The Coffeehouse, The Diner, The Bar: The Rise and Fall of Television's Favorite Third Places

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In the concluding scene of the wildly popular sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004), Rachel asks Chandler and Monica, who have just completed packing up their apartment in anticipation of a move to the suburbs, if they need to go to their new house right away or if they have time to get coffee. "Sure," responds Chandler, and as the central cast walks through the threshold of the apartment for the last time he adds, "Where?" (00:48:18). The studio audience laughs as the episode – and the series – concludes. The joke here, which even casual viewers are equipped to catch, is that Chandler has no reason to ask where the friends will get their coffee because the answer is obvious. For a full decade, from its premier in 1994 to its 2004 finale, viewers watched the six titular characters live their lives around the hub of Central Perk, a conveniently located and regularly visited coffeehouse. Although the characters move to a variety of apartments throughout the series, trading each other as roommates around Manhattan, Central Perk remains a constant meeting place, an impossibly reliable and neutral home-base where the friends may gather as a collective.

In the popular television landscape of the turn to the 21st century, the function of Central Perk in *Friends* is hardly unique. The titular bar of *Cheers* (1982-1993) set the colloquial standard for a convenient, accessible, television common space: this standard was later met by other such examples as *Seinfeld*'s Monk's (1989-1998), *Frasier*'s Café Nervossa (1993-2004), and *Gilmore Girl*'s Luke's Diner (original run 2000-2007). These places serve as common meeting ground the characters of their respective series gather spontaneously, at which they expect the unplanned company of people they know, and in which they feel comfortable (and expected) to linger. This "third place" (Oldenburg) television trend thrived up

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through the early 2000s but was ultimately short-lived: in the years following the previous examples, third places as central elements of popular television series have become much less common. Television third places, then, seem to have met a specifically situated cultural need at a particular time.

In *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*, Brian Ott argues that 1990s television supported viewers in learning to navigate the rapid, anxiety-inducing changes that characterized the turn of the millennium. Drawing on the sample set of television series listed previously, I extend from Ott's work to argue that the television trend of the third place is evidence of specific Information Age anxieties about disconnection and placelessness. Further, I attribute the decline of this trend to the rise of Internet-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) and social networking platforms, which have come to function as "virtual third places" (see Soukup; Horrigan; Lawson; Aldosemani et al.; Moore et al.) that at least partially meet the need for community and connection traditionally filled by physical third places.

Ray Oldenburg's "Third Place"

Ray Oldenburg, author of *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, defines third places as sites of "regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" and writes that such places comprise "the core settings of informal public life" (16). Oldenburg enumerates several specific characteristics of third places that frame their capacity to provide ideal conditions for spontaneous, enjoyable, social interaction. Through measurement against these characteristics, we can qualify fictional places like Central Perk, Café Nervossa, Cheers, Monk's, and Luke's as evident, albeit idealized, representations of Oldenburg's third place.

First, Oldenburg describes the social value of third places as "*neutral ground* upon which people may gather" (22). He writes that these are places "where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable" (22). This "neutral ground" qualification distinguishes third places from the first place, or the domestic space of home. In the example of *Friends*, although the six central characters are often shown gathered at one another's apartments, nearly every episode also features visits to the coffeehouse. The characters enter alone or together and leave one at a

time or in pairs: the nature of their third place requires no single person to be responsible for the others, freeing all to exist in the space equally.

Relatedly, Oldenburg's third place also functions as "a leveler," an inclusive space that renders irrelevant the status markers that apply in other places, including especially the second place: work. Oldenburg writes that in most day-to-day circumstances, people normally interact according to roles assigned to them for objective purposes. He writes that these hierarchical relations are most applicable at work, but that "a place that is a leveler also permits the individual to know workmates in a different and fuller aspect than is possible in the workplace" (Oldenburg 24). In the example of *Frasier,* at Café Nervossa radio personality Frasier Crane and his producer Roz relate to each other as friends, sharing gossip and personal aspects of their lives with one another. Despite their various and unrelated jobs (actor, paleontologist, chef), the *Friends* characters enter Central Perk with an equal right to occupy the space. Even when the third place is or becomes certain characters' workplace, the working characters are nevertheless still welcomed to participate in the third place-based conversational experiences of the others, which Oldenburg asserts is the primary activity, or "*sine qua non* of the third place" (28).[1] Specifically, Oldenburg explains that people visit and linger in third places for social engagement, to connect with each other, and to share ideas. Although Monk's and Luke's, as diners, primarily function as businesses that serve food, the characters in *Seinfeld* and *Gilmore Girls* respectively never visit these businesses just to eat but also to engage in conversation with other characters.

