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PERSPECTIVE

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

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Currently, there is much excitement about Web 2.0 as a novel platform for experiencing, producing, and consuming leisure, particularly through social network sites. Conversely, there are skeptics who sound the alarm on these spaces, viewing them as diluting of human relations. The perspective that guides this article is invested in neither a utopian nor a dystopian posture, but sees historical continuity, pointing out that performing leisure is a basic human impulse that has found expression over the centuries. With regard to the online sites used for leisure, it makes the case that the history of the development of the public park, the product of a complex interplay of interests and agendas of different stakeholders, provides a particularly rich resource for gaining insights into the evolution of social networking sites. To illustrate this heuristic potential, it draws on experiences ranging from the democratization of Beijing's parks in early twentieth century to the movement of flâneurs across Parisian public spaces to comment on the architecture of and activities on social network sites.

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, 20)

One can say that we have come a long way from the Puritan perspective of leisure as sin to that of a valued luxury in life. We are now perhaps evolving into a society in which luxury of yesteryear becomes everyday necessity (Chudacoff 2007). There are faint memories of leisure spaces and practices as contentious issues. For the most part, this memory remains buried away in the chronicles of a bygone era. Today, few appreciate the struggles that made possible the parks we enjoy. However, much attention is being paid to social spaces online where people check each other out, share their views on movies, or just "mindlessly" browse through texts and hypertexts. These online sites are seen as novel means of experiencing, producing, and consuming leisure. Furthermore, they are often viewed as democratic spaces that enable the circumvention of gender, class, and cultural barriers (Wellman and Hampton 1999). However, there are skeptics who sound alarms about the dilution of human relationships (Selwyn 2003). Then there is a perspective, the one that guides this article, that is invested in neither a utopian or a dystopian posture but sees historical continuity. It points out that while new technologies open up new possibilities for performing leisure, leisure is rooted in a basic human impulse that has found expression in different ways over the centuries (Roberts 2006).

What is needed is an open-minded approach that examines how leisure, both new and old, is experienced, who experiences it, and for what purposes.

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.(Roberts 2006, x)

Today social network sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Cyworld, Orkut, Second Life, MySpace, and Twitter are viewed as increasingly popular spaces for leisure. Within such spaces, people are seen to idle away their time in diverse and complex ways. This article conceptualizes such shared online "leisure" spaces as *virtual parks.* It looks into historical and contemporary constructions of public parks and the activities within them to gain insight into the nature of leisure spaces in contemporary society, particularly those online: the architectural and regulatory factors that structure and shape leisure spaces; and the range of transnational and transcultural leisure spaces that are inhabited, constructed, and enjoyed, and their enabling and disabling features. The objective of this article is not to argue whether or not current day leisure is novel, but to highlight the fact that leisure activities and spaces are permeated by histories. In doing so, this article reveals the true iconicity of *parks* and its diverse permutations across time and space.

The article starts with a discussion on metaphors as devices for making the unfamiliar familiar, particularly in reference to online social sites that serve as virtual spaces for leisure-related activities. The subsequent subsections, as outlined here, draw on the past experience with public parks to gain insights into sites for leisure online.

VIRTUAL PARKS

In conceptualizing cyberspace, the metaphor is never far behind. We resort to the familiar to orient ourselves with the unfamiliar; for example, we find ourselves in virtual dungeons, pubs, cyber*cafés*, chat*rooms*, *home*pages, online *communities*, and MUD *lobbies* (Adams 1997), confronted with the "electronic *frontier*" (Rheingold 2000), caught on the "information *superhighway*" (Brook and Boal 1995), and adrift among 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 is critical for cybersociality. We usually do so by using metaphors based on offline space to explain online ones.

