

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

# Being Virtually Real?



**Virtual Worlds from a  
Cultural Studies' Perspective.**

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# COMPUTER MEDIATED RELIGIOUS LIFE OF TECHNOSHAMANS AND CYBERSHAMANS.<sup>1</sup>

IS THERE ANY VIRTUALITY?

LIBUŠE MARTÍNKOVÁ

## *Introduction*

“The 21st century has brought with it not only New Age of Spirituality, but a new kind of Shaman. The world wide web opens access to individuals around the globe and combination of Cyberspace and Shaman has created Cybershaman.”<sup>2</sup>

These are words of a self-proclaimed and a self-confessed cybershaman Micheal Teal, presenting one of many attempts to articulate in contemporary religious post-modernity what cybershamanism is. But this definition effort is certainly not an easy task, neither for believers themselves, nor for the researchers in the field of studying religion on the Internet. The scholarly terms ‘technoshamanism’ and ‘cybershamanism,’<sup>3</sup> as well as (traditional) shamanism, from which these new religious movements were derived, are not broadly distinct and transparent.<sup>4</sup> Shamans, much less technoshamans or cybershamans, do not form any homogenous groups of believers with fixed borders, therefore the limits of these groups are considerably fuzzy. What is, on the contrary, relatively evident in the investigation of individual religiousness of technoshamanism and cybershamanism, is the fact of integration of computer technologies into up-to-date shamanic practice, characterized as postmodern religion.

Modern technologies, represented here mainly by personal computers, linked predominantly in a global network of the Internet, play a key role in religious life of technoshamans and cybershamans, though the *extent* and *modes* of computer use by followers

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the results of author’s research, included in the project of “*Cultural Turn in the Study of Religion*” supported by GAUK grant project number 535/2004-05 (together with Jiří Gebelt and Lenka Philippová).

<sup>2</sup> Teal 2005.

<sup>3</sup> I have recognized two linguistic plural forms, occurring in the interviews with the participants of my research or in texts published on the Internet – *technoshamans* and *technoshamen*, and in analogy *cybershamans* and *cybershamen*. For the purpose of this paper I have adopted the ‘terminology’ of majority of participants (including those of female sex), denoting themselves in plural *technoshamans* and *cybershamans*.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 1997, 107-108.

of both groups considerably differ. Computer mediation of technoshamanic or cybershamanic religious experience represents the substantial shift from the traditional shamanism and different ways of embracing computer technologies in ritual practice is one of the features traced in the course of study of this extremely individualized religiousness on the Internet.

In this paper I discuss different forms of incorporation the computers into ritual practice in a social and religious discourse of technoshamanism and cybershamanism, focusing on description and analysis of characteristic ritual changes. I have tried to elaborate my paper with consideration to advanced concept of *Ritual Dynamics*, dealing successfully with puzzled character of post-modern religiousness in the context of new media, specially the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Statements presented here are based on the results and conclusions of my own research, composed largely as the Internet fieldwork, employing mostly the methods of anonymous interviews in real-time chats, in lesser extent within web-based discussion boards or via email mode of communication. I am aware of partial and preliminary character of the results, but as long as there are no other reliable data available, they can serve at least for introductory purpose. Majority of the conclusions stems from sixteen (qualitative) interviews, which I conducted in 2004 and 2006 among the followers of technoshamanism and cybershamanism (seen from my perspective, since some of them did not identify themselves as technoshamans or cybershamans, but postmodern or electronic shamans). Also sophisticated searching<sup>6</sup> of relevant websites was applied as a methodological approach, and trying to avoid one-sidedness of study material, mostly gained online, I have added some sources coming from offline too.<sup>7</sup> Unlike in the case of examining for example the Christian web presence, where the researcher can include in the subject of investigation both personal pages as well as institutional sites for comparative study, for the survey of technoshamanic and cybershamanic religious expression on the Internet only personal hypertext documents are available. It is obvious, when one bears in mind the simple fact there is no technoshamanic, cybershamanic, not even shamanic ‘institution’, neither central, nor local. The empirical material in a form of Internet homepages, used for my inquiry, can be then divided into two groups – those designed with the purpose to present the information *about* technoshamans and cybershamans, and those created *by* adherents themselves. Both kinds of Internet presentations are characterized by extreme diversity.

