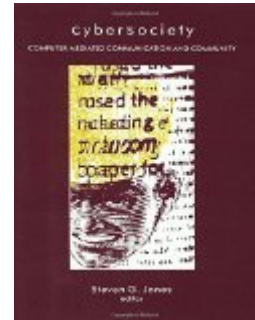**Steven G. Jones, ed..** *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995. ix + 241 pp. $62.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8039-5677-3.

Reviewed by Roy Johnson

Given the exponential growth of the Internet recently, this is a timely collection of academic papers studying its users and the "communities" (virtual and otherwise) to which they belong. It touches on computer-mediated communication (CMC), bulletin board users, emailers, and the [in?]famous Usenet groups--all so ripe for social analysis that one wonders why Tom Wolfe seems to have been so quiet of late (though the ghost of Howard Rheingold hovers over the collection, cited in the bibliography of almost every article).

Unfortunately the book seems to suffer from its academic provenance. The majority of the essays are written in a bloated style which suggests that they have been produced on the rack of tenure-seeking and "research requirements." For instance, one which deals interestingly with hiding gender behind "personae" in Usenet postings, spoils the issue by forcing an artifical link with Hobbes' concept of Leviathan--and we are not surprised to learn that the article has its origins in a master's thesis in political science.

One or two pieces embark on what might appear to be promising enterprises--a search for a theory of software, or an interpretation of a computer games programme in the light of New World narratives--but they collapse into undisguised encomiums for Nintendo and Sim City. This phenomenon is rather like the academic paper which claims radical insights, but is actually an excuse for some cultural theorist to rationalise an adolescent enthusiasm for Madonna or Michael Jackson.

There are a couple of reasonable pieces on Usenet and Netiquette (with well-deserved acknowledgements to gurus Gene Spafford and Chuq Von Rospach), but they are written in an amazingly po-faced and laboured style which is completely at odds with their subject matter. Similarly, a piece on [virtual] social interactions in Multi User Domains (MUDs) fails to convince me that these activities are anything much more than Toyz for Boyz.

Fortunately, the collection is rescued by its last major item--a fluent and stunningly persuasive analysis of "the E-mail murders." This was a true-life incident in which a Canadian research scientist created a furore by emailing evidence of

what he saw as academic corruption. Senior colleagues had attached their names to his research papers to gain credit--and as a junior he had been promised promotion as a quid pro quo. When this was not forthcoming, he blew the whistle on them.

His evidence was forwarded (by someone else) onto a relatively quiet Usenet group--sci.research.careers. The exposure created a heated debate which exploded dramatically when the original poster was threatened with legal action, then went on a gun-toting rampage and killed four people. The entire incident was discussed on a minute-by-minute basis in a community of astonished Usenet posters, with interventions by media and police.

What makes this study so impressive is not only the co-authors' sense of narrative and the sheer readability of their style, but the fact that they deal systematically with all the issues--theoretical and practical--raised by the incidents. They consider authorship and ownership in an age of electronic messages, the genealogy of a "text," the ethnography of Usenet users, the language and the symbolism of postings, the politics of academic life--even guns and madness in North America. All this is done with detailed reference to the messages generated by the Hypertextuality of the incident--which is what good tutors tell their students to do, isn't it? The Net still awaits its major cultural analyst, but the book is worth it for this piece alone.

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