With the advent of the "new," in this case, leisure online, we become *bricoleurs,* using "old" discourses and practices, in this case, those related to parks, to inform, construct, and shape the understanding of the new (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). The metaphor of "parks" is particularly valuable as it brings with it extensive historical experience to contemporary understandings. Given that social network sites have a short history of their own, by resorting to parks as a metaphorical equivalent, we can gain insight into the dynamic nature of online leisure spaces, their possible roles in society at a given time, their transnational and transcultural quality, their temporality and repetitions, their re-creations and revitalizations. This article draws on the virtual park metaphor to gain insights into online

leisure spaces along the following three dimensions, each discussed in a separate section.

One, when parks emerged on the urban landscape in the first decade of the twentieth century, they served as a vital site for socialization and there was a protracted struggle to make them public. The history of parks reveals the complex interplay of governments and other stakeholders that led to the "democratic" shaping of parks that were controlled spaces for the leisure of the growing urban masses. Here the article will argue that similar to parks, the "builders" and "regulators" of online platforms have to constantly attend to the "users" of their spaces, 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 is contested or shared on an ongoing basis.

Two, in our own times, the increasing popularity of local community gardens, gated communities, information technology (IT) parks, and theme parks can be sources of insight for understanding niche virtual parks online. In both offline and online arenas, boundaries are always key to the understanding of spaces. While there are certainly differences in the offline and online arenas, especially ease of movement across and through websites, it needs to be kept in mind that people are often creatures of routine and establish patterns online just as much as they do offline.

Three, urban parks were places where "weaker" sections of society such as children, women, gays, and poor exercised their identity. Here we see that behind the design of leisure spaces are intentions, regulations, expectations, and constraints that are often circumvented, transformed, and played with by the people that inhabit these spaces. In other words, one person's "loitering" or "cruising" could be another person's "strolling." This section captures the richness of play in online leisure spaces, wherein users strategically, impulsively, or aimlessly browse through a maze of multimodal texts and hypertexts.

Gardener, Patron, Architect, and Stroller

It is tempting to attribute to the designer the omnipotence of determined action. However, as we show, spaces manufactured for certain intended purposes often end up being used in ways that are quite different from what its makers had in mind. Interestingly, at times, the makers themselves can be instrumental in the transformation of a restricted and private space to a democratic one. For instance, much like how the Internet was birthed by/for the military and later deliberately opened up to the public, the early twentieth century Beijing imperial parks were opened up as public spaces because of the changes instituted by the elites themselves and not just local activism alone (Shi 1998). Such acts challenge the simplistic explanations that locate the responsibility for information-rich and information-poor and other divides in the existing power structures.

It is worth pondering why, in general, parks have fewer regulations and less policing than other public spaces, given that leisure can take form through varied expressions, often bordering on the contentious. As we think through this seeming paradox, we start to understand the dilemma faced by platform owners and designers of virtual social spaces as they simultaneously seek to control aspects of users behavior and benefit from their creativity (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, the draw of leisure spaces is contingent on the participants' sense of freedom to inhabit them and to actually gain "leisure" experiences there. 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, control of online leisure spaces takes place through contracts, "terms of service" agreements, and end user license agreements (EULAs) for participation. If not adhered to, the platform owners have full right to block or expel those who violate them.

> 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, 2050)

But then, 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 persistent 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" (Balkin 2004, 2051).

To add to the complexity, users of leisure spaces often become the designers themselves and with open-source code can alter not only the content but also the code itself. Consequently, the space is "owned" as much by the user as by the platform owner in terms of actual social norms and practices. 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 occupied with indecency and violence, platform owners may be more concerned about engaging and garnering loyalty from their users, and users themselves may be most concerned about building relationships, getting entertained, gathering information, or just passing time.

In fact, the best form of regulation comes from the users themselves through formal and informal norms as they shun and/or reprimand those who disrupt the space (Donath 2007).

> 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, 2082)

Interestingly, early twentieth-century Beijing was organized around concentric walled encirclements with the elites at the center: The Forbidden City at the heart of the city served the emperor, the Imperial City housed courts and the high-ranking officials, the Inner City housed the officials and business class, and the Outer City housed the masses.