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<sup>5</sup> See the website of the Heidelberg University Collaborative Research Center 619 “*Dynamics of Rituals*”. <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/index.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> For example using the Deep Web search engines. See further in the chapter *Exploring Religious Life of Technoshamans and Cybershamans on the Internet*.

<sup>7</sup> Real-life meetings with participants, leading to three more interviews.

*Definition of Technoshamanism and Cybershamanism*

“Drug use, ecstatic dancing, and trance music are well-established in today’s technoshamanic subculture, as is their use in ritualistic events to bind the communities together. One can easily see a mapping between computer networks and the spirit world, and between computers and the powerful entities the traditional shaman interacts with.”<sup>8</sup>

This quote is by Erich Schneider, ‘celebrity’ among technoshamans, well-known for his practicing technoshamanism as well as for his publication activities in this field. His thoughts are extensively spread on the Internet via Usenet articles, forwarded in chain emails etc. by many admirers since 1993.<sup>9</sup> One way is to focus on definitions of technoshamanism or cybershamanism from the emic perspective, from the perspective of the followers of these spiritual paths themselves. But this highly individualized religiousness produces similarly individualized definitions, varying extremely one from another one, as it is apparent from another definition example: “Redefining ritual for the 21st century. Going into ritual trance by use of digital music. [...] Some say that it connects us with God.”<sup>10</sup> This excerpt comes from the web discussion, set in forum providing the discussions on different social topics, not exclusively on religion. This discussion sub-group was designed with the intent to find the answers to the basic question ‘what is technoshamanism’ – it seems that even believers and sympathizers themselves notice the heterogeneity in the technoshamanic practice, and their quest to face the vagueness is shown here.

“Technoshamanism can be located as being on the fringes of a wider pagan revival being a hybrid of rave and internet cultures and spiritual expressions. I argue that technoshamanism is about the transgression and dissolution of boundaries particularly those between culture and nature, performance and audience.”<sup>11</sup>

This definition, adopted from a scholarly essay on technoshamanic spirituality, hence elaborated from an etic perspective, seems to be describing some completely other kind of religiousness. If compared with previous two descriptions, it indicates the (methodological) gap between different approaches, the inability to determine even the subject of study. In accordance with the tendencies of so called ‘culture turn’ in academic study of religion it is

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<sup>8</sup> See the website with several definitions of technoshamanism:

<http://hyperreal.org/raves/spirit/technoshamanism/Technoshaman-Definitions.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, <http://www.bunnysneezes.net/page181.html> with exactly the same text of Eric Schneider’s definition of technoshamanism.

<sup>10</sup> See the message posted by Cozmic Kitty (moderator of the discussion) <http://tribes.tribe.net/d7ecdbcd-5ff2-4f62-99ac-5699148dc91b/thread/31346a69-287d-4978-88b2-b31bd4fc2a5d>. Retrieved from: homepage of “Tribe” from: <http://tribes.tribe.net/>.

<sup>11</sup> Green 2001.

more suitable to concentrate on seeking the common features, though they may be fragmentary, instead of unavailing effort of definition consensus. As I have stated above, one of these characteristics is a use of computer technology in religious life of adherents of technoshamanic and cybershamanic streams. Describing and analyzing different modes of using the computer technologies in religious behavior of technoshamans and cybershamans allows coping partially with the definition uncertainty. Rather than seeking the answers to the question *who* is technoshaman or cybershaman, I ask *how* these believers employ the computers in their religious life. In other words, it is necessary to step aside from the quest to find the generally applicable definition and to direct the research different course.

### *The Role of Computer Technologies in the Process of Substitution and Innovation the Rituals*

As I have stated above, the computer mediation of technoshamanic and cybershamanic spirituality represents the key character of these religious movements. The analysis of computer use serves as groundwork for scientific description. While from an emic perspective the terms technoshaman and cybershaman are interchangeable, freely used by followers themselves, from an etic, thus scholarly, point of view, there could be marked a very distinct boundary between them, based on the analysis of the roles, what the computers play in religious life of technoshamans and cybershamans.

