opportunities associated with different types of employment or lack of employment, gender and family roles and life stages, all operating in the contexts of ethnic, national and religious cultures. (2006, p. x)

So while there have been efforts at drawing online/offline parallels (Wellman and Hampton, 1999), few venture to capture the complex momentum of this dichotomy through leisure activity that is at once both

contemporary and historic, cultural and transnational. The focus in this paper is not so much to argue about current day leisure as novel or not, but to highlight the dynamism in relationships between and within leisure acts/spaces that are permeated by a range of cultures and histories and thereby offer a fresh approach through the methodology of metaphorization, to conceptualize what appears to be an overwhelming realm of novel online activity and spaces. In doing so, this paper reveals the nature of *common* leisure spaces by unfolding the true iconicity of *parks* and its diverse permutations across time and space. Here, the very act of leisure becoming ‘common’ or democratic is paramount to its understanding.

Metaphorization of Online Leisure

In conceptualizing cyberspace, the *metaphor* is never far behind. To explain ‘new’ technology spaces and activity, there is a need to look at the ‘old:’ the unfamiliar resorts to the familiar to make itself known. In talking about social interaction online, we find ourselves in virtual *dungeons*, *pubs*, *cybercafes*, *chatrooms*, *homepages*, online *communities* and MUD *lobbies* (Adams, 1997). In situating ourselves in larger virtual geographies, we’re confronted with the ‘electronic *frontier*’ (Rheingold, 2000), caught on the ‘information *superhighway*’ (Brook and Boal, 1995) or adrift the modern cultural *scapes* and *flows* (Appadurai, 1996, Castells, 1996). In fact, the need to construct a “sense of place” (Spradley, 1980, Dodge and Kitchin, 2001) online has become a paramount strategy in the understanding of cyber-sociality. Thereby the resorting to offline space to explain online space is hardly an uncommon practice.

In fact, this paper does not contest such metaphors but rather builds on them to cater to an aspect that is believed to have been at large overlooked in conceptualizing spaces online: that of leisure. In a sense, one can look at this as accepting of the Internet as *soft cities* by Mitchell (1995) and thereby, focusing on a specific yet universal spatial construction within (and across) cities since the 1900s – that of parks. In other words, if the Internet is a city, this paper argues that its online common leisure spaces are its parks. Hence, given that the Internet is constructed as a social space, this paper employs the method of ‘metaphorization,’ that of conceptualizing the unfamiliar or lesser known by establishing parallels with the familiar yet seemingly disconnected. Metaphors thereby allow for a deep understanding of situated activity online:

...a metaphor makes sense of something by tying it to another, more familiar image. An alternative model holds that a metaphor creates an association between dissimilar things, inflecting disjunct meanings to create a new, third, meaning...on this account, metaphors does not contain meaning; it provides a starting point for the construction of meaning. (Adams, 1997, p. 156)

In fact, it is now commonly understood that with the advent of the “new,” in this case, leisure online, we become *bricoleurs*, using “old” discourses and practices to inform, construct and shape the understanding of the new (Dodge and Kitchin, 2001). The blurring of the virtual and the real is thereby an evolving social and spatial interaction and construction.

Virtual Parks

The employment of ‘parks’ as a metaphor is important as it comes with vast, dynamic and diverse historical to contemporary understandings. Given that social network sites have a short history of its own, by resorting to parks as a metaphorical equivalent, we can gain insight into the dynamic nature of online leisure spaces, its possible roles in society at a given time, its transnational and transcultural quality, its temporality and repetitions, re-creations and revitalizations.

We can equate for instance online social sites to urban parks across much of the globe as it emerged in the 1900s where there was a struggle of it becoming public as well as the fact that parks at that time served a vital community function of socialization and communication. It is important to stress that rather than preoccupy oneself with the superstructure versus agency dilemma, the history of parks will reveal the complex interplay of governments and other authorizing powers contributing to the ‘democratic’ shaping of parks simultaneous to their need to control the leisure spaces of the growing urban mass. Here, the paper will argue that similar to parks, much thought has gone into the architecting and regulating of online leisure spaces as the ‘builders’ and ‘regulators’ of online platforms have to constantly attend to the ‘users’ of their spaces and at times are subservient to their users as their manufactured leisure spaces only gain credence through usage by a diverse and active public. Yet this relationship is in constant and perhaps unresolved flux as control for such spaces are contested and/or shared on an ongoing basis.