For third places to feature conversation among regulars as the main activity, one that often continues long after patrons have finished their meal or coffee, they must flexibly serve purposes beyond those for which they are primarily designed. Instead of encouraging people to cycle out, efficiently making room for new paying customers, true third places allow, even encourage, lingering. Oldenburg explains that newer establishments "are more wedded to the purposes for which they were built" and that chain businesses are more likely to have "policies and personnel that discourage hanging out" (36). Thus, he explains, older establishments, those with a plain, low profile, are more likely to become third places. Accordingly, places like

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[1] Moore, Gathman, and Duchenaut offer a useful critique to Oldenburg's definition, pointing out that "third places must be second places for someone (that is, places of work). For patrons to enjoy the 'unplanned, unscheduled, unorganized, and unstructured' visits to third places, someone must do the work of supporting them (Oldenburg 1991:33). Neither the beer nor the coffee will pour itself" (238). Sam Malone and Rachel Green, then, may pour beer and coffee respectively without threatening the third place status of Cheers and Central Perk.

Central Perk, Café Nervossa, and Luke's feature in the pilot episodes of their shows as locally based, securely established locations already frequented by the characters. In fact, the pilot episodes of *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Gilmore Girls*, as well as *Cheers*, open in their third places, establishing the importance of these places to the stories and characters from the series' very first scenes.

Further, Oldenburg explains that the most successful third places are easily accessible: they must be in proximity to one's residence so that visits are convenient and so that the patrons are likely to know each other. Third places are "those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there" (Oldenburg 32). This characteristic is tied closely with the requirement that the third place be reliably populated with regulars. Oldenburg explains that people visit third places because of the energy created by the collective of other visitors and their relationships with each other. The urban setting of stories like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* allows for third places that are centrally located near the characters' residences in a way that is authentic to dense urban layouts in which businesses and residences intermix. Even the small-town diner of *Gilmore Girls*, though, is located within walking distance of main characters Lorelai and Rory's home. Its central location in town makes it conveniently accessible to many of the show's other primary characters. Because these third places are easy to access, they are reliably populated at any given time with members of the community and provide reliable, ongoing opportunities for neighbors to develop bonds with one another.

Finally, Oldenburg describes that the prevalent mood in third places must be playfulness, and that they should function as a "home away from home" (38) with the comfort of a domestic space without being a domestic space. The now iconic Central Perk couch and coffee table, furniture more associated with private living rooms than businesses, visibly establishes this "home away from home" atmosphere for both the characters and the viewer. Although other customers populate the coffeehouse at its tables and chairs, the central *Friends* characters most often sit on the couch and in seats around the coffee table (an arrangement that mirrors the domestic space of the upstairs apartment) and act accordingly, speaking casually with one another much as though they were enjoying the privacy of home.

The inclusion of third places in popular narrative television programs represents a late 1980s through 2000s trend of celebrating the qualities that Oldenburg describes. Settings like Central Perk and Luke's become characters in themselves: viewers come to rely on these coffeehouses, diners, and bars as gathering places in

which familiar and beloved characters spend time not only with each other but with the viewer. These places are a fictional manifestation of a comfortable, secure place that exists to serve the social development of each story's community. The thriving nature of these places in their television contexts, however, stands in stark contrast to the fate of third places in late 20th century reality.

Third places have historically featured prominently in American culture. Karen Lawson, in a brief overview of this history, writes that "The inns of colonial society were transformed into the saloons and general stores that sprung up with the country's westward expansion. Later came the soda fountains, coffee shops, and diners, which, along with the local post office, were centrally located and provided, along with churches, the social anchors of community life" (125). This historical pattern of third place abundance begins to shift, however, in the mid-20th century.

