The Psychology of Cyberspace

The Classic Text

John Suler

Preface

I first published *The Psychology of Cyberspace* online in 1996, revising and expanding it over the following decade. Now, some 35 years later, I undertake the time-consuming task of converting that website into this pdf book format. With websites coming and going, falling victim to hackers, outdated code, or indifferent algorithms, I'm hoping a pdf possesses a more viable lifespan.

While creating this pdf edition I was reminded of what cyberspace was like during those earlier times, before other terms replaced the word cyberspace; when social media began its ascent into dominating the digital world; when everyone relied more on communicating with text rather than photos alone, video, or clicking a like button; when the focus on popularity and profit had not yet superseded the simple desire to share resources and develop meaningful relationships; when cyberpsychology as a discipline to study all these things was born. It was when people were still optimistic about life online rather than shaking their heads at the disinhibited animosity, the flagging mental health, the disinformation superhighways, the calculating hackers, and the miscalculating algorithms that abound in cyberspace.

Back in the day we were aware of all these negatives, at that time in their nascent form. But the positives of cyberspace seemed so attractive back then. The internet promised to bring people together, to offer all the knowledge of the world at our fingertips, to give each person the opportunity to cultivate themselves. Little did we know how it also would serve so well to divide us, lie to us, and draw out our dark sides.

I can't help but wonder if the internet indeed marks a giant step forward in human evolution, or if it's all downhill from here. Perhaps we're staring down a zero-sum game as we seem to do with many forms of technology that are neither good or bad, but simply what we make of it. As I said in 1996, cyberspace is a reflection of the human mind. I might now update that idea by comparing cyberspace to LSD. As psychedelic or "mind-manifesting" forces, they both amplify and accelerate what is happening in our human psyche, collectively and individually, sometimes from deep within. Perhaps cyberspace, like LSD, also escaped from the lab too soon, before we truly understood how its power might lead us to good or bad. But it's too late for that now. We've already swallowed the pill. And we still aren't sure if it's going to turn out to be a good or bad trip.

Perhaps the principles explored in this book can help us answer these questions. Even though the ideas described here were first presented several decades ago, they still apply. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Technology advances rapidly, but the human psyche often lags far behind. There's the rub.

- John Suler, June 2023

The Psychology of Cyberspace
The Classic Text

John R. Suler, PhD

Department of Psychology Science and Technology Center Rider University

This book in pdf format was created from the website *The Psychology of Cyberspace* that appeared online in January 1996 and evolved over the following decade. It explores the psychological aspects of environments created by computers and provides a conceptual framework for understanding how people react to and behave within cyberspace: what is often called "cyberpsychology." Sections of this book were revised for John Suler's *Psychology of the Digital Age* (2016, Cambridge University Press). Research for this book was funded by grants from Rider University.

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The First Decade of CyberPsychology

Some Observations on the 10th Anniversary of *The Psychology of Cyberspace*

It's been a little over 10 years since I uploaded the first version of this online book *The Psychology of Cyberspac*e. As many of us are probably thinking, a lot about cyberspace has changed over the past decade.... or has it?

Cyberspace in the Media

On optimistic days, I like to think that portrayals of cyberspace in the media are becoming more balanced and realistic. Years ago hardly a week went by without a journalist requesting an interview with me about "Internet addiction." Those requests are more rare now. They've been replaced by journalists looking for information about online bullying, stalking, pedophilia, and identity deception and theft. Controversy sells, which, unfortunately, will probably always be the case with the news.

However, I have seen more interest among media people about the positives of cyberspace. It seems odd to me that it would take a decade to reach this realization: cyberspace is much more than a place for teens and unpleasant people to act out, and much more than one gigantic library for gathering information. It is replete with social opportunities: relationships, groups, communities of all shapes and sizes. I'm glad when journalists want to interview me about those topics. Despite the skeptics who persist with criticisms of how the Internet is destroying the sanctity of face-to-face relationships, I'm happy to see upbeat TV commercials about online dating services. Why not use the Internet to find a companion?

The New Generation Gap

Although the media has tended to exaggerate the dangers of cyberspace for children, it has been correct in noting the impact of the Internet on the next generation: the generation that has grown up in cyberspace. Settting aside the important issue of the socioeconomic Digital Divide, we now live in a unique era: there are young people for whom cyberspace is the air they breathe, and some older people who, for one reason or another, fell behind the curve of Internet use, even though it was available. This new version of the "generation gap" is a topic worthy of study. In a few decades, the opportunity to do so will be gone.

The Academic Study of Cyberspace

What has changed dramatically since the first publication of this online book is the academic study of cyberspace. A decade ago there were only a handful of us doing what we called "cyberpsychology." Now there are hundreds, with researchers specializing in particular aspects of online behavior. New journals devoted to Internet research have been created, while mainstream psychology journals are accepting more articles about online behavior. Azy Barak's reference list is an excellent portal into this world of cyberpsychology.

With this boom in research comes a variety of important questions. When can our traditional psychological theories explain online behavior? Under what circumstances do we need new theories? As is always the case in the history of any topic area within psychology, new theories will compete with each other. Only time and research will reveal which ones apply best to which phenomena. We must be on the lookout for concepts that are new and good, while remembering that what's new isn't necessarily good, and what's good isn't necessarily new.