Technoshamans find computer technologies a useful *tool* (effective, instant, almost globally widespread, anonymous when required etc.) for communication. It allows them to communicate whether within the followers or with non-adherents. Technoshamans also view computer technologies as a tool, being an integral element of a set of methods for accessing the ecstatic state (of consciousness), usually preceding and facilitating the spiritual experience of *journey*, which represents the typical feature of any shamanic religious practice. Then, what are these tools and methods, used for technoshamanic journeying, which have been influenced by the advance of computer technology? While the synthetic drug use has nothing to do with computers, for example the visual *sensory stimulation*, whether of individuals or groups, is usually carried out by computers and related technologies – laser or neon light machines, stroboscope devices, 2D or 3D images projection sets etc. on the rave, trance or techno parties. Also the method of auditory sensory stimulation can be provided by computers – as for the music for dancing or as for the generating special sounds, affecting the brain

activity.<sup>12</sup> Almost paradoxical is the fact that even the technoshamanic method of *sensory deprivation*<sup>13</sup> is somehow involved with the computers. There is a number of commercial places in cyberspace, advertising the online shops with special products like for example the sophisticated headphones eliminating the transmission of any external sound, designed for deep meditation, or personal sound gadgets, specially constructed for producing extreme noise in a form of loud binaural beats, lucid dream machines or floatation tanks for home practicing, simulating the conditions of complete isolation, etc.<sup>14</sup>

This signifies that technoshamans practice their belief as if the original rituals, known from traditional shamanism, were just ‘translated’ into the contemporary social and religious life, from which the computer technologies are not excluded. Dave Green says in his paper about this ritual change:

“Technoshamanic culture has, for example, digitised tribal beats, chants and sounds from the rainforests; replaced psychotropic ‘teacher plants’ with synthesised highs in the forms of amphetamines, LSD and Ecstasy; substituted the dances of Whirling Dervishes with raves; and swapped ritual bonfires with ‘magically’ transformative gazes of the strobe, and internet images and computer-generated fractals which are projected onto the walls of the venue.”<sup>15</sup>

Computer technologies, hand in hand with other tools (whether technical or not), became an inseparable constituent of technoshamanic religious life, in a mode of *substitution* the traditional tools and traditional rituals of shamanism.

Cybershamans, to the contrary, view computer technologies as a place, environment or more precisely as a *space*.<sup>16</sup> They find this space being an alternative realm of spiritual character, where they are able to journey into. The ‘usual’ cybershamanic religious experience of journey into altered planes is based on the assumption that there is a sort of spiritual

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, browser-based binaural beat generator on the website of “*BrainJav Binaural Beat Generator*” from: <http://pantheon.yale.edu/%7Ebb12/av/brainjav/BrainJav.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> There are five ‘techniques’ of sensory deprivation generally known – wall standing, subjection to noise, lack of sleep, food and drinks. Their application concerns wholly different social area – human rights, police interrogation practice and psychic torture. There is an interesting fact of using all these techniques by technoshamans (of course voluntarily), at least by those who practice their spirituality on dance floor in trance and rave celebrations. Instead of wall standing they expose themselves to non-stop dancing, leading to absolute bodily exhaustion, subjection to extremely loud music, perceived not only aurally, is evident here and deprivation of sleep, food and drinks (in duration from one to three days) are just obvious consequences of technoshamanic rave participation. Some technoshamans view these methods, supported massively by the help of computer technology, as a new way of entering the ecstatic states of mind, facilitating (techno)shamanic tripping.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the homepage of “*The Transparent Corporation*” from: <http://www.transparentcorp.com>.

<sup>15</sup> Green 2001.

<sup>16</sup> I intentionally have omitted here the fact that also cybershamans use the computer technologies with the goal to communicate through this medium within themselves and with others, because it is quite evident. See the chapter *Community and Communication in the Process of Individualization of the Rituals* further in the text.

energy, somehow ‘flowing’ in the computers or in the computer networks and the cybershamans can interact with it. Some cybershamans even more explicitly speak about the invisible electronic or digital spirits, ‘inhabiting’ the cyberspace and helping them on their journeys. Cybershaman using the nick-name CyberHeart, also known as C.H. on chats, tries to illustrate his faith:

C.H.: “I don’t see the stream of numbers, you know, the flow of ones and zeros, the mass of information... It’s more like the river, electronic one, or maybe not the river but the wind... No. Something I don’t know... Even typing on my keyboard I feel the life, the EnErgy, I see the love, the power [...]”<sup>17</sup>

Cybershamans also often depict the feeling of ‘immersion’ into the cyberspace, accompanied sometimes by some bodily ‘symptoms’, as it is rather explicitly articulated in the following text from an interview:

Astra: “I’ve started my fire-up ritual by watching the fractal video on the desktop non-stop almost one hour. Maybe more, I don’t remember, I definitely did lose the sense of time at first, and then trying to cut off eye-blinks I’ve lost the peripheral sight... After some time I’ve registered the distance between me and my computer is changing, the screen was getting closer and closer and I felt something like the immersion to water pool or better comfortable bath filled up all the way up to the top by hot water and bath foam... From that moment I knew I am IN THERE, tripping the whole night IN cyberspace, freed from almost all the Earth-based feelings and senses, but enriched by the others, yet unknown.”<sup>18</sup>

While technoshamans substitute the traditional shamanic rituals by new ritual practice *with the help of computers*, cybershamans create entirely new rituals taking place *in computer environment*, in the cyberspace. In other words, to gain the answer to the crucial question of the role of computers in technoshamanism and cybershamanism, one has to focus on the concept of *cyberspace*. Also, one has to bear in mind that cyberspace has not inevitably to be created in computers linked to the Internet; the connection online is not an indispensable condition of cyberspace constitution. Thus the notion of cyberspace comes the key term in this discussion – it refers to *where* the cybershamans make their spiritual journeys and in the same time *how* technoshamans set out for their ethereal trips.

To enlarge this debate, I would like to mention here the similar dispute (prolonged and never definitely closed) about the drug use, popular within the hippie movement in the sixties and the seventies of 20th century. The debate was involved with the person of Timothy Leary, popular (apart from other things) for his sympathy to drug taking experiments. The

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<sup>17</sup> Interview conducted by the author on 07/10/2004.

<sup>18</sup> Interview conducted by the author on 10/31/2004.

fundamental question was whether the drugs are just a tool, serving the user in achieving the altered states of mind, ego or body, facilitating the sort of shamanic experience or whether the drugs create this journey experience in themselves.<sup>19</sup> Swapping the subject from drugs to computers, the discussion is quite similar: are the computers just the tool for connecting with the alter realities or is there any kind of spiritual dimension(s) in cyberspace itself?

Being aware of this demarcation, based on the description of different modes of computer use by technoshamans and cybershamans, one can then analyze properly following quote from a shaman's 'confession':

"I am a Cybershaman – a Shaman and Psychic who uses cyberspace to embrace the 'Infinite Life Force' and open others to a universe of beauty and light. The internet has afforded me the opportunity to bring my unique and treasured purpose to people around the world. On any given day I can offer wisdom and guidance to a housewife in Ireland, a healer in Brazil and a doctor in Japan. The web has become my personal altar where I can share the teachings of the Spirit and explore its unlimited possibilities. My quest for meaning and heart is enhanced by constant access to people and information."<sup>20</sup>

Micheal Teal claims he is a cybershaman, but as it is apparent from the text, the way he uses the computers and the Internet indicates, he is rather a technoshaman. Strictly speaking, this is just a portrait of a modern technology tool-user, extending his current religious experience by means of the technological capacity of computers interconnected in the Internet. Here is, for comparison, short excerpt from web presentation of Larry Williamson, also known as Schwan-cyber-shaman demonstrating clearly his cybershamanic practice:

"[...] the basic concept of Webtrance involves netizens from all over the world simultaneously focusing into a mass computer generated trance; thus participating in humanity's digital reincarnation."<sup>21</sup>

### *Community and Communication in the Process of Individualization of the Rituals*

The theory of performance being central to the shamanic religiousness generally<sup>22</sup> is fitting only partially within the description of technoshamanic religious life, but it is no more valid for characterization of cybershamanic spirituality. The reason of this proposition is simple – there is no performance without an audience, as long as the term 'performance' is understood

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<sup>19</sup> See Leary 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Teal 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Schwann 1998.

<sup>22</sup> See Tambiah 1985.

here as the act of performing some activity *for* and *with* observers. The ritual shift is quite transparent here – while the traditional shaman performs his journey into altered spiritual dimensions usually in front of the audience, represented by the community members (in order to help the community), the role of a technoshaman in technoshamanic ritual events is becoming slightly different. Acknowledging the fact that the role of shaman is, in a way, more active than the role of the community, one can notice the change in technoshamanic practice. Using other comparison it is possible to state that the shaman is, above all, the ‘producer’ of the help through his journey, while the community (including shaman himself) is principally the ‘consumer’ of that help. Although some technoshamans are still playing leading roles in conducting rave festivals, the notional border between the performance and audience, i.e. between the producer and the consumer, is progressively fading away, as it is sketched in this extract from the interview with an informant, calling herself Shana, which is taking part in techno parties regularly:

Shana: I used to admire him. Popular Techno Shaman. His dj-ing is some way magical...