Beyond discussing the nature of third places, Oldenburg traces the context and outcomes of their rapid disappearance from American life: he attributes this shift in large part to the postwar development and expansion of suburbs, writing that:

> Life in the subdivision may have satisfied the combat veteran's longing for a safe, orderly, and quiet haven, but it rarely offered the sense of place and belonging that had rooted his parents and grandparents. Houses alone do not a community make, and the typical subdivision proved hostile to the emergence of any structure or space utilization beyond the uniform houses and streets that characterized it. (Oldenburg 4)

Postwar subdivisions, as Oldenburg describes them, were not designed to include third places and thus established inherently fragmented modern communities. He laments, "There are no sad farewells at the local taverns or the corner store because there are no local taverns or corner stores" (Oldenburg 4). Oldenburg underscores the loss of the soda fountains and lunch counters that formerly functioned as community gathering places and cites the trend of converting garages into recreation rooms, spaces for youth to gather, to meet this need (18).

Oldenburg summarizes the sense of disconnection and placelessness among individuals in a society without third places, identifying that:

> The problem of place in America manifests itself in a sorely deficient informal public life. The structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job, and passive consumerism is small and dwindling. The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals. American life-styles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by

> boredom, loneliness, alienation, and a high price tag. America can point to
> many areas where she has made progress, but in the area of informal public
> life she has lost ground and continues to lose it. (Oldenburg 13)

According to Oldenburg's analysis, this particular set of social concerns is historically situated among developments unique to the second half of the 20th century and the time immediately prior to the new millennium.

Information Age Anxieties

In *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*, Brian Ott discusses several other anxieties unique to the era of the Information Age and argues for the function of television as an avenue through which viewers could learn to adapt to the destabilizing changes of the era. Ott begins by positioning the Information Age historically, emphasizing the massively influential developments in information production and dissemination that characterized the turn of the 21st century. Ott defines information as "the vast array of semiotic material produced and circulated in society," clarifying that "information includes everything from the messages we read on billboards and conversations we have with our friends to the images we see on television and film and the music we listen to on the radio" (28). To emphasize the unprecedented explosion of information unique to this era, Ott quotes H.C. von Bayer's claim in 2004 that "humans and their machines will create more information in the next three years than in the preceding 300,000 years of history" (qtd. in Ott 30). Further, Ott points out that the length of time between the development of the phonetic alphabet and movable-type printing technology was over six times as long as the time between printing and mass electronic communication (5), making the transition to the Information Age "dizzyingly quick by historical comparison" (5). Computers and the Internet represent remarkably influential developments in communication technology, the progress of which is staggering: Ott explains that "So rapid have been the advances in computing power that in 1994 the typical person wore more computing power on his or her wrist than existed in the world before 1961 (Morrison and Schmid 1994: 171)" (qtd. in Ott 35).

This development in computing power and related communication technologies has impacted contemporary society by influencing the amount of information produced, by shifting who is able to produce and share information, and by increasing the ease with which information is circulated and spread across even

very large distances. In combination, these factors have led to an overwhelming abundance of information that in turn contributes to widespread cultural anxieties. As an example, Ott writes that, prior to these developments, the reality of physical separation between communicators necessitated time lags between information production, transmission, and processing. While in-person communication occurs synchronously, distance communication has, until recently, been asynchronous: a letter is written, a letter is mailed, a letter is read, with each step occurring at a different moment in time. Most asynchronous processes of communication, however, have been replaced by the faster-than-synchronous communication enabled by contemporary technology (e.g., computers, television, satellites). When communication is faster-than-synchronous, information is produced and shared at a rate faster than it can possibly be processed. As examples Ott presents the ease with which we might "download a library-worth of information from across the globe" (32) or the way that news programming, "with it[s] graphics, scrolling text, and talking heads, offers information more rapidly than it can be received by the typical viewer" (32).

Together, these remarkable developments of the Information Age contribute to five specific anxieties that Ott names: "feeling overwhelmed, feeling placeless, feeling frenzied, feeling guilty, and feeling fragmented" (47). These anxieties, particularly placelessness and fragmentation, mirror those that Oldenburg claims develop in the absence of third places. Traditionally, third places provide community members with space to engage in uncomplicated, synchronous conversational communication. They exist as reliable institutions within communities that tether people to one another in a shared space, and, by not demanding the responsibilities of home or work, they enable and encourage socialization for its own, human sake. The unprecedented explosion of information, paired with the isolating nature of a modern life void of dedicated third places, initiates, then, a search for ways to cope in this new world.