The largest park spaces were situated at the center, and as one 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*)" (Shi 1998, 220). Over time, as the need to appear "modern" took root, Chinese reformers sought to transform social spaces. By making public that which was private, and profane that which was sacred, they contributed to the purging of the past and the transition from imperialism to statehood.

Motivations driving the design for these leisure spaces were many: to improve China's image, to control social unrest, to create congregation spaces for distribution of public goods and services and also for organizing ceremonial functions, to regulate citizens' behaviors, ethics, and lifestyles, and more generally to extend the reach of the state into the domestic sphere. In spite of a host of rules instituted by the state, much of the activity in parks defied the state's dictate. Far from the intended designs, these parks were used by the people for a range of purposes, at times undermining the established institutions and norms; they served as political forums for the

"dissemination of ideas and the mobilization of the urban populace" (Shi 1998, 243), venues for commercial activities, pro-democracy movements, and mass rallies, and locales for 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. (Shi 1998, 250)

Thus we see that the social engineering of leisure spaces is more complex than the dynamics associated with either social control or mass upheaval and activism. To attribute to the designers premeditated rationality not only overplays the capacity of those in authority but also undermines the agency for whom these spaces are built. The development of public parks in Worchester, Massachusetts, in the late nineteenth century provides another example (Rosenzweig 1979). With urbanization came the demand by the working class for 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. The state 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 to serve as a means of solidarity and peace among a highly diverse group of immigrants that made up the majority of the population of the city.

Far from complying with these state-directed goals, we instead see 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," that being the "loafing" by the lower classes as they pursued their own leisure activities despite legal constraints against "loitering" (Rosenzweig 1979, 40). 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" (Rosenzweig 1979, 42). If anything, it gave autonomy to varied individuals and groups to shape this space in accordance with the needs of their commu-

nity, while at the same time they were bounded by their socioeconomic backgrounds, gender, and political status, and by legal frameworks that shaped access to such spaces. These factors helped determine the amount of time they had for such leisure, with whom they could spend this time, and at what times and for what purposes. While legal sanctions were quickly imposed on these "free" leisure spaces to socialize the masses, idleness (common experience due to high unemployment at that time) and drunkenness accompanied them into the parks in spite of the penalties imposed by the state. Thereby parks did give some relief from urban ills such as "overcrowding, poverty, squalor, ill-health, lack of morals and morale and so on" (Taylor 1995, 202), but not quite in the manner envisioned by the utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

In a similar vein, while institutions encourage or at least acknowledge online social spaces as modern and representative of contemporary time, at the same time they 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, and 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 contested histories, can we speak of parks as neocolonial and a "Western" imposition of utilitarian, Calvinistic, and Protestant values onto the "colonized"? Shall we rejuvenate the "othering" (Said 1978) interpretation in the design of parks by the British in colonized India of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, viewing the bastardizing of the Mughal traditions through the British "gaze?" 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, of the indigenous urban population, and of a landscape dotted with historical and sacred monuments and places of worship alive with religious life, as well as the acquired taste for Mughal-style gardens among the British themselves (Bowe 1999). These appropriations in the "Anglo-Indian" gardens of the colonial era were hardly subtle, as exemplified in the designs of Metcalfe, who deliberately drew in the existing monumental achievements such as the tomb of Adham Khan, the Jamali Kumali Masjid, 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.

Similarly, new online technologies introduced by the West to postcolonial countries as part of the grand mission of mitigating the digital divide and facilitating economic development and democracy (Negroponte 1995) are often

perceived as colonialism of a new kind. Perhaps 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 postcolonial technocrats or what Saxenian (2006) terms the "new argonauts," the Silicon Valley tech-savvy entrepreneurs from China, India, and other developing countries, who engage with their friends and acquaintances back home to spawn networks that shape the development of new technologies and virtual spaces they opens up. 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. Moreover, 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.

In general, leisure spaces 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 space. Online spaces can serve as useful resources on both sides of the battle, control and order versus resistance and creative "disorder": corporations forming their own Facebook profiles, media companies capitalizing on social network congregations for targeted advertising and tracking of user behavior (Economist 2008), while users are harnessing online social technologies for organizing online mass protests (Bennett 2005) with rallying cries ranging from the profound to the trivial, from fictionalizing fact to factualizing fiction.