Shana: I used to listen to him, I was ready to follow him everywhere, you know I mean?

Shana: Later, one day I became a part of the community. I felt so.

Shana: My ego has disappeared, it was part of everybody and every other body was a part of me, but in the same time there still was somehow my self. Was there? I was the Techno Shaman too! Every one was Shaman that night.<sup>23</sup>

The borders between performance and audience in technoshamanic rave practice are not distinct, it is not quite clear any more who is (active) performer and who is just (less or more passive) spectator. Instead the participants often claim they feel being both in the very same time, everyone is the producer as well as the consumer of the journey experience.

Cybershamans practice their ritual journeying alone, without the presence of other persons. There is no audience; there is no community to help to by tripping in spiritual dimensions of cyberspace. Interacting with cyberspace within the cybershamanic rituals can be comprehended as collective (due to the collective character of cyberspace itself), but not planned and organized as a collective ritual activity. Cybershamans get on their cyber paths in isolation of their homes, less frequently in some other places with IT access available. Actually, the cybershamans, I was in touch with during the fieldwork, did not use in any case the terms like community, group, collective etc. Quite the reverse, they all were constantly proclaiming individuality, originality, uniqueness and even anarchy in their ritual practice.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted by the author on 05/15/2004.

Strictly speaking, to describe the process of individualization in religious behavior of technoshamans and cybershamans properly, there must be distinguished ‘primary’ individualization, referring to the change of ritual, and the ‘secondary’ individualization, referring to the social life of participants. While the primary individualization is quite evidently represented by the shift of rituals as it was shown above, there is de facto no noticeable change in a relation to society (community). In other words, the need of community contacts is still present both among technoshamans as well as among cybershamans – not for conducting the rituals themselves, but for the purpose of communication about ritual practice or with the intention to communicate within society in a wider sense. Being networked with lower or higher number of people in purpose of sharing the information about rituals, tools, experience or about everyday life is what remains, despite the fact of individualization, typical for technoshamans as well as for cybershamans.<sup>24</sup>

The function of computer and information technology is obvious here – to connect the community (however large it is) together through the communication and it does not matter whether it is set in online dimension solely or transferred from online to offline mode or even following the figure offline-online-offline.<sup>25</sup> The example of a technoshaman RaveRaven<sup>26</sup> serves as a suitable illustration of this interconnectivity between online and offline modes. He is making relationship with persons practicing similar spirituality in the parties in techno clubs can serve, keeping up the email correspondence or discussing on Internet chats with them aiming to enlarge his religious horizons theoretically and then meeting them again offline, performing practically the discussed ritual experience together in the club.

Then, one can possibly make a theoretical distinction between *computer mediated religious life* (as an analogy of computer mediated communication, commonly known as CMC) and *hand-to-hand religious life* (as an analogy to face-to-face communication, generally known as FTF). But again, these ‘categories’ are highly idealized and they cannot be separated; both modes of communication overlap – this is the fact of which the academic analysis has to be always aware of.

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<sup>24</sup> Also the process of shaman ‘election’ or ‘installation’ could be mentioned here, concerning the course of individualization. While in the original shamanic tradition the shamans are usually chosen by community, in technoshamanism and markedly in cybershamanism, this characteristic is not found, instead self-proclaimed technoshamans and cybershamans are emerging.

<sup>25</sup> For further detailed information concerning the offline-online-offline transfers of ritual performance see the concept of *Individual Religiousness as a New Paradigm in the Study of Religions* on the website of the Heidelberg Research Project for Rituals on the Internet. Retrieved on 03/29/2007, from: <http://www.rituals-online.uni-hd.de/en/>.

<sup>26</sup> See the interview conducted by the author on 07/02/2006.

Finally, turning back to the beginning of this chapter, mentioning the performance as a central in any shamanic spirituality, it would be more appropriate to redirect the attention of researchers to the concept of *journey* for description of technoshamanic and cybershamanic religious life, because the idea of *performance* is no more generally valid for the ritual behavior of these movements.

