7 Down the Rabbit Hole: The Role of Place in the Initiation and Development of Online Relationships

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When Lewis Carroll’s Alice falls down the hole into Wonderland, she encounters a variety of situations in various places: a garden, a forest, a pool, a kitchen, a castle, and a courtroom, among others. The characters she meets who become her acquaintances, friends, and enemies differ depending on her location in her travels, and, of course, her size. She follows the White Rabbit who is terrified of her larger-than-human height in the hallway. She learns to adjust her size to match the places, objects, animals, and people who cross her pathways. People have likened “cyberspace” to the world found through the mirror, the virtual reality on the other side contrasted to the everyday physical world.

As the experience of people online accumulated, researchers differentiated modes of relating within cyberspace such as the use of the asynchronous and the synchronous or real-time media. They have begun to illuminate differences in the types of spaces, places, or settings online (see Baker, 2002, 2005; Baker & Whitty, 2008; McKenna, 2007; Whitty & Carr, 2006). A current line of inquiry attempts to explicate interactions that originate but do not remain in cyberspace, or relationships that span online and offline places. Researchers of online relationships recognize that people online often “felt as though they have gotten to know each other quite well” (Walther & Parks, 2002, p. 549) before meeting offline (Baker, 1998), entering “mixed mode relationships” (Walther & Parks, 2002, p. 542). People develop strong feelings for each other in cyberspace, and forge relationships, from casual acquaintance to close friendships, and intimate partnerships sometimes leading to marriage (see, for example, Baker, 1998, 2005; Ben Ze’ev, 2004; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Joinson, 2003; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Merkle & Richardson, 2000; Wallace, 1999; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). These connections first take place in a virtual world, without the two factors of physical attraction and spatial propinquity, dimensions previously thought essential for interpersonal bonding.

Taking off from the Alice’s adventures in new places, this chapter addresses two questions. First, and with primary emphasis, (1) how does the particular online place or space in which a romantic pair meets influence the course of the relationship, especially in the early stages? Then, (2) how does timing, the pacing of the relationship by members of the couple, interact with space to affect the development of a potential couple pairing? Examining primary
data and looking at the relevant literature on online dating, the chapter begins
the exploratory analysis of how place relates to initial attraction and further
commitment in romantic relationships in cyberspace.

Introduction to Place and Online Relationships

People meet at various places online. The kind of meeting place indicates the kinds of people who gather there, the commonalities they share, their first impressions, and the nature of their initial contact (see Baker, 1998, 2005). McKenna and Bargh (2000) described how sites in cyberspace contain different “gating” properties than physical space and have fewer barriers to interaction. Baker and Whitty (2008) and McKenna (2007) have recently noted that features of various types of online places produce multiple patterns in online relating. The kind of site or online meeting place provides different types of knowledge about the other and points to specific media for first person-to-person contact, for example. “Place” here refers to the space where two people first encounter each other online, and then later on, if they choose to connect in physical space, the kind of place or location of their meeting offline.

An “online relationship” is defined as one where the two in the dyad first met online and are looking to each other for a romantic involvement. In beginning their relationships, the two may have consciously searched for intimate partners, or met online as friends or acquaintances and later developed romantic intentions. The data and literature come mainly from researchers studying intimate pairs and individuals who are dating (or considering it), living together or married. Although personal relationships such as friendships can begin online, and even family relationships can occur mainly online, these are categories of dyads that deserve separate study and, thus, are mentioned only as they relate to the findings on intimate online relationships.

This chapter discusses first, the issues of place or space online and then the intersection of place and time in the formation and development of online relationships. Examining that combination, in particular, may open up new areas for research of relationships in cyberspace. In addition to citations from relevant studies, this chapter draws on the data from research on online couples by the author (see Baker, 2005) and later data collection with quotations taken from interviews conducted through phone and e-mail and from questionnaires provided by pairs who met online. Individuals received pseudonyms upon entry into the research.

The “Where”: Place in Online Relationships

In the discussion of “place,” this section first examines (a) the distinction between online and offline places – the parameters of “cyberspace” (Gibson, 1984) versus “real life” places or locations. Included here is the
concept of proximity or propinquity’s role in interpersonal attraction and how people approximate propinquity in cyberspace.

Moving into (b) the types of places where people interact online, this chapter addresses the goals and dynamics of dating sites in contrast to virtual communities, including discussion boards, games, social networking sites, and chat rooms. Finally, geographical distance (c) between potential partners who meet online is examined, and how that distance affects the process of developing relationships online.

**Place Online and Offline: Attraction in Cyberspace Versus “in Real Life”**

Cyberspace and offline reality share properties, and they also differ in kinds of interaction within the two spheres. In the early days of Internet research, researchers treated cyberspace as a pale reflection of “real life,” where people related through low bandwidth. Areas comparing interactions in cyberspace to the offline world, or in real life, are first, physical attraction and propinquity, and then, common interests and their relation to the initiation of relationships in cyberspace.