Also, given that not all social network sites are of the same scale and usage level, it is worth exploring the niche aspects of such a phenomenon, and the need for localizing and making intimate leisure spaces online. Here, we can investigate the burgeoning of local community gardens, international walled communities, IT parks and theme parks as the general urban parks become too ‘common.’ This poses the conundrum of making popular and institutionalizing leisure spaces and thereby leading to its loss of appeal. Of course, boundaries are always key to the understanding of spaces, including that online. While it is acknowledged that it is challenging to transfer such a discourse onto cyberspaces given the ease of movement across and through websites, it needs to be seen that people are often creatures of routine and establish patterns online just as much as they do offline.

The third prime argument made here are that these park spaces were strategic to many different populations as children, women, gays, lower classes and other specific and often discriminated groups

mobilized and exercised their identity and socio-cultural orientation through their meandering within park spaces. Here, leisure spaces can also at times be reconstituted as contested and (post)colonial territory, as barriers to entry were drawn, sometimes overtly as in the case of membership and permits to more covertly as in access and usage barriers instituted through social norms and expectations, policies, and other mechanisms for screening, manipulating and controlling people. Thereby, one person's 'loitering' or 'cruising' could be another person's 'strolling.' It is important to demonstrate here that behind the design of leisure spaces are intentions, regulations and expectations, constraints that are often circumvented, transformed and played with by the people that inhabit these spaces. Thereby this section reveals the richness of play with online leisure spaces, corroding any uniformity in action or generality of users as they browse strategically, impulsively, or aimlessly through a maze of multimodal texts and hypertexts.

In the concluding section, this paper taps into the contemporary discourse on parks as green ecologies and infrastructures, gaining insight into relationships of spaces and movements within and between such leisure spaces. Special attention is paid to points of tension between the applying of this "park" metaphor to such online leisure spaces. With all metaphors, there are places that cease to explain, overlap and at times directly conflict and contradict with its compared entity. By paying attention to this, we can gauge the junctures needed to disassociate this parallel, shedding light on possible unique characteristics of contemporary leisure spaces online. We can then investigate if online leisure spaces are mere continuations of spaces and practices or are distinct in certain ways.

PART 2

I The gardener, the patron, the architect and the stroller

It is tempting to attribute to the designer the omnipotence of determined action. However, as we will see, spaces however manufactured for certain intended purposes and intended actions, continue to defy its makers. More importantly, the makers themselves can be instrumental in shifts in authority from that which is more restricted and private to the makings of a democratic public space. For instance, the transition of early 20th century Beijing urban parks as imperial to that of a common space was not just from pressures of local activism but rather from the changes and momentum instituted by the elites themselves (Shi, 1998). Much like the origins of the Internet birthed by/for the military and later released deliberately by them for public access, these acts challenge the simplistic explanation of power structures as responsible for the divides of the haves and have-nots, of info-rich and info-poor, of the connected and disconnected.

In fact, it is worth questioning why in general, parks being a public leisure space have fewer regulations and less policing than other public spaces given that leisure can be expressed through a range of varied expressions and actions, often bordering on the contentious. In being able to explore this issue, we would be simultaneously shedding light on the real time dilemma faced by platform owners and designers of virtual social spaces as they are continuously confronted with controlling their users on issues such as the extent to which they should correspond their spaces to the needs of their users, which users get prerogative over others with the given fact that users themselves are heterogeneous in nature and demand different if not at times diametrically opposite services (Balkin, 2004). Here, the freedom to ‘design’ online platforms and the freedom to ‘play’ within these virtual worlds are in constant flux. More importantly, unlike other public spaces, leisure spaces are contingent on the participant’s sense of freedom to be able to be drawn to these spaces, to inhabit them and to actually gain ‘leisure’ experiences from such spaces. In other words, users do not *have to* use these spaces but *choose* to do so and that in itself is the most important factor in understanding the delicate balance between the owners and the users, the State and its citizens.

For instance, controlling of online leisure spaces takes place through contracts, ‘terms of service’ and End User License Agreements (EULA) for participation and if not adhered to, the platform owners have full right to block or kick out those who violate these terms.

Game designers and platform owners control what goes on in the virtual world in two basic ways: through code and through contract. First, they control what can be done in the game space by writing (or rewriting) the software that sets the physics and the ontology of the game space, defines powers, and constitutes certain types of social relations. Through code they can change features of the virtual landscape, grant or deny powers to participants, and kick participants out. They can also write the code to allow them to watch surreptitiously what is going on in the game space. Because they can magically change the physics of the game space and see everything that is going on there, the platform owners are sometimes referred to as the “gods” or “wizards” of the game space. (Balkin, 2004, pp. 2050)

On the flip side though, designers’ freedom and players’ freedom are often synergistic as the value of an online leisure space rests on its usage so it is to the designers benefit to keep their users happy and pay heed to their needs. And often when a designer makes a decision that a good number of users are unhappy about, as participants they make their voices heard and through continuous pressure, can make the owner revoke the judgment; “many of the most important controversies in game worlds revolve around the potential conflicts between assertions of the right to design and counter assertions of the right to play” (p.2051).