Unfortunately, the seriousness psychology now pays to Internet research isn't always matched by the seriousness it pays to online scholarly publications. Such publications too often are considered second class citizens, or they are not considered "publications" at all. An odd kind of double-standard seems to have evolved. Whereas cyberspace is considered a rich social/informational environment for gathering scholarly social science data, it often is not regarded as a rich environment for publishing scholarly research.

Of course, the skeptics are correct in noting the widely varying quality of what is published online. The necessity of evaluating quality is a challenge for everyone in cyberspace. But it is not a reason to abandon online publications. Online peer-reviewed journals have appeared as valuable resources that are gaining respect, but we need to do more. In addition to these Internet versions of hardcopy journal formats, academics also need to consider alternative methods of publishing online and evaluating the quality of such publications. Doing so will not only free scholars from the sometimes routinized and stifling aspects of the traditional peer review process, it will also open our eyes to new perspectives on understanding the meaning of "quality" in scholarship. The current debates about the validity of Wikipedia is a good example of how we need to think in more broad terms about the process of organizing and disseminating knowledge.

The More Things Change...

It seems to me that the basic psychological features of cyberspace have not changed all that much over the past decade, which is why I believe that a comprehensive theory of online behavior must revolve around a psychological understanding of the basic communication dimensions of cyberspace and the effect of combining them in various ways, as in the theoretical model of online psychotherapy that I have proposed. What this past decade has taught us is that the power of cyberspace is its potential to isolate, manipulate, and synergistically combine these various dimensions, sometimes in surprisingly unique and useful ways.

The online communities that are now succeeding seem to be the ones that integrate as many of these communication features as possible. They offer both synchronous and asynchronous communication, discussion boards, email, text, images, the ability for varying degrees of real or imaginary identity presentation, varying degrees of invisibility and presence, and a variety of opportunities for group as well as one-on-one interactions. Facebook, Myspace, and Flickr are good examples.

What is "Cyberspace"?

The past decade has shown us that cyberspace is expanding so rapidly and in so many different directions that it is now hard to define. As it becomes linked to the worlds of television, radio, and telephones, it is unclear where the boundaries of cyberspace end and where those other territories begin. Perhaps "Internet" is easier to define in terms of its hardware infrastructure. But I place emphasis on the word "perhaps." The computer-mediated universe – call it "cyberspace" if you wish – has evolved to the point where it is more than the sum of its wires and microchips. It is a social-psychological entity with a magnitude of complexity, subtlety, and adaptability no less sophisticated than the "real" world with which it interweaves.

As is always true of human nature, some people attempt to control that entity. The old-timers will tell you, sadly, that commercialization have changed the face of the Internet forever. For good reasons or not, governments and business attempt to regulate what people can and cannot access. The next decade will tell us if cyberspace is too big for any one group to control, and if it will be carved up into more tightly regulated nets.

Suler in Cyberspace

As for me and my explorations of cyberspace over the past decade, I see myself as having come full circle. I began my adventures, as well as my research, in the community known as the Palace. What captivated me was the visual/graphical dimension of online identity management and social relationships. I was fascinated by how people use images to present themselves and interact with others. From there, as you can see in the table of contents for this book, my work progressed into studies of Internet "addiction," text communication, online deviant behavior, and psychotherapy in cyberspace.

Now I'm back to where I started, again intrigued by how people use images to communicate. For me the visual qualities of cyberspace is what makes it so fascinating. In fact, it is the one of the major reasons why the Internet and computers in general became so popular. It is the psychological power of the image that has led to the booming success of online photo sharing communities, such as Flickr, which is my current preoccupation and an inspiration in my recent development of what I call Photographic Psychology. Imagery has been a long-standing interest in my career, dating back to my pre-dissertation days.

At the moment, I wouldn't say that I am "studying" the Flickr community, but rather using Flickr as a resource in understanding the psychological dimensions of imagery. But if I were to classify my research there, I would describe it as I always have over the past decade: participant-observation. The use of statistical methods in the social science research of cyberspace is on the rise, and it is valuable. But for me, it is not a substitute for the intricate, comprehensive, holistic knowledge that we obtain by immersing ourselves subjectively and objectively into an environment.

In the days ahead I may add to *The Psychology of Cyberspace* articles about online   photo sharing communities, imagistic communication, and photographic psychology. If you're interested right now in learning what I'm up to concerning these topics, you are more than welcome to visit my Flickr photostream and see me in action.

The Psychology of Cyberspace

Overview

The psychological study of cyberspace is as broad as the field of psychology itself. Anyone who has taken an introductory psychology course knows how vast that terrain is. Cognitive psychology, personality theory, social psychology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology - all are relevant. It's never easy slicing up a complex topic into categories. Inevitably, the categories overlap and intertwine.

Nevertheless, creating categories is necessary in order to make a study manageable. For this psychology of cyberspace, I've chosen to divide the pie into six slices. The first section is an exploration of what makes cyberspace "psychological." The next three deal with the individual's reaction to cyberspace (a one-person psychology), the relationship between individuals (a two-person psychology), and the interpersonal dynamics among groups of people (a group or community psychology). No psychology of anything would be complete without a discussion of the research methods used - which is the purpose of section five.

Finally, section six is the historical origin of this book. My inspiration to study and write about cyberspace began with the online community called "Palace." My intensive case study there led to a deeper understanding of that particular community, but it also expanded my research outward into a wide variety of topics in the psychology of cyberspace.