Citing Kenneth Burke and Barry Brummett, Ott presents public discourse as a method through which people name, discuss, and work through social anxieties, including anxieties caused by major paradigm shifts (5). In the context of the Information Age, Ott claims that television is uniquely positioned as an ideal medium for such discourse for two reasons. First, television represents an

accessible, nearly completely ubiquitous communication method.[2] Secondly, he posits that the simultaneous, rather than sequential, structure of television narratives "privileges a different way of knowing" (Ott 9) more in keeping with the nature of the Information Age. That is, rather than sequencing information in the linear fashion of print media, the visual approach of television engages simultaneous presentation. In addition to visual media's presentation of multiple signs at once that are read by the viewer in any order, Ott also describes editing techniques that introduce "gaps, breaks, and ruptures" (9), both of which differentiate television from the linear coherence of traditional print media (9). As a medium, television does not resist the paradigm shifts of the Information Age but instead rides its wave of abundance. Ultimately, Ott argues that the public discourse featured in the popular television programming of the 1990s supported viewers in navigating shifting social conditions (55). He presents categories of hyperconscious television, which acknowledges and parodies its own position, and nostalgic television, which gazes back towards the rapidly receding past. Both of which, he claims, help equip viewers for life in the present.

The prevalence of featured third places in popular television programming of the period between the 1980s and the 2000s aligns with and extends Ott's argument: in an era when people are losing or have lost the real-life touchstones of community gathering spots, and when an overwhelm of information is forcing feelings of isolation, television viewers seek comfort in narrative worlds that have preserved intentional space for conversation and community. This desire is named directly and addressed by *Cheers*: airing throughout the 1980s, this series no doubt maintained its immense popularity into the 1990s because it not only recognized the modern conditions of placelessness and isolation but also offered an antidote.

The *Cheers* opening sequence begins with an exterior shot of the namesake bar as cars and pedestrians pass. The image freezes before fading into an illustration of the same exterior, this time framed by a horse-drawn carriage and people dressed according to the fashions of the 19th century. The lyrics declare, "Making your way in the world today takes everything you got," naming the temporal distinction between the two visually represented time periods: "today" is presented in opposition to an idealized version of "yesterday." Articulating the purpose of third places as places set apart, the lyrics continue, "Taking a break from all your worries

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[2] Television skyrocketed from a presence in 9% of US homes in 1950 to an astonishing 95% by 1970 (Ott vii).

sure would help a lot" before asking, "Wouldn't you like to get away?" A viewer experiencing the Information Age anxieties previously described is primed, then, to agree with the song's declaration that "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came" (Portnoy and Angelo). Viewers of the show *Cheers* are invited weekly to spend half an hour at the bar Cheers, a fictional third place that perfectly meets all of Oldenburg's criteria. Cheers is "neutral ground" for conversation. If, as the song lyrics say, it is a place "where you can see troubles are all the same" (Portnoy and Angelo), it must also be a leveler. Viewers of *Cheers* may linger there, and they may come and go as they please, always assured that this place will be populated by locals whom they recognize. Week by week viewers become familiar with the standard cast of characters, come to know all their names, and are invited to imagine, in a type of fantasy, that their own name is known in that place as well. Because each episode is released and consumed one by one at regular intervals, according to the conventions of network television and the circumstances of the show's original airing, viewers develop a sense of regularity and ritual, entering the world of this familiar place presented as only the medium of television can achieve: visibly and audibly, and therefore immersively. The act of regularly watching *Cheers*, which is set almost exclusively within the walls of its namesake, simulates for viewers the increasingly inaccessible and elusive experience of third places.