### *Change of Time and Place in the Rituals*<sup>27</sup>

Analysis of extremely dynamic structure of technoshamanic and cybershamanic rituals shows that more elements of the ritual are impacted by the acts of integration of computer technologies into the technoshamanic and cybershamanic religious life – *time* and *place* of rituals. While there is no noticeable change of time setting in technoshamanic rituals, being usually set in the same day time as traditional shamanic rituals (mostly in the nights), the survey of cybershamanic ritual behavior revealed the time setting is no more determined. In other words, what makes the ritual accomplished successfully here is the computer and/or Internet access, which could be 24 hours a day. While the time of trance dance party, as a collective ritual (i.e. ritual organized for the collective of participants), is fixed and the invitees should respect the time schedule, cybershamans with constant access to IT can perform their individual ritual any time. “There is no magick time! Actually there is NO time in Cyber Space. Time is the border and there are NO borders in Cyber World [...]” the cybershaman nick-named Tiger comments on this topic.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, from the interviews has emerged the fact that the majority of cybershamans still set out for their journeys in the night time. Two main reasons for that fact were shown up – night scheduling of the ritual helps to eliminate the disturbing factors in computer surroundings and the Internet connection online is faster and cheaper in the night. This is, by the way, manifestation of the shift in the history (though very short) of the Internet. Dial-up Internet connection (with different prices in different day times) is almost gone, at least in the practice of technoshamans and cybershamans, preferring online (nonstop) connection to the Internet nowadays.

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<sup>27</sup> Also another dimension of ritual was changed – involved ‘objects’ – although it is to be mentioned here only marginally. Drugs have disappeared from cybershamanic rituals, but caffeine is still very favored, as well as so called energy drinks, helping to keep the travelers awake on their journeys. Also vial of eye drops preventing the red eyes effect is a necessary prop and the change in fashion is evident too – there is no special cybershamanic fashion (on the contrary to the technoshamanic), there are no special ‘ritual cloths’, since cybershamans make sometimes their journeys even wearing pajamas.

<sup>28</sup> Interview conducted by the author on 07/18/2006.

Analysis of place as another dimension of ritual influenced by the use of computer technologies, calls for distinguishing the two ‘sub-categories’ – *place of journey itself* and the place, from which the changed states of consciousness are entered by the participants, some *starting point*. Dance floors in techno clubs or in solitaire landscapes are viewed by technoshamans, practicing their spirituality in these ritual events, somehow as sacral places – places where they get on trance state, where they start their journeys into spiritual realms.<sup>29</sup> In analogy, personal computer surroundings at homes, in a lesser extent also in offices, Internet coffee bars or tearooms, student residences, PC laboratories etc.,<sup>30</sup> are the starting points for cybershamanic journeying. I leave out here the description of place of technoshamanic journeys themselves for the reason of self-evident extreme divergence of journey experiencing and, of course, for the reason it is not relevant for the aim of this paper, dealing with the computer mediated religious life. On the contrary, the notion of cyberspace, in a form in which it was adopted by cybershamans, is what is relevant in the framework of this discussion.

Cyberspace, as a ‘locality’ into which one can journey, does not have to be implicitly formed in global computer networks like Internet or in the webs of local character.<sup>31</sup> The experience of immersion, albeit subjective, familiar among the cybershamans, was mentioned above. But basic questions discussed here are whether there are any favorite cybershamanic zones in the cyberspace, any places, where the cybershamanic rituals are happening preferably, whether it is possible to locate such places by URL, and furthermore: do cybershamans inhabit (through the so called avatar identities) any special 3D worlds in cyberspace? Is possible to answer the last question positively – the cybershamans do not occupy any exclusively cybershamanic virtual worlds in a form of ‘digitalized’ residents and they do not dwell in any exclusively cybershamanic MMOGs. It does not mean that the cybershamans do not visit these virtual worlds at all – there are just no exclusively cybershamanic virtual worlds and game zones on the Internet, designed for them. Despite this simple fact, the cybershamans view themselves as ‘citizens’ of global cyberspace, sometimes using the neologism *netizen* for expressing their status there. Being a netizen means “being home everywhere in cyberspace.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, they are not traveling into particular cyber ‘destinations’, but into the cyberspace as a whole; the cyberspace itself (wherever it is

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<sup>29</sup> Green 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, I did not collect enough data during the inquiry to be able to gain proper statistic figures in this area.