The Basic Psychological Qualities of Cyberspace

Cyberspace is psychological space. Its social climate partly is shaped by its demographics. As a world structured by machines rather than the physical environment, it also is a space with some rather unique psychological features - such as reduced or altered sensory experience, the opportunity for identity flexibility and anonymity, the equalization of social status, the transcending of spatial boundaries, the stretching and condensation of time, the ability to access numerous relationships, the capacity to record permanent records of one's experiences, and the "disinhibition effect".... to name a few. It is a world with its own language. As a virtual reality, it stretches across a wide range from the simulated true-to-life experiences of webcams to the highly imaginative environments of avatar communities. In this reality we gain new insights into the meaning of "presence."

Cyberspace may even be an altered state of consciousness, a dreamlike world, that addresses a basic human need to experience oneself and reality from a different perspective. It is psychological space that becomes an extension of one's conscious and unconscious mind. We could even imagine the global network that comprises the whole internet as a larger transcending mind or "self" which reflects the evolution of human consciousness. The first conscious machine maybe not come as a stand-alone HAL 9000, but as the internet-mind. A grandiose, but conceivable thought!

But let's not be fooled into thinking that everything about the internet is grand. Cyberspace is not always benign. It also has the power to inflict frustration, apprehension, and stupidity, as revealed in our jokes about computers and the internet. Sometimes, it even fails at its fundamental duty to be interactive, to respond to our needs, resulting in a black hole experience that can draw out the underlying anxieties of those who fall into it. As the population in cyberspace booms - as large chunks of the internet take shape as market place, soapbox, and mischievous, even hostile playground - we also must learn how to cope with the unwanted junk called "spam" that threatens to clog our attempts to communicate.

The Psychology of the Individual in Cyberspace

The altered social reality of cyberspace has some very interesting things in store for the individual. People can take on unique roles that may be very different than those in their "real" life. For example, they can be "wizards" with special powers who help govern an online community, or even a "god" who creates a whole online world. The anonymity created by the lack of face-to-face cues in many environments (such as chat and e-mail) also gives one an opportunity to experiment with new ways to express oneself, to experiment with new ways to present one's identity. A person can even switch gender, if she/he so chooses (do you think you'd be able to tell?).

Others use online anonymity as an opportunity to act out in ways that annoy, hurt, or take advantage of others. Norman Holland would attribute their behavior to "the internet regression" - the tendency of internet anonymity to encourage immature ways of feeling and acting. Some of these deviant users I call "the bad boys of cyberspace." They have found a slew of ways to misbehave, forcing community leaders to develop all sorts of creative tactics to deal with them.

While the psychological qualities of cyberspace partly determine how the individual behaves there, it is the individual's own psychological make-up and personality type that also shapes his or her online lifestyle. Machine and human interact to create cyberspace. Because more and more young people are venturing out onto the internet, it's important to understand how the particular character and developmental features of adolescents affects what they do there. Whether people are young or old, their unconscious thoughts and emotions shape how they react to computers and cyberspace - what psychologists call "transference reactions." A powerful example of how computers and the internet can activate all sorts of hidden thoughts, feelings, and anxieties is evident in the Y2K phenomenon. Was it the end of the world, or did our "imagination" run away with itself?

Computers and the internet are good... or are they? Might people be harmed if they become "addicted"? Some think that cyberspace can damage mental health, and that people with psychological and lifestyle problems tend to use it as an escape or to vent their frustrations on online others. Computer and cyberspace addiction is a controversial topic. We can speculate about the features of pathological internet use, but is it a genuine mental disorder? While some mental health professionals have made jokes about it, other researchers are seriously developing addiction questionnaires as a first step in understanding the symptoms and causes of this psychological problem. If the media is a valid indication, "internet addiction" is an important topic, as evident in how frequently the media reports it (for instance, here's an interview with me). Research has not yet demonstrated definitively whether it's a unique type of mental illness or a symptom of other problems. Yet there are people who will admit that they feel obsessed, as evident in personal accounts of "ex-addicts" who attempted to quit cold turkey.

As a member/researcher of the Palace chat community, I've walked around in the cybershoes of a Palatian in order to understand the pros and cons of an avid cyberspace lifestyle. As a clinical psychologist, I've tried to systematically explore the conceptual issues about the spectrum of needs underlying healthy and pathological internet use. If there's any one single piece of advice I would give people who want to be healthy in their use of the internet, it would be the "integration principle" - the importance of bringing together one's online and offline living. This principle is one of the foundations of eQuest, an online psycho-educational program for helping people address some important issue in their lives. It encourages people to make media transitions - to explore new computer programs and online environments - as a way to better express and understand oneself.

The Psychology of Cyberspace Relationships

People are finding new relationships on the internet - some are transient, some longterm. Critics complain that online relationships are superficial or based more on personal fantasies than on reality. Internet romances vividly illustrate how people can get caught up in a illusion of love that eventually leads to disappointment. Transference reactions surely distort how people perceive and react to each other when they must contend with limited face-to-face cues. However, some online romances do lead to fulfilling marriages. And people do find true friendships. Cyberspace relationships can definitely be rewarding. The question is not so much whether online encounters are real or meaningful, but rather how people meet online, how they communicate, how those relationships develop, how conflicts are resolved.