The other television shows in the representative sample, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Frasier* (a series which spun off from *Cheers*), and *Gilmore Girls*, all feature third places that function similarly to Cheers the bar. In each case, the fictional third places presented in the televisual context become the "hyperreal" of Jean Baudrillard, disconnected from any actual referent (Baudrillard 6). Viewers do not feel emotionally connected to the atmosphere of places like Central Perk or Luke's because they are reminded of third places they know and frequent but because the fictional settings function as a stand-in for an environment to which the viewer has no actual access in the reality of their day-to-day lives. In fact, these fictional third places live up to Oldenburg's definition in a way that no real place actually could: we would be hard pressed to find a real-world third place in which institutions of power (including but not limited to class, race, and gender privilege) are authentically, but temporarily, dismantled in the "leveling" way that Oldenburg describes (Soukup 430). The pattern of featured, beloved, perfect third places across popular television narratives demonstrates a socially constant interest in the

third places that were absent from contemporary American life but desired by Americans when these shows originally aired.

Since the publication of *The Great Good Place* in 1989 and again in 1999, third places have not necessarily experienced a resurgence. Residential neighborhoods remain physically distant from businesses, and people are still discouraged from lingering just to talk when they take up space that could be occupied by a customer who will make a new purchase. On television, though, third places no longer feature with the frequency that marked the 1990s and 2000s. This shift away from what appears to have once been a staple of popular narrative television indicates some sort of social change that cannot be explained by the return of third places to communities because they simply have not returned.

Virtual Third Places

The same Information Age technological and social changes that contributed to the era's common anxieties also enabled the establishment and widespread use of Internet-based computer-mediated communication. In his book *Digital Places: Building or City of Bits*, Thomas A. Horan explores the influence of technological innovation on the design of physical spaces. While he describes adaptive and transformative designs that take new technology into account (7), he also observes, in what we might consider an extension of Oldenburg's position, that "our electronic experiences appear to be flourishing while communities of place seem to be withering on the vine" (Horan 63). Horan surfaces new questions (and anxieties) that have emerged as the Information Age has slid into the "digital revolution" (5). He writes:

> Seemingly unconstrained by temporal or spatial limits, the rapid and continuing emergence of Internet-based technologies, networks, and services brings with it entirely new dimensions of electronically mediated experience and communication. Will this virtual landscape make our cluttered public realm obsolete, so that we will no longer need to venture outdoors, content instead to surf the ubiquitous World Wide Web for all forms of work and pleasure? Will traditional cities meet the same fate as drive-in theaters? (Horan 5)

Rather than operating purely as a threat to current physical spaces, though, Internet-based technologies also offer an opportunity to reclaim the communal, social connections fostered in our now endangered third places. Howard Rheingold in *The*

Virtual Community lends in support of this claim a decade of observations of user inclination toward CMC-based community building. He writes, "I suspect that one of the explanations for this phenomenon is the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives" (Rheingold xx). The third places may be vanishing, but people's collective desire for social engagement is as strong as it has ever been. Innovations in Internet-based technology and computer-mediated communication methods have created new spaces within which users are finding virtual community (see Lawson; Horrigan).

In her book *The Culture of Connectivity*, José van Dijk attributes the development of social media to the interconnected development of Web 2.0 functionality and the shifting nature of "sharing." As Internet users became able, through Web 2.0, to create information with unprecedented ease, they likewise became interested in publishing it. She explains that previously private speech acts (e.g., "talking to friends, exchanging gossip, showing holiday pictures" (7)) now function, through social media and networking, as public utterances (van Dijk 7). Christina Ortner, Philip Sinner, and Tanja Jadin outline Internet-based social media and networking historically, tracing their development from as far back as the local email capabilities of the 1960s. They discuss the influence of Web 2.0 in the mid-1990s but ultimately cite the advent of Facebook in the mid-2000s as the point at which social networking became a dominant Internet activity (378). Van Dijk writes that in December 2011, "82 percent of the world's internet population over age 15 […] logged on to a social media site" (4), a statistic that highlights social media as one of the Internet's most accessed uses. Further, Ortner et al. attribute the rise in ubiquity of social media use to the nearly parallel development and popularity of the smartphone: as a portable, Internet-accessible device in near constant use for most people who own one, the smartphone has influenced the design of and expectation surrounding social media interfaces; at the same time, social media increases smartphone use, resulting in a cycle of mutual perpetuation (Ortner et al. 380).