**Physical Attraction and Propinquity Online**

In cyberspace, the role of physical attraction is lesser than in physical space, depending on the place. In the theories of attraction before widespread computer-mediated communication, appearance is, in many cases, the prime factor, if not the only one in how people become romantically intertwined (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), along with closeness in physical space or propinquity. Statistical studies of married couples affirm relative homogamy of age (see Fraboni, 2004; Wheeler & Gunter, 1987) and other demographic characteristics, and earlier research points to factors of attitude similarity and attractiveness in initiation of relationships (see Byrne et al., 1968). In contrast with the primacy of appearance, even in dating sites where photos are common and where people sort through personal profiles partly on the basis of physical appearance, other factors such as place of residence, interests, and style of writing can offset appearance. Older theories of attraction include propinquity or physical presence along with physical attraction. Propinquity or proximity online can mean closeness or co-location in cyberspace without nearness in physical space. If two people meet regularly at a discussion board, even if they post at different times, they grow to know each other, and expect their regular appearances, similar to offline neighbors or co-workers in contiguous offices.

Physical attraction and spatial proximity seem much less important in forming intimate relationships online, given the web (www) and e-mail, which link
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people from locations worldwide through the media of written communication (see Baker, 1998, 2005; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Fiore & Donath, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Merkle & Richardson, 2000). Some people in relationships communicate by video or webcams, although almost no one from the author’s primary database did so, and none used video more than rarely. Even when presenting photographs or avatars, the process of becoming acquainted with someone begins in a virtual or nonphysical plane, online, leaving the choice of whether to meet in person until later, after assessing what is known already through information provided online.

Although Al Cooper coined the “Triple A” model of accessibility, affordability, and anonymity (Cooper, 1999) to address the popularity of sex in cyberspace, these three attributes help reveal the appeal of meeting people online for all kinds of intimate relationships. Without so much emphasis on physical appearance, cyberspace bonds often begin with mutual self-disclosure and rapport based on similarity of the individuals (see, e.g., Byrne, London, & Reeves, 1968; Duck & Craig, 1975; Pilkington & Lydon, 1997). The connections “stem from emotional intimacy rather than lustful attraction” (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000, p. 523). This is not to say that the dimension of physical attraction is unimportant. In its absence, the couple will usually not continue the relationship. As one person in the research on couples (Baker, 2005) who met online described the process:

So, while I don’t doubt that I fell in love before the meeting, I think the meeting validated that. Let me use a really bad analogy: Online shopping. I can fill my shopping cart and submit my credit card number. But if something goes wrong after I hit “send,” or I somehow forget to hit send, it’s all pretty pointless. I’ve purchased nothing. (Rosa, interview through e-mail)

Rosa had seen a picture of her future spouse, a head shot that she found unflattering, in comparison to the actual man. She spoke of how both she and her partner liked what they saw upon meeting in person.

On the Internet, people can first get to know others, and then later decide whether to meet, rather than the other way around as in physical space (Rheingold, 1993, p. 26). Attraction begins online, often through the written word or a combination of pictorial and textual representation instead of simply a physical presence. The “click” of felt compatibility comes through connecting in a place online and then communicating through text and frequently by voice before meeting face-to-face (F2F).

Common Interests and Similarity in Cyberspace

Propinquity or proximity online means that two people have come to find themselves in the same area online, whether playing a game, discussing a television show, or sorting through profiles on a dating site. They have signaled a similar goal, whether to socialize, to gather information, or to seek entertainment.
Depending on the type of site, they have often announced their availability for relationships, whether directly in a dating site ad, or more indirectly with references to spouses or significant others in a profile, or in conversation with people sharing the virtual place.

If two people meet (offline) at a tractor pull, for example, they can assume a certain interest in common. This also applies online, for example, people in an age sixty-and-over group, who discuss movies they’ve just seen. In a dating site, the availability is announced, a willingness to find at least some kind of relationship, from serious to casual. The difference with places online is that they are often easier to access, using a browser and a search engine or through e-mailing people in the know.

Wright (2004) contrasted cyberspace and real-life space when he looked at exclusively Internet-based relationships (EIBs) in comparison to primarily Internet-based relationships (PIBs). The EIBs take place only on the Internet, while the PIBs contain people interacting both online and offline. Within the PIBs, Wright did not separate those who met online first, the “mixed mode” relationships (Walther & Parks, 2002) that move offline from an online start. He states along with researchers such as Barnes (2003) and Baker (2005) that shared interests replace proximity online. Similarity of interests comes across perhaps more obviously online, says Wright, because the online communication through text in e-mail or chat mutes other variables such as age and appearance.