Most people converse via typed text. The intricacies of those text relationships are fascinating. For example, e-mail can be remarkably rich and subtle in how people reveal themselves to each other. Because it is so easy to use and versatile, e-mail rapidly is becoming a cornerstone of relationships in the new millennium. If you wish to feel the presence of your companion in real time, the alternative is chat. Typed-text chat is a much more terse style of conversing than e-mail, yet people - out of their intrinsic human need to express themselves to others - have become remarkably versatile

and creative in adapting to text-talk. Chat also promises to move relationships beyond text-only communication. In the multimedia chat worlds, encounters using avatars have added a fascinating visual dimension to how people express themselves as they pursue their online relationships. Even the combination of very simple graphics with typed-text produces variety and subtlety in multimedia chat.

In the showdown between in-person and cyberspace relationships, which will win? Relationships are built on shared words and meanings, on understanding. They are built on seeing, hearing, touching the other. With it's ability to isolate and alter time and sensory experience, cyberspace offers fascinating new ways for people to communicate. But it has its drawbacks too. You can't hold your loved one in cyberspace. Ultimately, cyberspace is a supplement and alternative to in-person relationships, not a substitute.

Group Dynamics in Cyberspace

What makes the internet so much more powerful than other forms of communication (e.g., the telephone) is its versatility in helping people find, join, and form groups. Despite where they live in the world, people with similar backgrounds and interests can come together in chat communities, mailing lists, and discussion boards.

A social psychology of these online groups can draw on many of the well-known principles that apply to in-person groups. For example, the developmental stages of mailing lists closely resemble those of many types of groups found in the face-to-face world. However, social psychology also will need to adapt its concepts to the different linguistic, temporal, and visual styles of communicating in cyberspace. The group dynamics of "text talk" in chat rooms is rather unique compared to face-to-face groups because people converse only with typed text. Decision-making in mailing lists may require different strategies than in-person groups due to this text-only conversing, in addition to the fact that the group doesn't meet in "real time." Actually, making decisions in these lists can be so frustrating that you sometimes wonder how many list members it would take to change one light bulb!

Despite such difficulties, there are many unique advantages to extending an in-person work group into cyberspace by creating an e-mail list, or by extending a classroom into online discussion boards. In chat environments, if people want more than typed text, the addition of even simple graphics can add subtlety to multimedia chat that is quite different than the subtle social cues of in-person gatherings.

The challenge is to develop an online community psychology that integrates traditional in-person theories with new findings from cyberspace research. Some online groups are quite unique and may never have formed in the face-to-face world due to geographical obstacles, or simply due to the fact that the interests, backgrounds, and needs of the people were so unique that they could not find each other in the real world. An excellent example is the Geezer Brigade - feisty, irreverent seniors who prefer not to associate themselves with the stereotype of "seniors," but rather with other spunky geezers. My article explores the origin and beliefs of their Brigade, as well as outlines the steps in studying any online group.

In a collection of other articles, I've focused on the Main Mansion community that uses the Palace chat software. In that intensive case study of Palace, I've covered a range of topics relevant to an online community psychology. What happens during the birth and early history of an online community? Who are the leaders and how do they manage the group? At the Palace, wizards are the heart of the society. Their rather complex job combines the roles of host, educator, parent, therapist, and police force. That last role points to another major issue in an online community psychology: the causes of deviant behavior in cyberspace and how to manage it. As my long article on that topic reveals, the community leader's tactics for dealing with misbehaviors need to be as varied and complex as the misbehaviors themselves. On the lighter side, social psychological principles can be used to create entertaining and educational activities, such as group games using avatars.

The internet offers many new opportunities for online therapy and support groups. Mental health professionals are exploring how chat, e-mail, and newsgroup forums can be used for group interventions. Grass roots self-help groups are springing up all over the internet, often fulfilling needs that could not be met by in-person organizations. One of my students, Wende Phillips, conducted an excellent study of online ACOA groups. Online chat and newsgroup communities with a more general population also may be a place where people can therapeutically explore their identity and new relationships. If that indeed is possible, then one goal of an online community psychology is to discover the techniques for creating and maintaining a health-promoting community.

Research Methods in Cyberpsychology

Cyberspace has opened up a whole new world for social scientists to explore. There's more than one way to skin a cat, and no fewer methods for studying people on the internet. Statistical-minded researchers are just beginning to apply quantitative techniques for understanding cyberspace behavior. That's NOT how I've been doing my work. I've been more interested in what some call "qualitative" research. My studies involve field observations of how people behave in chat rooms, mailing lists, and newsgroup forums. Ironically and conveniently, I can sit comfortably at home in front of my computer while I'm "in the field!" Thanks to the very handy ability to save permanent records to hard drive, I study my archives of chat, e-mail, and newsgroup logs. I also frequently conduct e-mail interviews, as in my study of the Geezer Brigade in which I outline the steps in studying an online group.

Most importantly, I believe firmly in the power of participant observation - that style of research in which the researcher immerses himself in the social phenomenon he studies, so that he sees it from the inside and becomes a subject in his own investigations. I am an onliner who both steps back and looks inward in order to understand how I and others are behaving. The participant-observer method presents the challenge of exploring how subjective and objective knowledge intersect. On that score, my psychoanalytic training has been invaluable. My research at the Palace is a good example of this participant-observation method (check out my analysis of my own avatar collection!). Such intensive case studies allow for a holistic understanding of an online phenomenon, a comprehensive exploration of the many intersecting facets of a single social environment. One especially interesting application of the case study method would be an investigation of just how well cyberspace satisfies human needs. If we locked people into an apartment, giving them only the internet as a way to interact with the world, how would they fare in this total immersion and f2f isolation?