Further, van Dijk writes that "The very word 'social' associated with media implies that platforms are user centered and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term 'participatory' emphasizes human collaboration. Indeed, social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of *human* networks – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value" (11, emphasis in original). In her analysis of Facebook in particular, van Dijk discusses the notions of "friending"

and "sharing" and the new meaning they have developed in the context of online communication generally as well as Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's specifically articulated goals of making the world more social (45). Although van Dijk's project is ultimately focused on the collection and exploitation of users' data, she describes how the process of "sharing" and the norms that have developed around it have influenced the publication of content that was previously considered more appropriate for private audiences. Historically, this sharing of information, pleasantries, family photos, and the like may have occurred in one's home or, just as likely, in the context of a third place. In the context of both physical third places and digitally rendered social networks, social engagement and community are created through the human experience of sharing, not by the structures that house people or their data.

Viewed as structured environments in which individuals are able to make connections, engage in conversation, and expect to encounter other people they know, social networking platforms seem to present themselves as digital versions of third places. Charles Soukup explores this possible categorization in his article "Computer-Mediated Communication as a Virtual Third Place: Building Oldenburg's Great Good Places on the World Wide Web." Soukup weighs computer-mediated communication, including structures like chatrooms and multi-user domains (MUD), against Oldenburg's list of third place criteria and draws a nuanced conclusion. On the one hand, he finds that:

> if CMC contexts such as MUDs provide a "social refuge" from the stress of work and home life, this computer-mediated interaction reflects Oldenburg's imagery concerning his great good places such as pubs and coffee shops. Functionally, both third places and computer-mediated environments such as chatrooms and MUDs are essentially social spaces outside professional and familial roles for the purpose of informal social interaction. (Soukup 424)

However, he also points out that CMC is not, for the most part, anchored to a single physically oriented community. That is, like-minded users may gather according to similar interests, but, as they are likely spread across the country or even the globe, they are not physical neighbors like the regulars at the third places Oldenburg describes (Soukup 428).[3] Further, Soukup articulates that CMC contexts are

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[3] Soukup also questions the truly accessible nature of the online spaces he addresses, but it is worth noting that he further points out that Oldenburg's claim that third places are "levelers" in which social status and hierarchy are not applicable is likewise not actually characteristic of physical third

essentially simulations, explaining that "In a sense, people are merely 'pretending' to be in a 'real' place while they sit at their computer screens, much like people pretend to be at a 'real' French café when dining in Disneyland" (426; see also Rheingold 11).

Ultimately, Soukup suggests the qualifying term "virtual" to describe the nature of CMC contexts as third places, explaining, "While CMC shares specific characteristics with traditional third places, the interaction is 'virtual' or transcends space and time and alters identity and symbolic referents via simulation. This is an important distinction, because it provides a more realistic representation of the experience in a computer-mediated third place" (432). Thus, Soukup acknowledges that CMC and physical third places share many of the same functions, suggesting that the virtual third place may be made to stand in for a physical one if no such physical place exists. If we are to understand virtual third places as effectively simulations, then, we may reach even a step beyond Soukup's claim to conclude that virtual third places are able to fulfill the same or similar roles to the third place simulations we access through the narrative immersion offered by our televisions.

Similar research on massively multiplayer online (MMO) games has revealed the potential for Internet-users to build community in virtual third places. MMO games, or virtual environments that host thousands of players, offer an opportunity for nuanced analysis of virtual community building because they are based in synchronous communication between users that mimics real life encounters (Moore et al. 230). From their analysis of social interactions among MMO players, again weighed against Oldenburg's criteria, Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams conclude that "By providing spaces for social interaction and relationship beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new 'third place' for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old" (886). Steinkuehler and Williams dispel the myth of online gaming as an isolated, individual activity by presenting an analysis of gaming's conversational elements and explaining that "Text-based interaction in such worlds is incessant and ubiquitous" (893). They write, "Game play is not a single, solitary interaction between an individual and a technology" but rather that "in the case of MMOs, game play is more akin to playing five-person poker in a neighborhood tavern that is accessible from your own living room" (904). Nicolas Ducheneaut,

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spaces in the clean way Oldenburg suggests. Soukup asks, "Are these traditional third places to which Oldenburg refers truly without status and accessible to everyone? […] Do our deeply-rooted notions of 'race' and class disappear when walking into a bar or barber shop?" (430).