Downplaying age came up for one online couple when they met at an online dating site. Each chose age limits that excluded the other because their age difference exceeded fifteen years. Elliot saw a profile that attracted his interest in a list of the 100 most recent people to sign up for the site on its home page. He noticed a nickname, “Jordan,” that he thought stood for Jordan Baker in the Fitzgerald novel *The Great Gatsby*. Actually, his partner chose a relative’s name; however, the couple had much in common, nonetheless:

I wrote her first, based on both her handle . . . and the text of her ad which indicated a sense of humor (albeit a trifle warped – something I like) and a continuing interest in Theatre and Literature, two thing which are as essential as oxygen to my life.

She replied with a brief “what you wrote was really interesting; I’m busy now but will write more later” note; and she did; and, during the first few exchanges, we discovered an astonishing confluence of unusual and idiosyncratic commonalities, including the fact that about two weeks before we began writing, she had visited a friend in Chicago who lived three blocks from me and had, literally, walked past my apartment several times.

(Elliot, questionnaire)

This couple had posted no photographs, although they exchanged them after beginning their e-mail correspondence. They soon discovered a common fondness for the musical *Pippin* and for the poet Mary Oliver, and all the
writings of J. D. Salinger. The two married a little over a year after meeting online.

**Place Online: Dating Sites Versus Online Communities**

Two major types of online places for people forming relationships include the online dating sites, and other places, such as discussion forums, chat rooms, e-mail listservs, social networking sites, and games and virtual worlds. These kinds of sites other than the dating services are grouped together here and called online communities, or virtual communities (VCs). People visiting online dating sites have different goals, at least at first, than those at other sites. The sites also differ in how many people tend to establish offline relationships with each other. Finally, the dynamics of forming relationships in the two types of sites are discussed.

**Goals of Online Places and Participants**

Members of any particular online place enter with similar goals. People with common interests frequent the same types of online places or spaces, or URLs, the website addresses, in a more technical sense. Within discussion groups, games, chat rooms, and dating services, the individual purposes or motives of participating members may vary, although each type of place has a manifest goal related to the type of activity or conversation found there. Thus, similar kinds of online places created for particular purposes, contain people with similar goals or reasons for being there.

The process of developing an online relationship, including the timing, moves in various directions with different starting and end points related to what the parties desire from the relationship. What the two people want will vary, on the whole, by the kind of site they visit.

Goals of people seeking intimacy online can range from desire for a casual encounter of either brief acquaintance or sexual contact (see, for example, Whitty & Fisher, Chapter 8, this volume; Wysocki & Thalken, 2007), to a commitment as deep as marriage or lifelong partnership. Researchers examining members of a large dating site have identified other goals in-between casual and serious intimate relationships, such as meeting a larger quantity of dating partners, becoming more experienced at dating, and finding friends online (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). They found that most people in their study of Match.com sought someone for a dating relationship of some kind. None of the partners’ initial goals precluded building a long-lasting, committed relationship.

In fact, some dating and married couples claim they were looking for friends or were actually friends first either in the course of interaction in a VC or in the overt search for compatible others explored through online dating (Baker, 1998, 2005). A public television broadcast about “love” presented a woman
about to marry her online partner telling the story of how they first met at a
dating site: “Monica found Mark on-line by seeking friends and connections
in her new area code. They met and liked each other immediately. They had a
lot in common including their work as musicians” (Konner, 2006). The bride
said that she and Mark had built a good friendship on the phone so that when
she moved to Austin, she agreed to meet him for dinner. When he suggested
they date, however, she hesitated, thinking that dating was a step in another
direction from their current relationship. She had entered the site with the
thought of finding friends rather than a romantic bond.

Another woman, a member of an online community, told how she married
an online friend. Her partner was “strictly a friend online,” but they became
romantically involved offline over a three-year period (Lethsa, quoted in Carter,
2005). Friendship is probably more commonly the goal at online communities
than dating sites because people are driven to join because of an interest in
discussing particular topics, playing games, or interacting with people they
may enjoy. A participant in this author’s research explains in an e-mail that
meeting in a VC “worked” for her:

...mainly because we were not in that community to meet a mate. We were
there because we were interested in the community first, to engage in stim-
ulating conversation, to challenge our bases of knowledge, and share our
opinions and experiences.  (Miranda, e-mail)

Presuming daters have a variety of goals or motives propelling them to sign
up for dating services, two researchers suggest that one dating site alone may
not fulfill all their goals (Fiore & Donath, 2004). Site designers would have
trouble meeting all of their users’ needs for different types of interactions.
Even within the diversity of goals, most participants in a recent study of the
Match.com dating site wanted to find a person for some kind of dating relation-
ship (Gibbs et al., 2006), although with varying levels of commitment. An
advantage of the dating site for couples is the explicitness of the goal of meeting
a dating partner, whereas VCs do not generally filter out married people, those
already in a relationship, or those who have no interest in becoming coupled.