Cyberspace is not just the target of psychological research. It also can be the vehicle for reporting the results of that research. Thanks to hypertext, ease of revivability, and interactivity, publishing online offers exciting new opportunities for composing articles and even books (like this one!). It also presents some interesting challenges about how to evaluate the quality of online works.

Last, but certainly not least, is the importance of ethics in online social science research. Because cyberspace alters the temporal, spatial, and sensory components of human interaction, it requires a unique interpretation of traditional ethical principles - particularly in the case of naturalistic studies. Informed consent, the right to privacy, and the researcher's contribution to the people being studied are all critical issues.

The Palace Study

As I've mentioned at various points in this overview, a big component of my research has focused on the Palace. In fact, the Palace case study makes up an entire subsection of this book. Combining features of MOOs and chat rooms, the Palace is a visual and spatial environment where members socialize in a visual scene with text, sounds, and visual representations of themselves called "avatars." One long article delves into the unique qualities of interacting with others using avatars and graphical space.

My work at the Palace also explores a wide variety of other dimensions of this community: its language .... it's early history .... the wizards who host, educate, and police its population .... the vision of its "god" creator, Jim Bumgardner .... its addictive qualities as viewed from the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy of needs .... its deviant members and the attempts to control them (a rather long article!) .... the dream-like qualities of the Palace experience .... the subtle techniques for communicating with typed text and simple graphics .... educational games using avatars .... how Palace compares to other chat worlds.... There's a lot to read there! If you want a quick overview, this book contains a brief summary of my Palace study.

What I consider so important about my work at Palace is the fact is that clearly illustrates my emphasis on participant observation research and the importance of an intensive case study. Exploring Palace in-depth has led me to a wide range of issues that extend outward beyond the Palace community and into many realms that make up that complex universe we call "cyberspace."

Psychotherapy and Clinical Work in Cyberspace
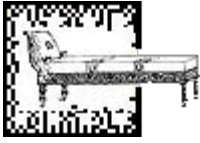
As experts in a particular type of relationship - the healing relationship that is psychotherapy - mental health professionals are exploring the possibility that cyberspace may serve as a useful media for working with their clients (see the table of contents for the subsection about psychotherapy). There are many misconceptions and myths about online clinical work. Despite skeptics who do not believe it is possible, we can classify, study, and design computer-mediated therapy according to five dimensional features of the communication pathway between the therapist and client: synchronous/asynchronous, text/sensory, imaginary/actual, automated/interpersonal, and invisible/present. Each feature has its advantages and disadvantages. Assessing a client's suitability for online therapy is important, but even under the best of circumstances, some clinicians and researchers are still skeptics.

A controversial topic is computers conducting psychotherapy on their own. "Eliza" was the first computerized psychotherapist. Other more powerful ones may follow. Another fascinating application of cyberspace in the mental health field will be the creation of psychotherapeutic virtual environments. In what I call "avatar psychotherapy," for example, the client and therapist can enact imaginary scenarios for the purpose of exploring and altering the client's sense of self.

Online clinical/community psychology will also attempt to maximize the well-being and growth-promoting features of virtual groups. In the years to come, professional study groups that systematically examine psychotherapy cases can test, refine, and expand the emerging hypotheses about online therapeutic activities. When these groups are conducted online, as in an e-mail case study group, the strategy for creating and managing them becomes an important clinical topic in itself.

What lies ahead in the future of online psychotherapy and clinical work? As I look into my crystal ball, I see some important issues surfacing: specialization, interdisciplinary teams, clinical networks, empowering of the client, automated interventions, and a meta-theory of cybertherapy. I also see new models of therapeutic activities involving comprehensive online programs for self-study and personal growth, such as eQuest.

Part 1

The Basic Psychological Qualities

of Cyberspace

Cyberspace as Psychological Space

With the advance of computers and online networks - especially the internet - a new dimension of human experience is rapidly opening up. The term "cyberspace" has been mentioned so often that it may at this point seem trite and overly commercialized. However, the experience created by computers and computer networks can in many ways be understood as a psychological "space." When they power up their computers, launch a program, write e-mail, or log on to their online service, users often feel - consciously or subconsciously - that they are entering a "place" or "space" that is filled with a wide array of meanings and purposes. Many users who have telneted to a remote computer or explored World Wide Web will describe the experience as "traveling" or "going someplace." Spatial metaphors - such as "worlds," "domains," or "rooms" are common in articulating online activities.

On an even deeper psychological level, users often describe how their computer is an extension of their mind and personality - a "space" that reflects their tastes, attitudes, and interests. In psychoanalytic terms, computers and cyberspace may become a type of "transitional space" that is an extension of the individual's intrapsychic world. It may be experienced as an intermediate zone between self and other that is part self and part other. As they read on their screen the e-mail, newsgroup, or chat message written by an internet comrade, some people feel as if their mind is merged or blended with that of the other. In their April Fools prank, "Tidal Wave Communications" introduced a new computer accessory called "Orecchio" - a headset, using Telepathic Internet Data Exchange (TIDE) protocol, that enhances e-mail functionality by enabling you "to send your most important thoughts directly from their source: your mind."

