# Virtual territorialities.[1]
# Identity, ownership and sense of
# belonging in multiuser online environments

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses internet mediated communication and the contemporary rearticulation of territorial links in three types of multi-user online environments: chat rooms, social network systems and 3D graphic worlds. Interviewees spoke about creation or participation in online representations of physical places (countries, cities, public places, etc). Results confirm the existence of identity and utilitarian links to this type of virtual place and indicate the existence of multiple and complex territorial links, mostly due to the intense geographical mobility of users of online multi-user environments and, on the other, to the historical and identity constitution which differentiates virtual places from their physical counterparts.

**Keywords:** Multi-user online environments, multi-territoriality, place, identity

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at discussing how internet mediated communication has an effect on the relations between geographical space and cultural identity, with special regard to questions related to the territorial link with the so called virtual places. Our focus rests online multi-user environments , where the influence of the question we are asking is particularly direct, since they allow for almost immediate *many-many interactions*, whose base are textual or visual representations of the participants (avatars) and the environment in which

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they find themselves. As we shall see, we understand that this double process of representation is decisive for the establishment of virtual places.

Given that our aim is discussing questions related to the social appropriation of information spaces that find their formulations in the notions expressed by the words `place` and 'territory', we chose to start this paper by clarifying the terms on which we build our differentiation[2] between *space*, *place* and *territory*. In this paper we take space to be an unlimited conceptual totality that, on being grasped and a appropriated, is organized in parcels that differ on structure, organization and dynamics. These sub-categories of space, that we call places (Foucault, 1986, *online*), acquire limits and histories from the social interactions that take place there and that create their identity (Santos, 1997; Augé, 2007). The senses of ownership or belonging by the subjects that interact *with* and *in* the place make for the multiplicity of powers that create its territorial character (Haesbaert, 2005, online). When we use *space* it is in reference to general meanings (e.g.: *geographical space*, *physical space* or *information space*), and *place* is seen as a more clearly situated perspective of identity characterization. Territory, on its turn, is understood from the developments of identity construction regarding a certain place, that result in the feelings of ownership or belonging and that are frequently joined by a set of rules or laws that characterize someone´s (or a group´s) appropriation of the place forbidding or allowing other people´s (or group´s) access (Haesbaert, 2007; Albagli 2004).

In this way, we understand that spaces, places and territorialities are inseparable: the materiality of spaces is organized in geographically characterized places (by its not necessarily material limits) and symbolically (by its identity and historicity). The relations that people create with spaces might lead to territoriality (Holzer, 1999), that is translated in a sense of territorial individual belonging (in reference to a personally immediate an dimpossibloe to violate space) or collective (when it regards a group identity, ruling its social interactions) (albagli, 2004, p. 28). In a functional perspective, territoriality consists in domination and exclusivity process, and the territory is seen as a resource, an exchange value aiming at profit. The symbolic aspect of territoriality regards appropriation and identity and employs the meanings of *home* and *shelter* (Haesbaert, 2004, online).

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[2] We talk of building differentiation to emphasize our view that, as with any concept, definitions of space, p lace and territoriality are deliberate attributions of meaning, given our research goal.

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## DE-TERRITORIALIZATION AND MULTI-TEMPORALITY

Globalizing processes, in particular the development of transportation and communication technologies, are frequently associated with a necessity of neutralizing spatial restrictions considered inherent to Capitalism (Harvey, 1999; Bauman 2001). This view is the basisi of the idea to the effect that the current elevated spatial mobility (Urry, 2007; Cogo, 2007) responds to a weakening of the importance of spatiality to social life (Virilio, 1993; Trivinho, 1998) that engenders the phenomenon known as *de-territorialization* (Jameson, 1991; Ortiz, 1994; Lemos, 2005). Haesbaert criticizes the view that the process of abandoning, of escape of modification and destruction of regions typical of our current times means a "disappearance of territories" or even a weakening of spatial mediation insocial relations (Haesbaert, 1999, p. 171). According to this author, territories are not vanishing, but changing place constantly, acquiring another relational sense (Haesbaert, 2007, p. 156). This interpretation meets that of Lemos, to whom current technology could be de-territorializing, but regardless of that create new "re-territorializations, through the dynamics of information control and access" (Lemos, 2005). It also meets Santos´ opinion, mobility assistance in "contemporary modernization" (Santos, 2006, p. 218) leads to a globalization of places and territories. According to Haesbaert´s view (2007) the result of this process isn´t the disappearance of places and territories, but its multiplying. Made easy through the acknowledgement and belonging of a person to new territories, a more complex form of territorialization is created, merging with the idea of net: multi-territoriality.