Showing availability through marital status or presence or absence of other
partners is a way of announcing goals in joining an online venue. Dating
sites provide boxes where people can check off any or all options that peo-
ple look for in signing up with a profile. They ask daters to select and mark
their own marital status and the status of people they seek to encounter. Some
sites explicitly limit their membership to single people who want committed
relationships, while others permit different marital statuses and goals that
are more casual. The mainstream sites often classify goals into categories as
“long-term relationship” or “serious relationship,” “short-term relationship,”
“friend,” “activity partner,” “casual dating,” or “play.” Newcomers can choose
one or more goals. People who check off “discreet” or use the term in their
profiles are understood to have other relationships, whether marriage or live-in
partners.
The VCs let people reveal in public or more privately their availability for relationships with those present in the discussion, the game, or the chat room. Sometimes participants describe their spouses and children in their profiles, or they list who lives with them, including pets. People may post photos, depending on community norms. Any information revealed about their age, marital status, and place of residence is usually voluntary rather than fixed by categories provided at the site. VCs differ in how much they require real names rather than just a user ID, although many members know each other primarily by their nicknames. At some VCs, nicknames, or “nicks,” relate to the subject matter of the group, such as fans of rock groups who name themselves after band members or particular songs. In others, like those on the dating sites, the nick either describes a personal interest or hobby or is a form of their real names.

Types of Places and Frequency of Personal Relationships

In two seminal studies of relationships in cyberspace, Parks and his co-authors (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998) determined that the majority of people in two types of online groups had formed at least one “personal relationship.” The authors studied people in newsgroups, threaded discussion groups on topics of interest, and later, in MOOs, which are text-based virtual realities, and “object-oriented” MUDs, or Multiple User Domains, most commonly used for role-playing games. Of people in newsgroups (Parks & Floyd, 1996), 60.7 percent started relationships, while 93.6 percent in MOOs (Parks & Roberts, 1998) did so, most commonly building friendships (as opposed to more intimate relationships). The researchers found that most of those forming relationships progressed to another communication channel outside of the group, including phone and snail mail. About a third in both types of online communities had gone on to meet f2f. People in MOOs (1998) formed many more romantic partnerships than the members of newsgroups (1996), 26.3 percent to 7.9 percent.

The size of the groups and the goal of the groups made a difference in numbers of people starting online relationships with each other. The immediacy of the communication, in real time in MOOs, as opposed to asynchronous posts on a discussion board, may contribute to the number of relationships developed, along with the group size and goal. Within the newsgroup, the level of experience or length of time in the group and frequency of posting affected the likelihood of forming a relationship (Parks & Floyd, 1996).

In a study of MUDs, Utz (2000) found that more 76.6 percent of her respondents, members of three online adventure games, formed personal relationships. Her research highlighted the role of a player’s goal in the degree of involvement in bonding between members. The people most likely to connect with others outside the game play were, first, those uninterested in either game playing or in role-playing but who were there for the interaction online. The role-players were slightly more interested than the game players, whereas
those skeptical that friendships could occur online did not form them as much as the other three groups. Those players also used much less “paralanguage” or emoticons and “emotes,” nonverbal expressions common in MUDs and MOOs. These include “smilies,” such as ☺ and :-D, as well as phrases indicating nonverbal reaction to what others say, such as applause or blowing kisses. The average participant experience in the MUDs studied by Utz was nineteen months, similar to Parks and Floyd’s typical newsgroup member of two years.

The Process of Initiating Relationships in Dating Sites and VCs

The process that occurs in identifying and contacting potential partners online differs with those who meet in online dating sites (DSs) as opposed to those who meet in online communities (Baker, 2005) or VCs. In this chapter, the two terms online community and virtual community are used synonymously, to mean social groups of people interacting using the Internet. The term virtual community (Rheingold, 1993) became popularized early in the history of the World Wide Web, whereas online community arose later to emphasize how these groups were taken more seriously and had more “real” impact than the original term perhaps implied. Couples encounter potential partners differently, whether looking specifically for others who meet a formal or informal set of criteria at dating sites, or running into them while participating in more “naturalistic” (McKenna, 2007) settings, groups outside the dating sites.

Before the first meeting with the other person online at a DS, the online daters (1) see others in a setting delimited by their individual parameters set to include the kind of people they consider desirable. Then they can choose to click on any profiles that turn up within the search criteria. In this first online encounter of a potential partner, online daters see only the profile or online ad, and recently, on some sites, can access a voice-recorded message if someone has paid to put one up. The joiner of the VC sees all those who are online at the time he or she goes on. The VC person may talk/write in real time, synchronously, seeing what happens from the time of login. In a lag situation, the asynchronous, posters respond at their leisure to previously written comments, even though people may post within seconds of each other, mimicking real time interactions.