"Orecchio"

"Imagine no more keyboards and achy hands. No more eye strain from the glare of the screen. Just visualize the message you want to send, followed by your send command, and poof! Your email is transmitted to our network for quick delivery to its destination."

Truth comes out in jest.

When one experiences cyberspace as this extension of one's mind - as a transitional space between self and other - the door is thrown wide open for all sorts of fantasies and transference reactions to be projected into this space. Under ideal conditions, people use this as an opportunity to better understand themselves, as a path for exploring their identity as it engages the identity of other people. Under less than optimal conditions, people use this psychological space to simply vent or act out their fantasies and the frustrations, anxieties, and desires that fuel those fantasies.

As an internet traveller once told me, "Everywhere I go on the internet, I keep running into...... ME!"

The psychological qualities of cyberspace are determined by the hardware and software that constitute computers and the online world. An Op has the power to throw you off an IRC channel; lag can destroy conversation in a chat group; the reply-to in a listserv group might send your e-mail to the whole list or just to the sender of the message. All of these factors affect the psychological "feel" of the environment. All of them are determined by the nuts and bolts and program code that comprise the internet infrastructure. As hardware and software change, so will the psychological aspects of cyberspace. Of particular interest is the expansion of the experiential dimensions of cyberspace by technological advances that allow more visual and auditory communication. How will the ability to see and hear other people on the internet change cyberspace? Will people WANT to give up those spaces that lack face-to-face cues but are rich in imaginative ambiguity?

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The basic psychological features of cyberspace
Networks as "mind" and "self"
Presence in cyberspace
The online disinhibition effect
Cyberspace as dream world
Transference to one's computer and cyberspace

The Basic Psychological Features of Cyberspace

The virtual world is quite different than the in-person world. Digitizing people, relationships, and groups has stretched the boundaries of how and when humans interact. In this article we will explore some of the unique psychological features of cyberspace that shape how people behave in this new social realm. In different online environments we see different synergistic combinations of these features, thus resulting in a distinct psychological quality to each environment which determines how people experience themselves and others. We may think of these features as the fundamental elements of a conceptual model for a psychology of cyberspace. The effect of these elements on individuals, groups, and communities is an important theme throughout this book. It's important to remember, though, that the ten elements described here are only part of the story. How people behave in cyberspace will always be a complex interaction between these features of cyberspace and the characteristics of the person.

reduced sensations
texting
identity flexibility
altered perceptions
equalized status
transcended space
temporal flexibility
social multiplicity
recordability
media disruption

Reduced Sensations

Can you see a person in cyberspace - his facial expressions and body language? Can you hear the changes in her voice? Whether an environment in cyberspace involves visual and/or auditory communication will greatly affect how people behave and the relationships that develop among those people. Multimedia gaming and social environments (such as the Palace), audio-video conferencing, podcasting, and internet-phoning surely are signs of the very sensory sophisticated environments to come. However, the sensory experience of encountering others in cyberspace - seeing, hearing, and COMBINING seeing and hearing - is still limited. For the most part people communicate through typed language. Even when audio-video technology becomes efficient and easy to use, the quality of physical and tactile interactions - for example, handshakes, pats on the back, dancing, hugs, kisses, or just walking together. - will be very limited or nonexistent, at least in the near future. The limited sensory experiences of cyberspace has some significant disadvantages - as well as some unique advantages - as compared to in-person encounters (see Showdown).

Texting

Despite the reduced sensory quality of text communication, it should not be underestimated as a powerful form of self expression and interpersonal relating. E-mail, chat, instant messaging, SMS, and blogs continue to be the most common forms of social interaction for reasons beyond their ease of use and low cost compared to multimedia tools. Drawing on different cognitive abilities than talking and listening, typing one's thoughts and reading those of another is a unique way to present one's identity, perceive the identity of one's online companion, and establish a relationship. E-mail relationships in particular have evolved into a very complex, text-based form of communication - with chat or IM relationships approaching that complexity.

Identity Flexibility

The lack of face-to-face cues has a curious impact on how people present their identity in cyberspace. Communicating only with typed text, you have the option of being yourself, expressing only parts of your identity, assuming imaginative identities, or remaining completely anonymous - in some cases, being almost invisible, as with the "lurker." In many environments, you can give yourself any name you wish. The multimedia worlds also offer the opportunity to express yourself through the visual costumes known as "avatars." Anonymity has a disinhibiting effect that cuts two ways.

Sometimes people use it to act out some unpleasant need or emotion, often by abusing other people. Or it allows them to be honest and open about some personal issue that they could not discuss in a face-to-face encounter.

Altered Perceptions

Sitting quietly and staring at the computer monitor can become an altered state of consciousness. While doing e-mail or instant messaging, some people experience a blending of their mind with that of the other person. In the imaginary multimedia worlds - where people might shape-shift, speak via ESP, walk through walls, spontaneously generate objects out of thin air, or possess all sorts of imaginary powers - the experience becomes surrealistic. It mimics a state of consciousness that resembles dreams. These altered and dream-like states of consciousness in cyberspace may account for why it is so attractive for some people. It might help explain some forms of computer and cyberspace addiction.