To further complicate matters, users of leisure spaces become the designers themselves be it through wikis, blogs to Facebook profiles and with open source code, can actually not just alter the content but also the

code itself (p. 2051). Thereby, the space is ‘owned’ as much by the user as by the platform owner in terms of actual social norms and practices that prevails online. This is not to say that there are no boundaries for key actors such as the State, the platform owners/ designers and the users themselves as they play out their own roles in orchestrating and sustaining such spaces. For instance, while the State is more preoccupied about indecency and violence, platform owners may be more concerned about engaging and garnering loyalty from their users while users themselves may be most concerned about building relationships, entertainment, information gathering or just passing of time.

In fact the best form of regulation comes from the users themselves through forms of formal and informal enforcement norms as they shun and/or reprimand those who behave disruptively towards the space (Donath, 2007). Interestingly, most States have created laws to protect such leisure spaces from themselves and that historically, just like parks as ‘open public forums’ have been held sacrosanct for the exercise of free expression:

In virtual worlds, the relationship between platform owners and players is not simply one between producers and consumers. Rather, it is often a relationship of governors to citizens. Virtual worlds form communities that grow and develop in ways that the platform owners do not foresee and cannot fully control. Virtual worlds quickly become joint projects between platform owners and players. The correct model is thus not the protection of the player’s interests solely as consumers, but a model of joint governance. (Balkin, 2004, pp. 2082)

In drawing parallels to such virtual spaces, we can take the city of early 20th century Beijing for instance. It was organized as concentric walled encirclements with the most esteemed class at the center: the Forbidden City at the heart of the city served the emperor, within the Imperial City resided the courts and the high-ranking officials, the Inner city for the Chinese officials and business class and the Outer city for the masses.

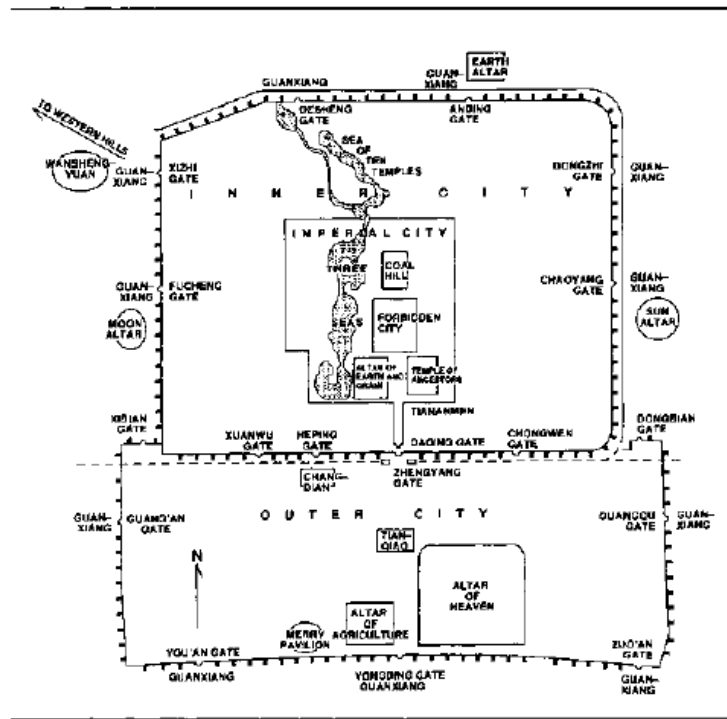


Figure 1: Plan of Beijing in the Early Twentieth Century

Figure 1: Shi (1998) Plan of Beijing in the Early Twentieth Century

The largest park spaces were situated at the center and as you moved to the outer spheres, the public spaces diminished to a point where at the outer realm, the only public spaces available to the masses were “narrow and constricted alleyways (*hutong*) and the inner courtyards of traditional Chinese homes (*siheyuan*)” (p.220). Over time, as the need to appear “modern” took root, Chinese reformers sought to transform social space; in making public that which was private, making profane that which was sacred, their efforts contributed to the purging of the past and the igniting of a new regime, from Imperialism to Statehood.

Motivations driving the design for these leisure spaces were many: to improve their foreign image and reputation, to control social unrest, to use as a congregation space within which public goods and services could be disseminated, to regulate public behaviors, ethics, lifestyles, and other ceremonial functions, extending the reach of the State into domestic spheres. In spite of a host of legal rules instituted by the State, much of the activity in parks defied such State norms. Far from the intended designs, these parks were used by the people for a range of purposes, at times undermining the very institutions that sought to support them; it served as political forums for the “dissemination of ideas and the mobilization of the urban populace” (p.243), venues for commercialized activities, pro-democracy movements and mass rallies as expression of public opinion, to courtships and women’s participation outside the domestic sphere.