The early-twentieth-century notion of institutionalizing public spaces for leisure has been an international phenomenon and has taken on new significance today as governments across cultures and nations face an ever-expressive public that is making its power felt both online and offline. Furthermore, governments themselves see leisure as an avenue for fostering national solidarity and as an outlet for dissipating social pressure, increasingly important in an era of rapid change and uncertainty.

> 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. (Wilson 1988, 12)

Hence, while online spaces may be novel, recreation is a basic human need, which has found expression in various ways over the centuries. For instance, constrained by the spatial hierarchy of Beijing parks described earlier, the masses devised forms of recreation and leisure

under bridges, within Buddhist and Daoist temples, on the streets, with activities similar to those we find in modern public parks, for example, picnicking, socializing, selling wares, and putting on impromptu performances (Shi 1998). These activities over time became institutionalized into annual fairs and entertainment shows, and at times spawned full-time markets for wares and talent shows that gained popularity among not just the masses but also the elites, who left their private enclaves to enjoy these public gatherings. So as we can see, a distinction needs to be made between the act and the space itself. Therefore, for those on the other side of the digital divide where online social spaces are unknown and nonaccessible, that being the majority of the world populace, we need to keep in mind that these people continue to indulge in leisure activities extensively and creatively and mobilize their social networks through ingenious ways. These spaces therefore cannot be disassociated from their historical inheritance and contemporary yearnings; instead, they should be viewed as a multilayered reality with yesterday's sacred embedded in today's mundane.

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 deter access and usage, the Beijing's "public" parks at their 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 understood in all its diversity.

> Boyd and Ellison (2007) capture some of the diversity of the online social sites: 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 [social network services] 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. (6)

The diverse affordances of leisure spaces remind us that it is not just the act of leisure that is dynamic and contingent on the user group, but the leisure space itself is multifaceted and ever-changing. We see this vividly in the new trend of walled gardens in urban India that enable the moneyed class to experience leisure "uncorrupted" by the slums outside. Here women and children are encouraged not to go outside these self-contained communes. With security guards at entrances monitoring movements in and out of these green enclaves, there is a concerted attempt to limit them 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. (Sengupta 2008)

Or better yet, one need not look any further than the Dubai landscape, where there is much to be discovered about contemporary leisure practices. Here we are compelled to leave behind the notion of park as a monolithic nature-centric space to one that is concrete, technology-laden, and consumption-oriented. This new conception celebrates the commodification of leisure, of heightened stimulus through often technologically mediated experiences. For example, there is the *Wild Wadi* water theme park or the *Gold and Diamond Park* 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. With their wide range of restaurants and brand stores, such spaces have surpassed the once radical theme parks envisioned by Disney in terms of scope and self-containment. In fact, theme or fantasy parks are moving away from the compartmentalization of leisure to a more integrated and hybridized whole; the renowned Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid blends office and residential towers and highways and public parks into "a seamless whole." She states, "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 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 that what constitutes as common public leisure spaces has expanded and exponentially grown to fill multifarious demands of contemporary urban life.

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 twenty-first century is marked by a leisure of decadence and defragmentation. Cameron (2002) 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 culture. . . . 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. (12)

Such an "iron cage of uniformity" (22) is typically constructed as a vast network of entertainment and consumption through an amalgamation of mega public structures including multiplex movie theatres, malls, and fast-food chains that deliver leisure as packaged products. Thus the urban park, with its democratic attainments, has been upstaged by a "branded empire" (62).

We are perhaps seeing similar transformations in social network sites, as media corporations infiltrate and dominate these online leisure spaces. Yet, as this article has outlined already and continues to do in the next subsection, human nature is ingenious and can be seen to improvise new modalities to connect, consume, and often times produce in remarkable and divergent ways. Here the global entertainment economy of leisure is hybridized and amalgamated with the architecture and the user in continuous flux.