Equalized Status

In most cases, everyone on the internet has an equal opportunity to voice him or herself. Everyone - regardless of status, wealth, race, gender, etc. - starts off on a level playing field. Some people call this the "net democracy." Although one's status in the outside world ultimately will have some impact on one's life in cyberspace, there is some truth to this net democracy ideal. What determines your influence on others is your skill in communicating (including writing skills), your persistence, the quality of your ideas, and your technical know-how.

Transcended Space

Geographical distance makes little difference in who can communicate with whom. An engineer in Germany converses with a business woman from California on a server in Australia. It's a small world after all. The irrelevance of geography has important implications for people with unique interests or needs. In their outside life, they may not be able to find anyone near them who shares that unique interest or need. But in cyberspace, birds of a feather - even those with highly unusual feathers - easily can flock together. For support groups devoted to helping people with their problems, that can be a very beneficial feature of cyberspace. For people with antisocial motivations, that's a very negative feature of cyberspace.

Temporal Flexibility

"Synchronous communication" involves people sitting at their computer at the same time (i.e., in "real time") communicating with each other via the internet. Chat rooms and instant messaging are good examples. On the other hand, e-mail and newsgroups involve "asynchronous communication" that does not require people to interact with each other in the moment. In both asynchronous and synchronous communication (with the exception of video conferencing and internet phoning), there is a stretching of time. During chat and IM you have from several seconds to a minute or more to reply to the other person - a significantly longer delay than in face-to-face meetings. In e-mail, blogs, and newsgroups, you have hours, days, or even weeks to respond. Cyberspace creates a unique temporal space where the ongoing, interactive time together stretches out. This provides a convenient "zone for reflection." Compared to face-to-face encounters, you have significantly more time to mull things over and compose a reply.

Some new internet users go through a period of adaptation to this novel temporal experience. For example, they may expect a reply to their e-mail immediately. Enthused about e-mail relating, they assume (perhaps unconsciously) that their partner's reply will approximate the rate of an in-person conversation. Experienced e-mail users appreciate the advantages of time stretching, and even come to understand that different e-mail users have their own e-mail pace.

In other ways, cyberspace time is condensed. If you are a member of an online community for several months, you may be considered an "old-timer." Internet environments change rapidly because it's a lot easier to write and rewrite software infrastructure than it is to build with bricks, wood, and iron. Because it's easy to move around cyberspace, the people we meet and the membership of online groups also changes rapidly. Our subjective sense of time is intimately linked to the rate of change in the world in which we live. With the context of sights, sounds, and people changing around you so quickly in cyberspace, the experience of time seems to accelerate.

Social Multiplicity

With relative ease a person can contact people from all walks of life and communicate with hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. While "multitasking" one can juggle many relationships in a short period of time - or even AT the same time, as in chat and instant messaging, without the other people necessarily being aware of one's juggling act. By posting a message within a blog, discussion board, or social network - which are read by countless numbers of users - people can draw to themselves others who match even their most esoteric interests. Using a search engine, they can scan through millions of pages in order to zoom their attention onto particular people and groups. The internet will get more powerful as tools for searching, filtering, and contacting specific people and groups become more effective. But why do we choose only some people to connect with - and not others? The ability to sift through so many online possibilities for developing relationships amplifies an interesting interpersonal phenomenon well-known to psychologists. A user will act on unconscious motivations - as well as conscious preferences and choices - in selecting friends, lovers, and enemies. This "transference" guides us towards specific types of people who address our underlying emotions and needs. Pressed by hidden expectations, wishes, and fears, this unconscious filtering mechanism has at its disposal an almost infinite candy store of online alternatives to choose from. As one experienced online user once said to me, "Everywhere I go in cyberspace, I keep running into the same kinds of people!" Carrying that insight one step further, another said, "Everywhere I go, I find.... ME!"

Recordability

Most online activities, including e-mail correspondence and chat sessions, can be recorded and saved to a computer file. Unlike real world interactions, the user in cyberspace can keep a permanent record of what was said, to whom, and when. Because these interactions are purely document-based, we may even go so far as to say that the relationship between people ARE the documents, and that the relationship can be permanently recorded in its entirety. These records may come in very handy to the user. You can reexperience and reevaluate any portion of the relationship you wish. You can use quoted text as feedback to the partner. One sign of a flame war is the blossoming of the infamous arrows >> that highlight the ammunition of quoted text. Although it's tempting to think of the saved text as an objective record of some piece of the relationship, it's fascinating to see how different your emotional reactions to the same exact record can be when you reread it at different times. Depending on our state of mind, we invest the recorded words with all sorts of meanings and intentions.

Although the ability to record has many advantages, there is a downside. Because people know that everything they say and do in cyberspace can be tracked and recorded, they may experence anxiety, mistrust, and even paranoia about being online. Should I be careful about what I say and where I go? Will it come back to haunt me? Who might have access to these records?