Chinese parks became a public space highly contested by both the government and the civil society. On one hand, parks provided an arena for the city people to participate in modern China's political transformation. Unheard of in imperial times, frequent mass rallies held in the newly created public spaces heightened city people's demand for a political voice in national policy making and demonstrated their strong commitment to the idea of democracy in a sovereign republic. On the other hand, the government also used the newly created spaces to push for their reformist agenda by offering free exhibitions, reading rooms, and maxim pavilions to emphasize the educational function of public parks. Reform-minded officials launched campaign after campaign to promote public health, encourage moral behavior, and combat illiteracy, by popularizing new types of recreation and entertainment in the public parks, the reformers also hoped to eradicate harmful social customs, such as gambling and prostitution. (pp.250)

Thereby, the social engineering of leisure spaces is more complex than that of being either of social control or mass upheaval and activism. To attribute the designers with the rationality of premeditation is to not just overplay on the capacity of those in authority but simultaneously undermine those for whom these spaces are built. The situation of park reformation in Worcester, Massachusetts in the late 19th century is no different (Rosenzweig, 1979). With urbanization came the demand by the working class for separate leisure spaces on prime urban property. Rather than suppress this angst, the State saw the need to cater to this demand by creating parks for the urban populace. They saw parks as a strategic space to provide a safety valve for social upheaval, as well as a means to socialize and civilize an 'unruly' and 'uncivilized' public and serve as a means of solidarity and peace amongst a highly diverse group of immigrants that made up the majority of the composite of the city (p.34).

Far from colluding on this State anointed goal, we see instead diverse ethnically-based leisure patterns, through which the workers expressed their distinct ethnic cultures. Here, "parks were providing a setting for precisely the sort of behavior they were supposed to inhibit," (Rosenzweig, 1979, p.40) that being the "loafing" by the lower classes as they pursued their own leisure activities despite legal constraints against "loitering." In fact, the "introduction of parks did not 'remake' the Worcester working class in the image desired by the State, the industrialists and reformers; neither did it precipitate a new class solidarity or consciousness" (p.42). If anything, it gave autonomy to varied individuals and groups to shape this space to the needs of their community at hand while at the same time, they were bounded in terms of access to such spaces by their socio-economic backgrounds, gender, and political status, and legal structures surrounding these spaces. This helped determine the amount of time they had for such leisure, with whom they could spend their time with and at what times and for what purposes. While legal sanctioning was quickly imposed on these "free" leisure spaces to socialize the common masses, idleness, a common experience due to high unemployment at that time, along with the habit of drinking accompanied them into the parks in spite of the State penalties associated with such behavior. Therefore, parks were meant to give some relief from urban ills such as "overcrowding, poverty, squalor, ill-

health, lack of morals and morale and so on” (Taylor, 1995) as envisioned by the utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

In similar vein, online social spaces while encouraged or at least acknowledged by institutions and individuals in general as modern, representative of contemporary time and perhaps the future platform for commerce, at the same time block employees from accessing such sites: the U.S. military for instance banned soldiers from accessing MySpace, the Chinese blocked Wikipedia and certain Blogging sites, the Canadian government prohibited employees from using Facebook, while the U.S. Congress has proposed legislation to ban youth from accessing social network sites in schools and libraries (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Yet, the youth and citizens in general continue to ingeniously navigate through such barriers in ways and means that are innovative and out of the box.

Crossing continents and historical dramas, can we further speak about park spaces as neocolonial and ‘western,’ imposing the Utilitarian, Calvinistic and Protestant values onto the ‘colonized?’ Shall we rejuvenate the ‘othering’ (Said, 1978) interpretation in the designing of parks by the British in colonized India of the 18th and 19th century, viewing the bastardizing the Mughal traditions of the past through the ‘gaze’ of the British? We see that such was not the case as the Victorian garden style was compelled to negotiate with the local realities of flora and fauna, of availability of running water and the urban surrounding populace; of centuries of historical and sacred monuments and temples, as well as the sensibilities and ‘taste’ for Mughal style architecting of parks cultured among the British themselves, appropriating the local within the new ‘Anglo-Indian’ gardens of the colonial era (Bowe, 1999). These appropriations though were hardly subtle as exemplified in Metcalfe’s designs, the famous British landscape architect who deliberately drew in the existing monumental Mughal achievements such as the tomb of *Adham Khan*, the *Jamali Kumali Masjid*, the site near the *Qutb Minar* and the famous Iron pillar in the formation of the gardens of *Dilkusha*, earning Metcalfe his reputation that survives to this day.