Robert J. Moore, and Eric Nickell build on the work of Steinkuehler and Williams by narrowing their focus to cantinas in the MMO game *Star Wars Galaxies*, environments within the game world designed to reflect real-life third places. Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell likewise conclude that "online games are promising environments that could be designed to replace or, at the very least, supplement the third places of the physical world. […] We have seen that most of the positive aspects of third places can be transferred to games, provided significant attention is paid to avoiding design pitfalls that have already been documented with physical places" (164). The relevance of these findings extends beyond the specific mechanics of MMOs to other social networking contexts, which likewise function to connect people to one another virtually even when they are separated physically.

Importantly, this research demonstrates not only the possibility but the ongoing existence of virtual third places in a world bereft of physical third places. It is also worth noting that Soukup as well as Steinkuehler and Williams initially describe the nature of third places by referring not to physical third places but rather to the third place examples that a contemporary reader is most likely to recognize: the third places of narrative television. Steinkuehler and Williams clearly allude to the theme song (and thus the setting) of *Cheers* in their title "Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name," and Soukup references the fictional Boston bar as a point of comparison to chatrooms when he writes, "As a 'place' where a tightly-knit small group of regulars consistently return for spirited and spontaneous talk, chatrooms have been compared to the most popular mediated depiction of a third place, the television show *Cheers* – a place where everybody (at least everyone who is a regular patron) knows your name (Browne, 1997)" (Soukup 425). These references acknowledge that third places have featured so prominently in television subject matter that they have become our primary cultural touchstones for the concept. Contemporary programming, though, offers no such critical mass of examples. While third places certainly existed on television before *Cheers* (Soukup references *The Andy Griffith Show*'s barber shop and Al's Drive-In from *Happy Days*) and do appear in more recently popular shows, they are not featured with the same regularity as the third places of the era in between. For instance, JJ's Diner in *Parks and Recreation* and Poor Richard's in *The Office* are both examples of later third places. Neither, however, feature in their respective narratives with the frequency and reliability of earlier examples like Central Perk or Luke's, and neither comes close to meeting the standard set by Cheers or Oldenburg. Ultimately, television's

favorite third places seem more or less localized to the years surrounding the turn of the century.

Conclusion

If television third places were acknowledging and providing equipment to navigate Information Age anxieties of placelessness, isolation, and a lack of community from the 1980s through the 2000s, these anxieties must have eased by the 2010s. If the disappearance of real-life third places throughout the second half of the 20th century contributed to these anxieties, then the advent, acceptance, and spread of social media has served to establish a sense of community and reduce the need for television third places. It is not the independent operating of various media that we see here, but rather their interaction. Considering this point of interaction allows us to interrogate popular media as a response to cultural needs and invites us to consider whether we recognize the response they offer as sufficient.

No doubt viewers are still enticed and comforted by the home-away-from-home, neutral spaces that encourage community and conversation featured in shows like *Friends* and others, as evidenced by their popularity both in syndication and on streaming services. Perhaps we remain drawn to these shows because we continue to value third places in the way that Oldenburg claims, or because we consider the online alternative to be an inadequate simulation. Perhaps it is our lingering desires that have led to pop-up manifestations of television's favorite third places in the physical world, still simulations but simulations that are at least tangible. Take, for instance, the October 2016 conversion of over 200 coffeeshops into temporary Luke's Diner locations in anticipation of the *Gilmore Girls* reboot (Luckel). The popular reception of this marketing strategy could reveal an unconscious collective realization that virtual third places are not enough and might signal the beginnings of a nostalgic cultural interest in reviving physical third places as community centers.

Or perhaps our communities are now too far reaching to be adequately served by a location-specific meeting ground. After all, do we visit a pop-up Luke's Diner to be there, or to take pictures to share with our friends (or followers)? In our contemporary moment, Chandler's question of where the group should get coffee might have no obvious answer, and a move to the suburbs, away from walkable coffeehouses and bars and diners, might still feel like a loss. In equal likelihood, though, the introduction of physical distance might not seem quite so bad if the

friends know that they can, whenever they choose, speak to and see one another instantaneously, at any time of day, on devices they can carry in their pockets.

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