One Man's Strolling Is Another Man's Cruising

Different people *move* through the same leisure space in unique ways. Therefore, a leisure space should be seen as multiscaped. The "browsing" movement through online leisure spaces illustrates how people navigate and experience leisure spaces in general, as an admixture of meandering and getting lost, making connections, following paths and trails that lead to the unknown, and establishing a routine of such practices (Burbules 2000).

We see such similar traits in how people strolled through public parks in the early twentieth century.

The public parks then were especially designed for strolling. Benches were provided to check out people, and a custom of family promenades permitted inspection of other families for matrimony. So while people actively strolled through these guided terrains in search of future marital prospects, these pathways also became known as gay sexualized spaces that provided a cover for gay glances (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" among an "invisible" group of people, the gay community (Higgs 1999). Thus, "movement" entails not just directionality but also communication. Today, we see as much lurking behavior as active dating behavior on social network sites.

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, while leisure is often linked to idleness, perhaps a better reading of this concept is Rheingold's (2002) "hard play," which challenges the notion that labor and play are diametrically opposite. In fact, leisure can be highly labor-intensive 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 amid vast acres of green enclaves and zones. We see a similar trend of social network sites being harnessed by the private sector, nonprofits, and academia, where the blurring of play and labor is architected to enhance productivity (Boyd & Ellison 2007). This is a contemporary phenomenon, where to be globally competitive, organizations need to attract their workforce and simulate a lifestyle that resembles more play than labor, to appear very much part of the youthful contemporary scene of online activity.

The concept of the flâneur is particularly useful for understanding such contemporary movements. As people navigate and browse through social leisure sites with pop-up advertisements and hyperlinks, with brands scrolling their customized messages directed at 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) turn 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 amusedly, voyeuristically, and often knowingly immerses himself completely and fully into packaged experiences. Baudelaire 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, 55). According to Benjamin and Tiedemann, the flâneur emerged in response to the new architecture of the city wherein passageways were etched through the streets of Paris, weaving shops, storefronts, and parks together, contributing to the labyrinth of experiences for this icon of the bourgeois. Of course, one needs to view the flâneur as less part of an elite group and more a tourist, often touching past briefly and superficially, experiencing temporarily the merchandise and sites around him, of teasing alternatives in lifestyle, cuisine, and habits, knowingly and playfully.

While online spaces are commonly perceived as adult, gendered, and neocolonial (Solomon, Allen, and Resta 2003), users often 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, multi-scaped, multimodal, cross-cultural, and spatiotemporal (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981; Street 1993).

CONCLUSION

As the preceding analysis shows, the history of the development of the public park is a rich source for materials that make legible ongoing processes in the evolution of social network sites and also alert us to the possibilities for the future. They range from the democratization of Beijing's parks in the early twentieth century to the movement of flâneurs across Parisian public spaces, the former pointing to the complex interplay of power and resistance that shape the development of places of leisure and the latter to the ingenious ways in which humans, especially the disadvantaged classes, improvise recreational opportunities on an altered landscape. This concluding section does not offer a recap of what has been discussed in detail. Instead it is directed to the takeaway points for research on new technologies in general, and specifically, online spaces for leisure under investigation.

One, the literature on new technologies is brimming with comparative studies. They typically tend to be either between countries or competing technologies. One

rarely sees comparisons between a new technology and an old one. Moreover, these comparisons tend to be artifact-centric. This article shows the fruitfulness of shifting the focus of a comparative study away from the artifact to the study of social practices. While the artifacts change rapidly, especially in an era marked by blinding pace of technological development, the social practices tend to be far more stable. Therefore social practices-centric research is likely to generate works of much more durable value.

Two, the metaphors based on past experience can be fruitfully employed to gain insights into evolution of an emerging technology for which the configuration possibilities and the practices that may develop around it are little understood. To bear fruit, such an exercise needs to be conducted with certain artfulness, as a mechanistic mapping of salient features of the old technology onto the new one will only yield mundane results.

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