Figure 2: *Dilkusha gardens*

Similarly, new online technologies introduced by the west to post-colonial countries as part of the grand mission of mitigating the digital divide and a host of socio-economic barriers to prosperity and democracy (Negroponte, 1995), are often perceived as a neocolonialism of kind. Instead, it is more appropriate to view new technology spaces as negotiated spaces where often the gazer is also the gazed upon; where in gazing, there is much of shifting and transfiguring based on engaged practices and beliefs. In fact, the ‘architects’ of the west are often drawn from postcolonial products or what Saxenian (2006) terms the “new argonauts,” the silicon valley tech-savvy entrepreneurs who often come from China or India and engage with their home countries to spawn a chain of networks that facilitate the shaping of new technologies and its spaces. In other words, the architects of new technology spaces may appear to emerge from the West but in fact cannot be disassociated from other cultures and nationalities and in fact, due to their unique exposure to a range of markets, such argonauts become harbingers of change, exposing the West to new tastes and making exotic behavior the norm.

Thereby, leisure spaces in general are multitudinous, conflicting and dynamic, with varied authorships and scripts intersecting with one another, forming incomplete and constantly transforming narratives. So what we have here are issues of access, usage and institutionalization of leisure spaces, of the shifts in authority across spheres, temporarily residing in the act of usage of the space itself. Online spaces while being viewed as a panacea for modernism, civilization and democracy, can serve as useful instruments on both sides of the battle, of control and order versus resistance and creative ‘disorder:’ corporations forming their own Facebook profiles, a range of media companies capitalizing on social network congregations for targeted advertising and tracking of user behavior (Economist, 2008) while at the same time users harnessing online social network spaces for organizing online mass protests including that on the war on Iraq that entailed a historically unprecedented international coordinated effort coalescing diverse activists across the globe for a common goal, global resistance through blogging against the drilling for Alaskan oil, Darfur and other interests that have now been globalized (Bennett, 2005); from the profound to the trivial, from fictionalizing fact to factualizing fiction.

The notion of instituting leisure as a public space of the early 20th century has been an international phenomenon and has taken on significant meaning in this day and age as governments across cultures and nations face an ever expressive public that is making their power felt through the exercising of their choices both online and offline. Further, governments themselves see leisure as avenues for fostering national solidarity, bonding, and highly relevant social outlets particularly as economic and political pressures escalate. In other words, as Wilson (1988) states,

Governments inevitably become involved in leisure, irrespective of whether they wish to encourage particular uses of free time, if only because they are the ultimate custodians of social order and leisure is part of the struggle for the control of space and time in which social groups are continuously engaged. (pp. 12)

Hence, while online spaces may be novel, recreational practices continue to be innate human expressions that are embedded in immortal needs for pleasure and leisure. Incidentally, despite the spatial hierarchies in 20th century Beijing parks as stated earlier on, the public continued to devise forms of recreation and leisure under bridges, within Buddhist or Daoist temples, on the streets, with activities resembling that within modern parks such as picnicking, socializing, selling wares, and enjoying impromptu performances (Shi, 1998). These activities over time became instituted and formalized into annual fairs and entertainment shows, and at times spawned full-time markets of wares and talent shows that gained popularity not just amongst the masses but also with the elites and imperial families of that time who left their private areas to enjoy these public entertainments. So as we can see, a distinction needs to be made between the act and the space itself. Hence, for those on the other side of the digital divide where online social spaces are unknown and/or non accessible, that being the majority of the world populace, we need to keep in mind that these people continue to perform leisure extensively and creatively and mobilize their social networks through ingenious ways. These spaces therefore cannot be disassociated with its historical inheritance and contemporary yearnings; instead, should be looked at as a multilayered reality with yesterdays sacred embedded as today's mundane. Therefore, the domain of the right to leisure is a historical and sociological construction.

II The 'postmodern' park

It is important to note that while the notion of "public" connotes service to the people, stemming from the Latin word *populus* meaning people, it is by no means indiscriminate. Just as the internet is not free and available to all due to physical, cultural, linguistic and other factors that deters access and usage, the Beijing 'public' parks of early 20th century at its conception were made available for certain purposes (socialization and education), for certain groups (the middle class) and at a certain cost. Therefore access to parks, much like to online social spaces needs to be seen deeply in all its diversity to better understand leisure patterns online and offline.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) so aptly explains that social network sites, while often meant to cater to a large and diverse audience, gain preference by certain groups else are originally designed as such to exclude/include based on interests, religion, race, and other 'bonding' entities:

The visibility of a profile varies by site and according to user discretion. By default, profiles on Friendster and Tribe.net are crawled by search engines, making them visible to anyone, regardless of whether or not the viewer has an account. Alternatively, LinkedIn controls what a viewer may see based on whether she or he has a paid account. Sites like MySpace allow users to choose whether they want their profile to be public or "Friends only." Facebook takes a different approach—by default, users who are part of the same "network" can view each other's profiles, unless a profile owner has decided to deny permission... while most SNSs focus on growing broadly and exponentially, others explicitly seek

narrower audiences. Some, like aSmallWorld and BeautifulPeople, intentionally restrict access to appear selective and elite. Others—activity-centered sites like Couchsurfing, identity-driven sites like BlackPlanet, and affiliation-focused sites like MyChurch—are limited by their target demographic and thus tend to be smaller. Finally, anyone who wishes to create a niche social network site can do so on Ning, a platform and hosting service that encourages users to create their own SNSs. (pp. 6)

This kind of diversity is important to note as such affordances of varied leisure spaces reminds us that it is not just the act of leisure that is dynamic and contingent on the user group, but that simultaneously it's the leisure space itself that is multifaceted and ever-changing. We see this clearly with the new trend of walled gardens of contemporary urban India with private lawns made public to “gated communities,” (Sengupta, 2008) serving the moneyed upper class to experience leisure ‘uncorrupted’ by the slums outside. Here, women and children are not encouraged to go outside these modern communes as such leisure spaces are designed to be self-contained and self-serving. With security guards alongside all entrances to these green enclaves monitoring movements in and out of such spaces, there is an overt attempt to channel and contain leisure spaces to the select few:

The guards at the gate are instructed not to let nannies take children outside, and men delivering pizza or okra are allowed in only with permission. Once, Mr. Bhalla recalled proudly, a servant caught spitting on the lawn was beaten up by the building staff. Recently, Mr. Bhalla’s association cut a path from the main gate to the private club next door, so residents no longer have to share the public sidewalk with servants and the occasional cow. (pp. 2)



Copyright: Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Figure 3: *A child walking in a trash-strewn lot near the gated community of Hamilton Court in Gurgaon, India.*

Or better yet, one need not look any further than the Dubai landscape, an architects dream, where there is much to be discovered about contemporary leisure manifested through its range of park spaces. Here, we are compelled to leave behind the parks of yesterday as monolithic nature-centric spaces to that which is concrete,

technological and consumption oriented celebrating the commodification of leisure, of heightened stimulus through often technologically-mediated experiences. Be it the Wild Wadi¹ water theme park to the Gold and Diamond Park² designed by the Emaar Malls group, which claims to be the leading space for gold and diamond jewelry business as well as an experiential space for families and tourists to recreate through its wide range of restaurants and brand stores, such spaces have surpassed the once radical theme parks envisioned by Disney. In fact, theme or fantasy parks are moving away from the compartmentalization of leisure to a more integrated and hybridized whole; as the renowned Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid blends office and residential towers and highways and public parks into “a seamless whole”, she states that “we wanted to create a complex order rather than either the monotony of Modernism or the chaos you find in contemporary cities” (Ouroussoff, 2008). Dubai in fact symbolizes the contemporary marked shift in leisure as communities are assembled together temporarily and strategically with their ‘movements’ guided through a play of fantasy. This is not to say that the classic urban park is losing its appeal but rather what constitutes as common public leisure spaces have expanded and exponentially grown to fill multifarious demands on public life.



Figure 4: *Gold and Diamond Park, Dubai*

At this point, it is worth speculating about the nature of such theme parks and its contribution to our understanding of leisure in contemporary society. There is a popular belief that the 21st century is marked by a leisure of decadence and defragmentation (Cameron, 2002). Cameron argues that such themed fantasy parks dominate:

the cultural discourse of urban centres around the globe, as brand recognition pulls consumers in and away. Culture is becoming deterritorialized, detached from the community, and commodified in the global marketplace. Local forms of culture, in this environment, are under assault. These local cultures are becoming more important as people activate differentiated identities in response to increasingly homogenized global cultural space. However, they are becoming more difficult to produce and reproduce, not only as cultural product grows in economic importance, but also as new global regulatory frameworks constrain what governments can do to sustain local cultures...Internet works in the opposite direction, by encouraging direct, unhindered individual participation, free of supervision and largely beyond. The increasingly accessible technologies of information and communication not only erode

difference and foster homogenization, but simultaneously promote particularization and differentiation as communities appropriate, use, and transform global cultural product even as they rediscover the individuality of local culture. (pp.12)

Therefore, such leisure spaces are looked upon as a detriment to diversity, an “iron cage of uniformity” (p. 22), where these new theme park spaces are constructed as vast networks of entertainment and consumption through an amalgamation of mega public structures including multiplex movie theatres, malls, fast-food chains, delivering leisure as packaged products. So what Cameron states is that what was once a democratic space, urban parks have now transformed to become nothing but a “branded empire” (p.62).