Multi-territoriality is characterized by the over-connection of territories and by the greater liquidity of spatial transits, simplifying the access (virtual and real) to different places that harbor "flux space" (Castells, 1999). Against this background the idea of *de-territorialization* doesn´t occur due to an effective extinction of territories, but to the difficulty of recognizing or defining the current multiple and broken territories, something that blocks the acknowledgement of the imminent character of (multi-)territorialization in people's and group´s lives. In this way, "more than the uprooting de-territorialization, there is present a spatially broken, extremely complex phenomenon of re-territorialization" (Haesbaert, 1994, p. 2014) in which the weakening of some forms of spatial control are joined by the remodeling,

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reinforcement or creation of other power elations that are inserted in social life spatiality, as affirm, for example Soja (1989) and Sassen (2006).

Haesbaert doesn't relate the rise of cultural hybridism, territorial identity multiplicity and territory juxtaposition with the disappearance of territorial relations. Using concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari, to whom *de-territorialization* movements and *re-territorialization* are always relative and are always connected, bound to each other (Deleuze e Guattari, 2005, p. 11), Haesbaert understands the whole *de-territorialization* process as accompanied by a re-territorialization one, strengthened by a multiplicity of territories that would be characteristic of contemporary times. By moving through the multiple territories that can be accessed, people do not necessarily give up their references of belonging and ownership, but collect others, joining one more social group that inhabits one more territory (Haesbaert, 2007, p. 131). That is to say, the multiplicity of available territories allow people to visit, own and belong to multiple territories, situated in different dimensions and that would arouse the same sense of belonging and ownership as those observed in single territoriality relations.

## SPACES, PLACES AND VIRTUAL TERRITORIES / VIRTUAL SPACES, PLACES AND TERRITORIES

In its most generic meaning, our definition of space embodies more concrete definitions, linked to the possibility of "measuring with steps", of "walking in-between" (brunet, 1992 apud Machado, 1997, p. 21) and also more theoretical and abstract ones, like mathematical hyperspace (Fragoso, 2000). Build in this way, this concept aims at bringing together three spatial notions that merge to form our research goal: the idea of geographical space (physical), that of information space (cyberspavce) and that of social space (appropriated). Though closely related, they´re fundamentally distinct, and when worked with in an undifferentiated manner create paradoxes and unreal similitudes (Fragoso, *in print*).

Social comprehension of space recognizes the link between spatiality and social actors, focusing on the history of object systems and of action though which physical and social spaces are built and rebuilt, appropriated and re-appropriated (Santos, 2006). Social space is thus an essentially inhabited space since it is built by social practices and interactions with th elements

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that allowed for the relational perception of spatiality (Fragoso, 2005, p. 51), and through social interactions that take place among these elements. Albagli (2004) thinking follows the same line, to whom human beings are related *with* and *in* space.

The peculiarities of internet mediated communication allow the establishment of *many-many* interaction environments that are made up of accessible visual and/or textual representations insie which social practices take place. They are multi-user on-line systems, lke games (e.g: *World of Warcraft*), conversation environments (e.g: IRC channels), social network services (*Orkut*, *Facebook*) that categorize as social spaces due to two types of social interaction indicated by Albagli: with the elements that create the environment (interactivity as defined by Fragoso, 2001) and between social actors (social or mutual interaction, as defined by Primo, 2005).

The non-materiality of online multi-user environments do not hinder the process of social appropriation that qualify them as virtual places and created feelings of ownership and belonging, characterizing the more intense identity link we associate with territory. The attribution of territorial characteristics to virtual places is noticeable through everyday experience and finds its reality in reference to ownership (as in the case of the "Orkut takeover", Fragoso, 2006) and in parcels or specific divisions (as in the terrains or islands in *Second Life*, Rebs, 2010).

Besides offering the support to the creation, organization and sharing of these virtual territory-places, internet potentiates the multiplicity of interactions and with that, the multiplying of cultural identities and identifications. That is to say, the facility of internet social interaction augmented the "'multiple tribes' to which one can belong (and that would) reveal the numerous, ephemeral territorialities that we encompass in everyday life (Haesbaerst, 2007, p. 226). In this process, individual and collective identity links migrate to on-line representations (that is to say, to virtual territory-places), augmenting multi-territorial experience by broadening territory range to which one can belong materially or symbolically[3].