<sup>31</sup> For example LAN (Local Area Network) or MAN (Metropolitan Area Network).

<sup>32</sup> Interview conducted by author on 07/18/2006.

constituted) represents the altered place, spiritual realm with guiding, healing and teaching spirits.

Some of the cybershamans favor the fractal art,<sup>33</sup> thus they sometimes ‘start’ their trips into the cyberspace visiting the favorite pages with fractal photo and video galleries, usually set as initial pages of their Internet browsers. They also often purchase special computer programs generating the fractal images in the interfaces of their personal computers, or there are even some skilled program designers,<sup>34</sup> journeying and at the same time programming new fractal sets.<sup>35</sup> It is not significant where exactly in cyberspace the cybershaman is surfing in the time of his spiritual journey – he can for example warm himself up by watching the fractal movie sequences set on the desktop and then proceed intentionally browsing the web sites dedicated to nonlinear studies, or he can realize his journey when he updates web presentations or when he plays the offline chess match<sup>36</sup> with computer intensively. In general, it indicates that there are no cybershamanic ritual pages in the Internet and there are no special online worlds only for cybershamans.

#### *Exploring the Religious Life of Technoshamans and Cybershamans on the Internet*

How complicated is the investigation of technoshamanic and cybershamanic presence on the Internet was outlined above – it is related mainly to the vagueness of the definition and self-definition of technoshamans and cybershamans, individualized and eclectic character of their religiousness and furthermore to the absence of their own virtual worlds with concrete locations. Technoshamanism and cybershamanism are truly the ‘invisible religions’ in the sense of Luckmann’s theory,<sup>37</sup> therefore the ‘standard’ methods of examining these religious manifestations on the Internet are not sufficient and new methods must be employed.

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the website of “*Fractal Art Galleries*” from: <http://www.fractalus.com/dan/>. Or see the website with number of ‘psychedelic trippy animations’– the website of “*Mental FX*” from: <http://www.mentalfx.com>.

<sup>34</sup> Majority of the cybershamans I have met during the research were software engineers, computer graphic designers or computer game authors. Also here more data is required before one can present this fact as universally valid.

<sup>35</sup> By the way, these sites (or others with similar topics – chaos theories, quantum physics etc.), often located on edu Internet domain, are perhaps the most popular among cybershamans.

<sup>36</sup> Other web pages, achieving high popularity among cybershamans, seem to be the homepages providing simple online games like for example Tetris, 2D poker etc. See, for example, website of “*Tetris*” from: <http://www.tetris.com>.

<sup>37</sup> Luckmann 1967.

For example if searching World Wide Web, using the usual devices for Surface Web like AltaVista search engine or Yahoo! catalogue directory, does not bring many results, then it is necessary to look at the Deep Web. So called Deep Web is also known as the Invisible Web/Net and it is estimated that it is approximately 500 times larger than the Surface Web.<sup>38</sup> On that account the Deep Web search engines or catalogue directories should be utilized too. For my research I have used popular metasearch engine Turbo 10,<sup>39</sup> engineered for valuable Deep Net searching; working with IncyWincy<sup>40</sup> was in some point successful too. I have also added searching in spiritual catalogue directories like for example iPadma.<sup>41</sup>

Also precise combinations of key words are required. Entering the query for ‘cybershaman’ or ‘technoshaman’ into the search engine could be almost useless, since some part of believers do not identify through these terms. This means that queries for searching must be put in other way – for instance the combinations of the key words ‘shaman’ – ‘cyberspace’ – ‘journey’ show several interesting results. Using simple key word ‘shaman’ for searching instead of ‘technoshaman’ or ‘cybershaman’ is also helpful, although it is inconsistent with the academic definitions.

But being honest, I must admit that searching the technoshamanic and cybershamanic religious manifestations on the Internet (whether they are located on the Surface or Deep Web) this way is not very fruitful at all. Technoshamans and cybershamans are very often ‘hiding’ behind the wider frames of postmodern religiousness, e.g. neo-paganism, alternative healing methods etc. Browsing multi-religious homepages, as for example Life Positive,<sup>42</sup> may help in quest to locate people interested in non-traditional religions, ideas and streams, thus technoshamans or cybershamans too. Another example of such multi-religious framework is the homepage of LDE – Lucid Dream Exchange, where the lucid dreamers publish their experience.<sup>43</sup> Lucid dreaming is popular technique, widespread among the followers of neo-pagan movement, yoga practitioners, as well as among the shamans and therefore it is possible to meet here the people practicing also these brands of shamanism. Other interesting place, where the technoshamans and cybershamans can come along under cover of the interest in astrophysics, hi-tech philosophy, robotics etc., is also very multi-scoped server of The Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension, known as deoxy.<sup>44</sup> Skilled hackers

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<sup>38</sup> See Bergman 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Website of “Turbo 10” from: <http://www.turbo10.com>.