We find similar views held on social network sites, as mass media is seen to infiltrate and dominate these online leisure spaces, corrupting and flattening social diversity as stated earlier on. Yet, as this paper has outlined already and will continue to do so in the next section through the concept of the flâneur, human nature is ingenious and can be seen to appropriate temporal role plays and escape mechanisms to connect, consume and often times produce in remarkable and divergent ways. Here, the global entertainment economy of leisure, its consumption and production patterns, the ‘brand empires’ that surround it, the ‘players’ of this game and their roles in fostering leisure are hybridized and amalgamated where the architect and the user are in continuous flux. Hence, in underlining the democratic nature of the urban parks against that of contemporary times, we find ourselves nostalgic of a past that does not exist.

III One mans strolling is another mans cruising

Different groups/ people *move* through the same given leisure space in unique and diverse ways that should be seen as multi-scaped; that which while broad ranging is, within its bounded settings and needs, more predictive in its patterns. Here, we focus on how this manifests itself in a plethora of ‘movements’ that reflects usage patterns amongst leisure spaces.

For instance, the movement of ‘browsing’ through leisure spaces online demonstrates how people navigate and experience these spaces where this very act is seen as intrinsically social and learnt, of meandering and getting lost, of making connections through hyperlinks, of following paths and trails that lead to the unknown, of making a routine of such practices (Burbules, 2000). Here, browsing is wide ranging and deeply connected to intent and spatial affordances. We see such movements mirrored through the strolling within public park layouts at the end of the 18th century which were designed exclusively for strolling, a custom of family promenades which permitted inspection of other families for matrimony. Boulevard rings, logical semi-circular bands of greenery or walkways and symmetrical planting to put on the site were inspired by the more disciplined French style design to more curvaceous and non-disciplined English gardens. Benches were provided to check out people that could lead to a marriage. So while people actively strolled through these

guided terrains in search of future marital prospects, this pathway became simultaneously known for its 'cruising,' a city zone of gay sexualized spaces that provided an appropriate cover for gay glances, from parks in Moscow to that of Rio de Janeiro (Higgs, 1999). These movements while following the same route were driven by the need for different encounters and opportunities. Such open spaces thereby allowed for the mingling of homosexuality and heterosexuality, of private and public acts, giving birth to "semiologically coded communication" amongst an "invisible" group of people, the gay culture (p.170). Thus 'movement' not just entails directionality but also that of communication. As such, we see lurking behavior as much as active dating behavior on sites which are intended to be for 'friends' or for other purposes like gaming.

Further, it is worth pointing out that it is not a coincidence that the Greek word *schole* from which our words 'scholastic' and 'school' derive, means leisure. Therefore, the 'schooling' of movements online, of 'surfing' or 'browsing,' is not a random act per se but rather strategic and learnt spatial engagements driven by specific interests with premeditated worlds, from the most general to the more tailor-made even in its most leisurely state. So even in the most idle of space is embedded the labor of practice. Therefore, while leisure is often linked to idleness, perhaps a better reading of this concept is through Rheingold's "hard play" (2002) thereby challenging the notions of labor and play as diametrically opposite. In fact, leisure can be highly labor intensive and exhaustive with a thin line dividing work from pleasure as much effort goes into discovering, navigating, meandering and reproducing such movements again and again, online as well as offline. These lines are often crossed as corporations usurp leisure for productivity, simulating worlds of pleasure in their manufacturing of IT parks in places like China and India to seduce the tech-savvy youth through a cocktail of yoga classes, sports, and exotic cuisine all amidst vast acres of green enclaves and zones. We see a similar trend of social network sites being harnessed by the private sector, non-profits and academia where the blurring of play and labor are architected to enhance productivity (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This is a contemporary phenomenon, where to be globally competitive, agencies need to attract its workforce and simulate a lifestyle that resembles more play than labor, to appear very much part of the youthful contemporary scene of online activity.