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[3] Fragoso and Rosario (2008) discuss the simultaneous presence in virtual and material places in terms of physical rooting of the subject given the materiality of his/her organic body (Fragoso, in print), that is still existing in online interaction, that by its turn has another, symbolic space which the physical body can´t access.

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## VIRTUAL TERRITORIALITY

Verbal and visual representations that characterize virtual places and territories have as a reference the physical world, sometimes in a spatially generic way (beaches, cities, lakes) and sometimes by specific places (a certain beach, city or lake)[4]. The theme of the rearticulating between geographical space and cultural identity lead us to focus on the seconf type of representation. For this reason, our efforts fall upon virtual territories established in multi-user internet environments that represent specific places of geographical space. We have discussed in previous papers the existence of this kind of places that function as virtual *re-creations* of geographical places, exemplified by chat-rooms related to cities and countries (such as *Porto Alegre* and *Argentina*) or even related to a migration movement (such as *Brazilian abroad*, *Dekasseguis*, *Brazilians in Europe*, observed by Barth, 2009), communities in social networks related to Brazilian cities or states (communities such as *Rio de Janeiro* and *Sao Paulo* in *Orkut*, in Fragosos, 2008) and graphical environments, like *Brazil Island* or *Curitiba Island* in *Second Life* (Rebs, 2010).

A great number of internet provider *UOL* chat-rooms observed by Barth (2009) seemed to shelter random meetings, in verbally constituted environments that may be conceived of no one´s places or "non-places" (Augé, 2007, p. 73)[5]. However, in the chat-rooms related to cities and regions one can notice that the nicknames[6] point to subjects with multiple territorial belongings, related to the place represented by the room, be it the same or different from that indicated in its personal representation, (Barth, 2009).

The relation that subjects establish with these geographical places seems to be mostly regulated by identity questions. Rebs (2010) studied the creation of virtual places in multi-user graphic environments without pre-defined theme, verifying in *Second Life* Islands the virtual representation of countries, cities, squares, buildings and monuments that function as extensions of their referential concrete places, creating a link between territorial construction

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[4] Examples of generic representations I Love beaches in *Orkut*, or Quality of life in cities. Examples of specific representations: Paria da Pipa, Il ove São Paulo.

[5] Augé (2007, p. 73) undesrtands that "if a place can create identity, relational and historical, a space that cannot be classified thus will be a non-space". This perspective has been developed by many authors: Cardoso (1998), Lemos (2005), Santaella (2007).

[6] A nickname is the users ID in the chat-room. It can be a real or fictitious name. Nicknames with territorial links are *cleberlondon* and *Eng of Love – Paris*.

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and the necessity of referring to cultural expressions in virtual space. The same had been indicated by Tomasini (2007) who saw in the association to geographical place related *Orkut* communities the intention of *declaring* territorial relations, a perception consonant with that of Mattuck e Meucci (2005), to whom *Orkut* communities are part of the identity icons group that subjects use to build their self representation in that social net system.

In parallel to this association as declaration of belonging and identity, Fragoso (2008) noticed that participation in communities of location or mother towns, in *Orkut*, raised the chances of contact between people with similar interests and that visit geographically close spaces, as well as it makes extending the relation form virtual to real easier. Conversely, face-to-face relations can become virtual, making contacts easier and more frequent, helping the maintenance and strengthening of pre-existent links.

Finally, *Orkut* communities observed by Fragoso (2008) seem to function also as sources of information about the geographical places they represent, functioning as a *notice board* with buy-and-sell ads, party and event announcing, public services such as missing children warning and vaccination news. Barth (2009) found a similar function in sites dedicated to Brazilians living overseas, offering services of law consulting in immigration procedures, tips on living abroad and relationships between expatriated Brazilians.

In a nutshell, the works mentioned point to two reasons for the creation or search of virtual places that express territorial links: identity expression and the use of the place as a *meeting point* and *notice board*. In the first case, people would create or search for representations of geographical spaces in multi-user online environments as a way of representing themselves, indicating who they are according to territorial origin. In the second case, these places would be the basis for the creation, maintaining and strengthening of social bonds, or for the spread of information and warnings to the dwellers of the geographical places.

Up to here, however, we have dealt with the observation of the elements that constitute the virtual places (naming, images, etc.) and the evidence of interaction s established with them and in them (creation of topics and warnings, conversation records between users, etc.). In order to deepen the comprehension of the reasons of the creation and association to the representations of geographical places in multi-user online systems and of the ways of use and

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appropriation of such virtual places, we deem necessary to advance from the observation of environments to that of the subjects that interact in them and with them.