Selection of potential partners (2) can happen very fast in online dating sites. During each login, daters tend to select people quickly in one-shot explorations of profiles, whereas VC members get to know each other over time and have access to previous posts going back weeks, months, and years. In VCs, people see each other’s names in each posting and thus become familiar with each other in that sense (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). However, knowledge of hobbies and characteristics not specified during written participation in the community may or may not appear in profiles of VC members. Photos typically do not show up in VC profiles, unless the community norms mandate them, whereas many on the dating sites post pictures of themselves contained in their ads or they exchange them by e-mail. Matching occurs (3) automatically in a dating
site through the software, with profiles appearing that were set to match the criteria specified by the user. The online dater can change the criteria at any time, to increase or decrease the available pool of matches. In a VC, matching is completely under the control of the individual participant.

In the online DS, people usually express interest (4) by sending an e-mail, or “wink,” to the person selected. The site conceals the private e-mail addresses to allow only communications through the site itself, until the participants decide to exchange personal e-mail addresses. In some cases, the daters may use instant message (IM) to indicate desire to connect, if the site has that option. In a VC, people use “backchanneling,” or communication outside the public board, to indicate interest in developing further conversation. This usually happens through e-mail or a private message or IM at first. In a VC, people can post publicly too, expressing tastes or views that concur with the other person’s before going to a private mode of communication. Ultimately, the mechanism of personal connection is similar, although the amount of knowledge may vary greatly at each type of site.

The online dater may have expounded at length about themselves, or not very much at all, depending on personal inclination and the structure of the dating site and its profiles. In the VC, the participants may see each other write, play, or chat for long periods and can often access archived writings. A woman talks about her searches on a discussion forum for information about Leon’s history there:

One of things that I did, Leon had been there for a year . . . I went back through every thread, searched out every single word, wanted to know if he was flirting with other women . . . I wouldn’t had been interested in him if he had been . . .

His interest was in the things that I was interested in. The environment. I liked the fact that he was an artist . . . His tone . . . His spirituality came through. When I started to realize how spiritual he was, I went back into all the things he wrote in Spirituality . . . I went back to every conference and read everything he wrote . . . for a lot of reasons. He used the same tone with other women . . . I am so monogamous, I had to make sure the person I was with was monogamous. (Margo, phone interview)

Another person talks about what she liked better about VCs than meeting men elsewhere:

I could see good things in the way Ferris responded to others’ postings online, as well as with me. One thing that didn’t work about past online relationships was that I could not observe the men interacting with others with any depth. It was always one-on-one contact. But the format of the community allowed for community, a wide range of conversational topics, a good deal of depth of conversation, and a great opportunity to observe other people interacting in a variety of styles. (Miranda, e-mail)

VCs often have archives going back to their beginnings, allowing participants to see prospective partners’ posts about a variety of subjects and to see how they present themselves and respond to others. Of course, a dater may do a search to see whether information on the other person pops up online or
may pay for services that identify current addresses and presence or absence of criminal records.

Types of Places: Technical Features

Some sites require or encourage avatars, member-created visual self-representations that accompany an online name. Depending on the site, avatars may include cartoon figures or photos (see Suler, 1996–2007). Avatars are usually found in games, large and small, and also in places such as The SIMS and Second Life, virtual worlds, where people meet to interact in various types of conversations and activities and to buy virtual property and build virtual dwellings. Some of these sites require payment either to join or to attain privileges at higher levels and thus resemble the dating sites that usually ask members to pay if they want to contact others beyond a brief trial period. Most discussion boards online are free or based on voluntary contributions although the long-lived board The WELL (www.well.com) and the recent incarnation of Salon Table Talk (tabletalk.salon.com) charge members to join.

Technical features of sites influence outcomes of interaction, in that availability of photos, chat mechanisms, and more recently webcams and voice recordings may encourage authenticity. People intent on circumventing honesty, however, can concoct completely false identities, a practice much less common than popular news accounts portray (see Lenhart, Rainie, & Lew, 2001). On a dating site with age categories, people sometimes adjusted their ages slightly downward, reasoning that they would not appeal to those younger potential partners if they did not (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). They saw this as acceptable within the site parameters and often revealed their deception to others in the first e-mail or two. Places with interaction of avatars allow people to create likenesses of themselves or to create characters very different from themselves, such as fantasy creatures or animals. Norms of each place and available options influence the forms of the avatars. The site may offer individuals a variety of clothing, hairstyles, headgear, or other add-ons such as wings of different sizes and shapes. As a participant in online games, Taylor (2003) has written about how designers control images projected by the range of choices they offer to members of virtual worlds. In conversation with other avatars, people in games and virtual worlds share how much or how little they match their avatars, either on site or through the backchannels of private chat or e-mail.