In fact, in talking of strolling, particularly through new leisure constructions, from fantasy parks in Dubai to IT parks in India, it is necessary to explore the much exploited concept of the flâneur in understanding such contemporary movements. As people navigate and browse through social leisure sites with pop-up advertisements and hyperlinks, with brands scrolling their multimedia messages above to tailor-made messages to the browser catering to their innate desires and wants, one can easily get trapped into viewing the browser as a victim of modernity, commerce, globalization, and more. Instead, Benjamin and Tiedemann (1999) turns this around, viewing the flâneur or 'stroller' as a shopper with no intention to buy, an intellectual parasite of the arcade. The flâneur is seen as a free explorer of this space, making such public spaces as much home as that of

his four walls. He wanders detached, gazes amusingly, voyeuristically else often knowingly immerses himself completely and fully into packaged experiences. Benjamin remarks that with the flâneur, "empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd. He . . . enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes" (Baudelaire, 1964). According to Benjamin, the flâneur came about particularly in response to the new architecting of the city where passageways were etched through the streets of Paris, weaving shops, storefronts, parks together, contributing to the labyrinth of experiences by this icon of the bourgeois. Of course one needs to view the flâneur as less part of an elite group than a person in a state of being that manifests more as a tourist, often touching past briefly and superficially, experiencing temporarily the merchandize and sites around him, of teasing alternatives in lifestyle, cuisine, habits, knowingly and playfully.

So in spite of commonly perceived contraptions of online spaces as adult, gendered and neocolonial for instance (Solomon et al., 2003), users exercise their prerogative for play, appropriating, teasing, circumventing, transforming and in essence redesigning such dialectical spaces. In fact, the urban park is that which is at once both private and public, a space seemingly free of regulation yet highly constrained by social, political, cultural and economic relations; that which is inter(con)textual, hybrid, multiscaped, multimodal, cross-cultural, and spatio-temporal (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981, Street, 1993).

Conclusion

If we are to move beyond the dichotomies of online and offline spaces, we need to ponder in what ways are these spaces interconnected, interspersed and interdependent so as to gauge the “real” and “new” of such activities and spaces. In fact, it is now commonly understood that the spatial form, interface design and interaction metaphors of many online communities bare a remarkable resemblance to “real” world locales (Leander & McKim, 2003). While the motives for the design and enablement of access and usage of such spaces is of interest, what is of more importance is what people *do* with such spaces, how they educate themselves and others of its design, its potential, its constraints and how they are able to enact, circumvent, transform and sometimes reproduce social, political and cultural conditions and activity. When you stretch a metaphor to its limits, you can discover genuine difference. This exploration can be the starting point for attributing online spaces its distinct and unique properties. In essence, we can understand whether online phenomena are a continuation, an extension, or a difference in kind, by the stressing of the metaphor to its limits.

A concern voiced may be that by equating one social network site such as *Facebook* to that of an urban park in the 1900s, are we in that sense flattening all urban parks as one? Also, in this analysis, are we looking at *Facebook* in its entirety or specific aspects in such comparisons? In addressing this concern, we need to keep in

mind that much like urban parks, often the basic architecting principles may be the same but its design and “personality” is endemic to the locality, the people who it is intended for, the people who actually use it and that these spaces transform and evolve slowly through usage over time. So this isn’t a paper to figure out the specifics of a particular site and its usage but to give a broad conceptualization to online leisure shared social spaces.

One can also state that the demographics of who uses parks are different from those on social network sites online. However, to state that is to accept that demographics are static and tied to its place which is not necessarily true. Demographics change based on time of activity, social setting, culture and a whole host of socio-economic and cultural factors. Historically, urban parks were used by imperial and/or upper class families and over time shifted to the working class. Today, one can argue that some of these parks are inhabited primarily by tourists, the elderly and the homeless. In other words, these sites evolve, multiply and spawn and the purpose of this study is to highlight this phenomena.

Of course, one can point out that communication that occurs in social network sites resembles more a café or a bar than a park. While by no means is there any denial that such metaphors are useful, the reader will be reminded that parks are not just defined here as urban green spaces but rather incorporate theme, commercial and fantasy parks which encompass bars, restaurants, cafes, shopping centers and movie theatres; the megaplex, one-stop for all leisure, that being the postmodern park. Further, as we compare online leisure spaces to the parks in the 1900s, parks were in fact one of the prime public leisure spaces for the working class to socialize and communicate, a social outlet given their cramped quarters. Ironically, we see the rebirth of such situations in contemporary cities which is worthy in itself of investigation. Further, hanging out in cafes and bars are not necessarily universal and even if so, it is much more socially regulated and economically mediated as compared to parks. Thereby, to provide a more transnational and transcultural worldview of leisure today, we need to delve into such a problematic to highlight such issues.

Basically, this paper is deeply interdisciplinary so as to understand larger issues of technology, space, and sociality. In a sense, by offering the framework of ‘virtual parks,’ this paper intends to shift the comparative approach of old and new technologies and spaces where the *artifact* is central to that of a comparative study of social practice through what I am positing as a legitimate methodology- that of metaphorization. I believe this approach is novel as it will allow for a more international and transcultural approach to relational issues of communication, society and technology.

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¹ <http://www.dubaishoppingfestival.com/attraction/wild-wadi.htm>

² <http://www.goldanddiamondpark.com/>