**INTERVIEWS: MULTI-TERRITORIALITY AND TRANSMIGRATION**

In order to deepen the comprehension of the reasons of the creation, association and participation of in virtual places that represent geographical places, with conducted a series of semi-structures interviews with user of online interaction systems that we had observed in our previous work: chat-rooms associated to cities and countries in the *UOL* website, Brazilian city and state communities in *Orkut*, and islands that represent Brazil and Brazilian cities in *Second Life*. With this variety of online multi-user systems we hope to encompass different types of people and a variety of use and appropriation profiles, enlarging the samplings of our conclusions. In all, we conducted 49 interviews – 27 with members of *Orkut* communities with direct reference to Brazilian cities and states, 18 with *Second Life* users that know, participate or live in geographically related islands, 4 with *UOL* participants in city or country=y related chat-rooms. The interview were conducted in 2009 by email, *MSN, Skype, GTalk* , by IMs internal to *Second Life* or private chats in *UOL*.

Almost all interviewees (45) claimed to have connected to these geographically representing virtual places with which they maintain territorial links (identified throughth euse of *my* city, *my* state). The reason presented varied from *searching mutual friends, showing who I am, being proud of where I live knowing about where I live, meeting nw people* to *being my place.*

The "identity tag" pointed by Tomasini (2007) came up as a frequent motive, seen is expressions such as:

(Orkut) communities aimed at showing who we are, what we like, etc.

Other identity tones, convergent with this idea, indicate the assuming of a two-way street between belonging to a community and that function as a virtual place and personal identification:

Even though I don´t actively take part in the community, it serves as a display
so that others may join, so indirectly I belong to it.

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The idea of *showing one´s origins* come up emphatically in the interviews, pointing not only to the existence of territoriality feelings, but also to pride of precedence location. This is exemplified in the following interview excerpt, in which a user explains the reasons for going after a community that represents a geographical space:

> The main reason for setting communities related to my place of origin (for example, Rio Grande do Sul) refers to how proud I fel about where I was born. To the lifestyle that we (gaucho) have. Characteristcs of our state many times lacking in other territories.

We also find signs that adhesion to online representations of geographical spaces goes beyond pre-existing territorial bonds and functions as a multi-territorial experience, since the virtual places and the interactions that take place there are considered as *real* as their physical counterpart:

> They (*Orkut* communities) represet something that really exists and to which I belong . To me the virtual world is a parallel world. In the real world, where interaction can be much more real, that´s where we belong or not to the representations of our lives. I live in my neighborhood, my city, my state, my country. I belong to the virtual communities exactly because I belong to such places. Even if I don´t interact.

The importance of virtual places as a communication tool and symbolic structure to the support of multi-territorial living in the physical world could be detected in interviews that reported an interest in virtual places related to distant geographical territories, with which an affective or social bond is maintained due to personal life history:

> Yes there is Santos Island, I lived there when I joined SL (*Second Life*) it´s beautiful there is parachuting and a beautiful beach
> (…)
> Because I missed it, that was the reason I went after it
> (…)
> When you live far you have a different view on teleporting yourself to your town
> (…)
> It´s the feeling of knowing you belong somewhere

Using multi-user online systems in order to maintain multi-territorial bonds established in the geographical space meets Siqueira´s (2008) notion of "transnational migration" that points to the sense of *living in two places* always going back and forth between origin and

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destination. They´re transit experiences between different places that make way for the establishment of new territorial bonds, but don´t erase previous ones.

> I lived for a certain time in the USA, in California specifically
> (…)
> (*Orkut* communities) related to Minas Gerais go back to the tome when I lived in Sete Lagoas, in that state
> (…)
> I own a little visit community on south Recife, where I used to live and study

Besides maintaining territorial links crated in the physical world, interviewees also pointed to the importance of geographical representations in multi-user systems as a way of bringing together people that live far away but share similar values and cultural references.

> In the case of Brazilian islands I joined to meet other Brazilians, but they all followed the same pattern: (urban, with beaches an parties an lots of people just chatting away)

Conversely, virtual places also serve as meeting point to those that are geographically close. In this case the possibility of extending the interaction to material places is an important motivation:

> Physical proximity helps people to meet each other virtually and as well as in the real world. Besides, there´s a greater chance of meeting people you already know.

Some interviewees use online multi-user environments to look for specific types of interaction, especially sexual encounters and dating relationships:

> the reason why I visit this virtual place is) meeting people that are close to me, for friendship or love involvement too.

However, all in all, the search of virtual places as sources of information about the places they represent was more frequent.

> The community is a great place to find out about events, bars, restaurants and services that are indicated by other members.