Places to Meet Online and Offline:
Geographical Distance

Wherever people meet online, if they like each other, they may want to meet in person, or offline. Leaving out the “exclusively internet-based relationship” (Wright, 2004), online daters or friends wishing to deepen their
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connections often desire to encounter the person “in the flesh.” Early computer aficionados contrasted the virtual world with physical space by calling the offline world “real life.” People from online would arrange not for a meeting but a “meat” in “meatspace,” still part of the hacker’s dictionary (online jargon file, Raymond, 2003) to distinguish the earthy physical space from the ethereal cyberspace.

The following sections describe how the type of meeting place online relates to the geographical locations of participants. Although most people available for new relationships may desire potential partners who live within walking distance, where they set their outer limits of travel distance varies. Residents of remote or rural areas may realize that potential partners live faraway, whereas people in New York City perceive that many others of all ages and interests live within a small geographical area. Before the Internet, and also today, people ranked cities according to the number of singles there. Online, the type of place makes a difference in who tends to show up and from where. Members of dating sites and VCs may delimit their geographical boundaries differently. Deciding where to meet in person involves picking the particular kind of meeting place for the offline setting as well as choosing the geographical location for the first encounter.

Meeting Place Online and Place of Residence of Partners

On the dating site, the importance of place outweighs many other factors, perhaps following only appearance and age for people who will not travel to meet others. At the site, partners can pre-limit the distance they search within. Meeting in a VC suggests that members come from many physical locations, if the VC does not emerge from a locally based offline group. A VC may have an international membership or one limited to a particular country, if the native language is required. The location of the originating group or the founder may influence the residency of a typical participant, at least at first. Theoretically, on the Internet, any space is open to those with access to it.

When people encounter those who live out of their geographical area, they either reject them, as on a dating site when their settings say someone must live within so many miles of their home, or they go ahead, nonetheless, with pursuing a relationship. The geographical distance between potential partners is a factor among people who wish to pursue relationships wherever they happen to meet online. Overcoming distance at various stages of the relationships may involve sticking with online communication modes and then moving to long-distance phone calls. With available cell or mobile phone plans and online long-distance services like Skype, the financial cost may have declined from the past. At some point, partners have to decide who is going to travel to the other when they meet offline. If the relationship continues, eventually the partners will choose where to live, in either of their current locations or somewhere
As people hit it off in the naturalistic settings, they may tend toward openness in how far they will go geographically to meet their partners. They are united by common interests, and have likely already built a satisfactory bond before they decide to proceed further. Comfortable with chatting or posting with those they might never meet offline they can take the time to discover if they would like to share more of their lives than they already do.

In the researcher’s study of ninety-two Internet couples, eighty-nine from Baker (2005) and three more gathered later on, a third met on dating sites and another third met at real-time chat groups or online games. The final third met through discussion boards, posting asynchronously. Combining the people at chats, games, and discussion boards shows that nearly two-thirds of the couples met at VCs (Figure 7.1.) These people who met outside of dating sites tended to talk to those faraway from them in geographical distance more than those from the matchmaking sites. The classification of “far” means that each member of the couple had to live outside the state of the other for the United States, outside the province or country for Canada and Europe, or farther away. Thirteen couples contained partners from two different continents, mainly Europe and North America, with two people from Asia and two from Australia. “Close,” conversely, means individuals who lived no farther than within the state, province, or country of residence of their partners.

Observing online meeting place by geographical distance offline or comparative place of residence of the individuals within each couple, the pie chart in Figure 7.1 illustrates that half the sampled couples in the study met at VCs and the individuals in them resided far from each other. The other half was split among the other three groups: dating site couples living farther away, dating site couples who lived closer, and VC couples who resided relatively nearby.

These figures are not to suggest that most members of couples who meet online come from places distant to each other, but to identify where the people studied reside at first and later on in the development of their relationships. Each research project about online dating or relationship formation likely has a different mix of those geographical couplings, depending on the dating sites or

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Figure 7.1. Online meeting place and geographical distance of partners
(n = 92 couples).
VCs studied, as well as how the sample was gathered. Differences in findings may relate partly to variations in online and offline places of study participants. Online research that traces movement from online to offline locations should take into account the geographical factor of both the online and offline meeting places.

Meeting Offline: Choosing a Place

People exploring relationships usually come to a juncture where they want to meet in person, to see whether the connections they have explored will go further offline. They especially want to know whether they “click” in real life the way they have online. Aside from deciding which mode they prefer for communication, the pair chooses where to meet offline. They pick from a range of offline places, from coffee shops to restaurants and from hotels to their own homes, if they plan to stay overnight. Couples may decide before the actual meeting that they need a plan “B,” an exit route if they would rather not spend the original amount of time planned. Conversely, some couples may extend their visits, finding their partners particularly interesting (Baker, 2005). If they stay overnight, they often have to decide whether to share sleeping quarters.