<sup>40</sup> Website of “IncyWincy” from: <http://www.incywincy.com>.

<sup>41</sup> Website of “iPadma” from: <http://www.ipadma.com>.

<sup>42</sup> Website of „Life Positive“ from: <http://www.lifepositive.com>.

<sup>43</sup> Website of „The Lucid Dream Exchange“ from: <http://www.dreaminglucid.com>.

<sup>44</sup> Website of „The Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension” from: <http://deoxy.org>.

meet here cyberpunks, genetic engineers chat with cyber sorcerers and also cybershamans can be discovered, sharing their experience, opinions and information with others. But paradoxically, many of the contacts I have made with people practicing technoshamanism and specially cybershamanism, come from the ‘civil’ chats, i.e. those discussing originally non-religious topics.

An additional note to the conclusion of this topic: entering the query ‘cybershaman’ or ‘cyber shaman’ in ordinary search engines, e.g. Google, shows as first the links to the homepage of Cybershaman computer software.<sup>45</sup> These links are at the first sight misleading and thus useless for the aim of researching the cybershamanic religiousness, because they have nothing to do with cybershamanism. The Cybershaman is the computer program, designed for practicing the (cyber) magical rituals of sigils. However, there are some involved Internet pages providing the discussions on personal experience with this software and number of ‘strayed’ cybershamans can be discovered here, mixed with the followers of cyber and chaos magic, who practice sending the sigils into cyberspace.

### *The Conception of Virtuality*

Dealing mainly with cybershamanic discourse in this moment, leaving out the context of technoshamanism, it was asserted that there are no exclusively cybershamanic virtual worlds, since the cybershamans conduct their rituals in cyberspace as a whole. Besides, and I would like to emphasize this, they do not treat cyberspace as *virtual space*, they do not perceive it as the logical opposite to the real world, because they view both of them as real. Cybershamans do not find occupying cyberspace, i.e. living their virtual life, less valuable than living their real life. They had not adopted this rigid theoretic conception, based on strict dichotomy of virtuality and reality, which is arrested in early existing scientific points of view, since they find this conception having a judging character, viewing virtuality as being something less than reality. Instead they are using the popular term *flesh space* (or *fleshspace*) to denote the ‘opposite’ to cyberspace without bias and inequality. This open and neutral terminology (though conceived by believers themselves) could be, by the way, embraced by the scholars to avoid non-objective, one-sided and mainly biased approaches to the study of this kind of modern individualized religiousness through the prism of present scientific categories.

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<sup>45</sup> See website of „Cybershaman“ from: <http://www.gocsl.com>.

In relation to this, a question must be raised whether technoshamanism and cybershamanism deserve the academic examination in the field of religious studies at all. Are there truly any methodological standpoints, which enable researchers to face the enormous variety of technoshamanic and cybershamanic religious manifestations? Is it relevant to focus on computer mediated religious life of the technoshamans and cybershamans and to ignore the other aspects of their religious behavior? Does the description of computer and Internet use in rituals practice give any evidence of these religious movements? Do the cybershamans really and consciously apprehend the conception of virtuality/reality or cyberspace/fleshspace the way it has been stressed here? Being aware of involved risks and problems, I dare to claim that this just represents the challenge for the application of modern approaches, new perspectives, following the cultural shift of nowadays. One of the most helpful up-to-date theories which reflect new demands in the study of modern religion are the advanced concepts of *Individual Religiousness* and *Individual Rituality*, embraced by the larger framework of *Ritual Dynamics*.<sup>46</sup> They are currently being developed in Heidelberg and I have found the application of these innovative approaches very useful for the study of the wide spectrum of religions on the Internet.

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<sup>46</sup> Website of the Heidelberg University Collaborative Research Center 619 “*Dynamics of Rituals*” from: <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/index.htm>.

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