Besides, interviewees also mention the potential of virtual places as a source of information of the habits and culture of the geographical spaces.

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> As for my neighborhood community, it was only to know about the lifestyle of those around me, their daily lives, if they drink *chimarrão*, things like that, that can be found in the topics if the community.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We chose to focus our research on virtual territorial articulations in online multi-user environments because we take these to made up of representations of elements whose relations create an internal spatial order, including representation of the social actors that interact with each other and the environment- that is to say *with* and *in the space*, granting them an identity and a history. This process of social appropriation of virtual space create virtual places that can serve as basis to the establishment of territorial bonds, something that becomes particular interesting and complex when we take into account that the representations used in the creation of virtual places are related to elements found in physical places, oftentimes with the obvious intent of creating a *virtual equivalent* of countries, cities, squares, etc.

Our previous work had targeted the theme of the relations between subjects and virtual places that represent specific geographical places, using as empirical basis the elements that constitute virtual places and evidence of social interaction found thereof. Our interest in territorial links established with those places lead to a subject-oriented approach that resulted in a corpus of 49 interviews with participants of different online multi-user environments (*Orkut, UOL* chat-rooms*, Second Life*).

Going beyond the importance of identity questions of virtual places that represent geographical locations (Tomasini, 2007; Rebs, 2009) and of their potential as meeting points and information sources (Fragoso, 2008; Barth, 2009), we find evidence of high geographical mobility among users of online environments. The expressions of the interviewees on multiple spatial transit that inform their experience confirm Haesbaert´s (1994) hypothesis to the effect that displacement doesn´t imply in abandoning already established territorial references, bat adding new ones, forming a complex group of belonging and ownership feelings with multiple places. In this sense of simultaneous belonging to multiple spatially broken geographical spaces, the notion of multi-territoriality meets the idea of transnational migration (Siqueira, 2008), understood as multiple symbolic presence, a perception that was very evident in our interviews.
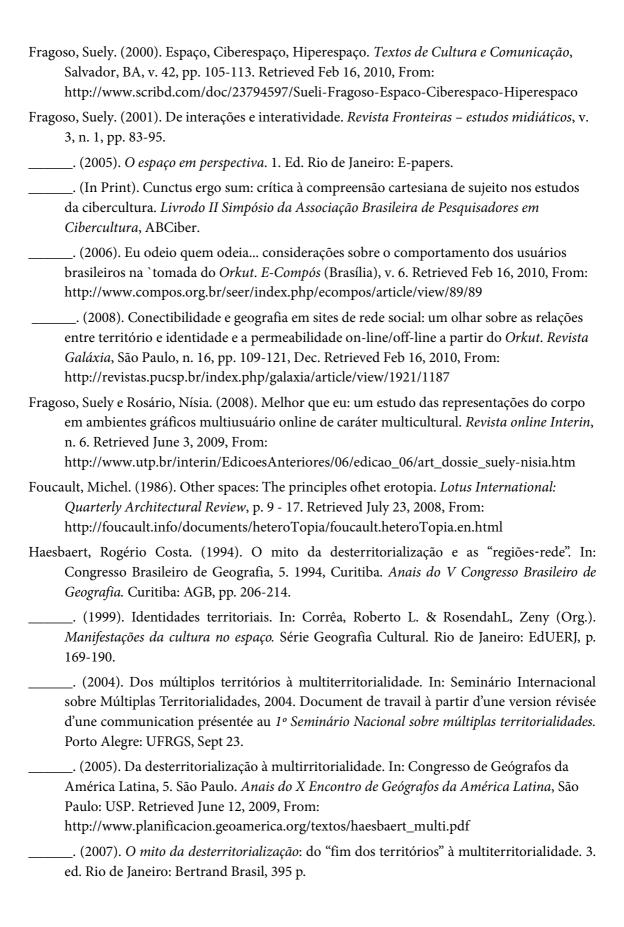
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In another perspective, one could see that interactions *with* and *in* a certain virtual place create its identity and history, making them different from the geographical places that serve as their reference. This *reality status* creates another level of multi-territorial experience, typical of online multi-user systems that are made up of territorial bond with two places, the virtual and the real one – places that, though related, are recognizably distinct. This perception finds its expression in the search for virtual representations of geographical spaces with which the subject already has territorial bonds, with the goals of identity affirming, maintaining previous links or interacting with people that are physically in those places. On the other hand, virtual places that represent future destinations or residence of the interviewees are used as a source of information and as meeting points - in both cases with the evident intent of exploring permeability and continuity between physical and virtual spaces.

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