Here is where geographical distance as well as length of time of communication can influence people’s choices. When people live in the same city, they can plan to meet briefly to validate each other’s impressions. When they live far apart, the traveling partner, or both people, if meeting at a neutral location, has committed more time and money to the meeting. Ironically, people who met at their own private residences had more chance of success or probability of staying together (at the last time of contact by the researcher) than couples who met at hotels and other public places. These people generally communicated for longer periods of time, and may have felt quite comfortable with each other by the time they made the decision on where to meet offline.

Much more research is needed on how couples select their offline meeting place and how the place fits with the length of their communication and further development of their relationship or its decline. The quality of communication allows the couple to agree on the location of the beginning of their offline relationship, if the meeting carries the mutual attraction and friendship forward. The location can mark the relationship’s ending if either or both do not like what they see, hear, or feel from the other person.

The Intersection of Place and Timing: Two Dimensions of Online Relationships

Although timing could be the subject of another article, here it is discussed as it relates to the places people meet online and offline. Place and timing interact in a number of different ways to develop or retard the online
relationship. In this chapter, “timing” means the sequence and length of events in the process of communication online and offline. The concept of timing encompasses decisions on when to move forward and when to escalate the bonding through various means of communication. Timing also refers to the method of communication and whether people interact in real time as if they were co-present in space, or delayed response mode.

Bringing in time or timing into the process of online relationships sets up the notion of relationship stages. Depending on place, the relationship has a certain beginning, either reading profiles and e-mailing or interacting in an online group. In either track, people may progress to another deeper stage of relating, if they decide they are compatible. People coordinate the speed at which they progress, reaching a balance of mutual desire to continue or, conversely, to end their interaction.

The topics here include mode of communication, whether in real time or not, and relation to place. Also discussed is the length of time before meeting and its dependence on place and, finally, an examination of the effects of place and time, moving toward an understanding of factors in the success of online relationships.

**Synchronous Versus Asynchronous Communication and Place Online**

Some online spaces are chat rooms, allowing participants to write in real time. Game players also relate in real time in places called “virtual worlds.” Virtual worlds are simulated environments where people interact using avatars. Someone new to the virtual world of *Second Life* comments on how the immediacy of synchronous communication affected her:

> I have been very active in SL and have formed several relationships. As a result, I experimented a bit with “textual intercourse” in SL and then in chat – got seduced actually – and I was really surprised at how much impact typing can have on you! But I am generally turned off by the more blatant sexual overtones, and just like RL, I prefer intimacy to raw sex.” (Cassie, online posting, used by permission in e-mail)

Some places contain only asynchronous options, such as posting in discussion boards, or sending e-mail. Other spaces, although mainly asynchronous, have chat or IM options built in for people who wish to use them whenever they like. Within those places, whether an online dating site or a VC, if communication is usually asynchronous, a feature showing when someone is in the chat room helps avoid the situation of waiting silently for another chatter to show up.

One feature of online relationships is deciding on communication mode after the couple meets. If two people meet through chat, they may typically continue that or switch to the phone. Joe Walther’s early work (1992) has documented how even synchronous written communication proceeds more slowly, taking more time than verbal talk, causing some couples to proceed to the phone and
Table 7.1. *Time of meeting offline by place of meeting online and distance (n = 91 couples)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dating site</th>
<th>VC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a month</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One to three months</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four to seven months</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight to 11 months</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 months or over</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>(14)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(19)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

use that as their main medium. If a couple meets by searching profiles and then e-mailing, or discussing issues at an online forum, they can decide to stay with e-mail, which allows for thought and revision, unlike the real-time media. Of crucial importance is that the two must agree on the best communication mode to use to develop their relationship.

**Time and Place: Delay Before Meeting Offline and Type of Online Meeting Site**

The data gathered from the eighty-nine couples in *Double Click* (Baker, 2005) plus a few more couples joining the research later (n = 91 pairs, not counting the one couple not meeting offline) includes geographical distance of the partners, type of site or place they met online, and amount of time lapsed between their online and offline meeting. Table 7.1 shows a relationship between the place they met and the timing of the lag between their online and offline meeting.

Most of the members of couples who waited the longest times to meet, a year or more, were from geographically distant places. Most couples who met at VCs rather than dating sites took a longer time to meet. Two couples from VCs with geographically distant relationships even waited more than two years to meet. (Even with collapsed cells, some contain cells with n’s too small for statistical analysis.)

Collapsing the five categories into three lengths of time before meeting offline, less than a month, one to seven months, and more than seven months produces the bar graph in Figure 7.2. It shows people in DSs typically meet within a short rather than a long period whether they live close or far apart, whereas people from VCs usually engage in longer online correspondence or phone contact before meeting offline, especially when they live faraway. People in DS have presumably committed to meeting potential partners by joining the site, although some members browse profiles without seeking to
Figure 7.2. Length of time before meeting F2F by type of online meeting place and geographical distance of partners (n = 91 couples).

connect further. Converting the raw data from Table 7.1 and Figure 7.2 into percentages shows that 21 percent of those from dating sites met within a month or less, whereas only 2 percent of VC participants did. Conversely, 29 percent of people from VCs took seven months or longer to meet offline, while only, 9 percent of people from DSs waited that long, regardless of geographical distance. Although the sample was not random, an issue for researchers of online relationships is to specify both the distance between partners and the type of site of their study participants before drawing conclusions from their data about timing of offline meetings.

Almost all of the couples who waited a year or longer to meet offline met at virtual communities, not dating sites. They came to know each other in a more “naturalistic” way (see McKenna, 2007) rather than seeking out a dating partner or mate directly. Most of the people who met within a month’s time came from dating sites. These daters wanted to interact F2F with potential partners quite quickly, which was easier to accomplish when they lived closer. No one from a VC in the couples studied met in less than a month after meeting first online.

**Place and Deception: The Online Presentation of Self**

Although an in-depth treatment of the issue of online deception is beyond the scope of this chapter, a few points about place or settings, goals, and honesty can be made. (For comparisons of self-revelation and honesty online versus offline, see, for example, Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001; Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004; Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). At DSs, no real names are used, unless a first name is combined with some numbers or another word. The process of revealing identity usually follows a path from on-site e-mail to personal e-mail to phone number before meeting in person. The two people control the flow of information. In VCs, anonymity ranges from none at all, with people using true or real first and last names to total protection of identity, with people hidden by avatars and names chosen
from site-provided lists as in *Second Life*. In chat rooms, people regularly select nicknames related to the topic area and in some discussion boards, such as fan groups, people choose names derived from the celebrities or shows of interest.

When people wish to know each other more than casually, the issue of honesty rises in importance. Upon entering any site, a person can decide which level of honesty appeals to him or her within the technical parameters and norms of the site, coupled with a personal preference within those constraints. On a discussion board, members become known to each other by their histories there and in interactions elsewhere. One interesting feature bringing the two settings closer is that some dating sites (see http://www.plentyoffish.com) now have opportunities for daters to speak about each other on the site after they communicate in private, either affirming or disconfirming what is presented by a dater.

Goffman (1956) described how people present themselves in social situations, how they “manage impressions” of others by highlighting positive features and de-emphasizing or hiding negative ones. Rather than divide online participants into honest and deceiving, researchers may want to look at the slight deceptions prevalent at dating sites as commonly accepted attempts to present an appealing persona. People who want to develop relationships know that any major deceptions will emerge over time. Based on cases of couples that were available for analysis during the years of the data collection, Baker (2005, 2002) found that people meeting online who lied about crucial facts such as marital status had less success in maintaining their relationships than those who were honest.

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**Place, Timing, and Outcome: A Concluding Note on the Success of Online Relationships**

Building a framework from the data of couples that met online, this author (Baker, 2005) coined the acronym POST to discuss which couples seemed to have greater chances of success (Baker, 2005, 2002) or of creating marriages and other long-term intimate relationships. For the (P) factor, place of meeting affects which kinds of people are at a site, influencing degree of common interest and affecting mutuality of goals. Examining the type of place where people meet online and then also offline is crucial in understanding the dynamics of online relationships. People who meet in VCs and in their homes offline seem to have a better chance of success overall than others. Not discussed in this chapter, variations in handling the obstacles (O) a couple faces, and how each chooses to present himself or herself online, or self-presentation (S), fill out the model. Here analyzed mainly in conjunction with place, timing (T) includes responding to the person’s initial contact to deciding when to move to another medium, how intimate to become online, and as outlined in this chapter, when to take the relationship offline.
Communication affects all four factors of the POST model, and of course, the four factors may affect the quantity and quality of communication as well. Communication skills and modes determine how the couple reacts after first encountering each other online in a particular type of place, and how the two people can overcome any obstacles such as distance, finances, and other relationships to decide on a place to meet offline. Decisions about how to present themselves to the other involve choices about each dater’s honesty, with or without mild to extreme withholding of personal information or outright deception. Communication affects the timing or pacing of shared thoughts, feelings, and movement to the next level of commitment in continuing or stopping the relationship. The textual communication of the couple is the product of their online interaction. It constitutes the whole of the online relationship, unless audio or visual means of communication supplement the written word.

The details of types of online places examined here, along with the relations of aspects of time to place, can help future researchers specify patterns and problems in the development of online relationships. Whether at dating sites or virtual communities, the number of people forming intimate partnerships continues to grow worldwide (see Barak, 2007). Researchers can complement and inform each other’s work by stating not only “who” they are studying but “where” people have found their partners online and how that place makes a difference to the relationship process.

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