Media Disruption

We all expect our computers and the internet to interact with us. That's the name of the game. Nevertheless, no matter how complex and sophisticated our electronic tools become, there will always be moments when they fail to live up to their end of the bargain. There will be moments when software and hardware don't work properly, when noise intrudes into the communication, and connections break. There will be moments when our telecommunication systems give us nothing, not even an error message. The frustration and anger we experience in reaction to these failures says something about our relationship to our machines and the internet - something about our dependency on them, our need to control them. That lack of response also opens the door for us to project all sorts of worries and anxieties onto the machine that gives us no reply. I call these the black hole experiences of cyberspace. Fortunately, some computer-mediated environments are more robust than others. Those differences in reliability, predictability, and dependability bear important psychological effects.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Cyberspace as a psychological space
Networks as "mind" and "self"
Presence in cyberspace
The online disinhibition effect
The Two Paths of Virtual Reality

Human Becomes Electric

Networks as Mind and Self

Psychological and philosophical research can approach the rather fascinating question as to how the internet itself possesses a "personality." Old-timers, for example, often lament how the "character" of the net is changing as new and different types of people come online. Like the "self" of groups or an individual, the cyberworld consists of various subcomponents that collaborate, conflict, dissociate, and develop over time. Psychological models of the mind may help organize our understanding of this world. Where is the id, ego, and superego dynamics of the internet? Is the internet, or its subnets, self-actualizing organisms? If the internet is a complex system of links and associations - not unlike the human brain - is it a form of consciousness that is an extension or a manifestation of the human world? Perhaps someday it can attain its own independent consciousness. Would we then consider it human in its own right, or is there something so uniquely human that machines, no matter how complex, can never acquire it? Consider this conversation between the leader of an interplanetary explorer fleet and one of the fleet commanders (taken from a story by science-fiction writer Terry Bisson as quoted in "How The Mind Works" by Steven Pinker, W.W.Norton, 1997)
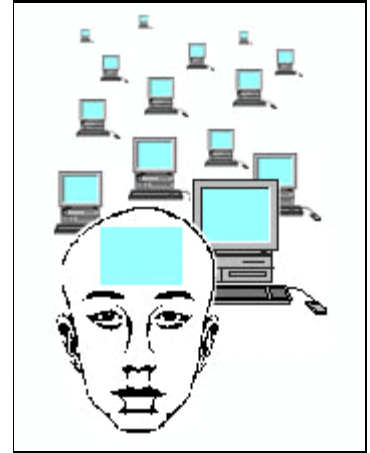
"They're made out of meat."

"Meat?"

"There's no doubt about it. We picked several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, probed them all the way through. They're completely meat."

That's impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars?"

"They use the radio waves to talk. But the signals don't come from them. The signals come from machines."

"So who made the machines? That's who we want to contact."

"They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines."

"That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat."

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in the sector and they're made out of meat."

"Maybe they're like the Orfolei. You know, a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage."

"Nope. They're born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn't take too long. Do you have any idea of the life span of meat?"

"Spare me. Okay, maybe they're only part meat. You know, like the Weddilei. A meat head with an electron plasma brain inside."

"Nope, we thought of that, since they do have meat heads like the Weddilei. But I told you, we probed them. They're meat all the way through."

"No brain?"

"Oh, there is a brain all right. It's just that the brain is made out of meat."

"So ... what does the thinking?"

"You're not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat."

"Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat!"

"Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?"

A few years ago, I spoke at a conference devoted to eastern philosophy and psychology. For my talk, I decided to focus on the concept of "self." What is this thing called Self? Well, I said to the audience, why not look it up on the internet, the information superhighway? I mean, you can find everything on the internet, right? If the internet marks the next stage in the evolution of the human mind and self, then why not consult it about the definition of its own destiny? So I told the audience about my attempt to discover the self in cyberspace. And this is a true story!

I fired up the computer, logged on, and immediately aimed my browser at the Alta Vista search engine on the Web. I entered in the keyword "Self" and hit the search button. In a matter of seconds, after furiously scanning all of cyberspace, the engine came back with a reply... 2.5 million hits! Looks like the self is everywhere! Maybe that meant something. Or maybe I just needed to narrow my search. So I entered in the keywords "True Self." This time I got 11,000 hits. Better. I was on the right track. How about "Essence of Self?" The search engine hummed away and returned 245 hits. Now I was definitely zooming in on the target. I could tell this was the right path because a lot of the hits included web sites devoted to philosophy, spirituality, and poetry - although it also turned up the American Legion Magazine and a web page called "Understanding Diarrhea in Travelers." No, really! In fact, maybe there was a connection here. After all, when asked what is the Buddha, a great Zen master once replied, "Dried turd." On the other hand, maybe those anomalous search engine results meant that the hunt for the self will lead to glitches and dead ends. But I wasn't going to let that stop me. Finally, I entered in the keywords "The True and Essential Self" and clicked the search button. Once again Alta Vista went out into the vast Netherland of global electronified knowledge and came back with... zero hits. Nothing! The void! The True and Essential Self was no where to be found, well at least not in cyberspace.

People at the conference enjoyed my talk, so I decided to publish it on my Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors web site. About a year later, I received this e-mail from a visitor to the site:

Hi John,

I was reading your essay "What is this thing called self." You say that on an altavista search you looked for "The True and Essential Self" and found no hits, that this "True and Essential Self" is not out there.... Well, now it is, because if you try the same search again it will find 1 hit... "The True and Essential Self" is in your essay!! It seems the answer has been closer to home than you thought all along...now that is DEFINITELY zen!...... have a good day!

Joe

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Cyberspace as a psychological space
Identity managment in cyberspace
Presence in cyberspace
Intensive case studies in cyberspace and the evolution of digital life forms

Presence in Cyberspace

I am Present Here: Environmental Presence
Others Are Present Here: Interpersonal Presence
Individual Differences
The Dimensions of "Here" and "Now"

Be here now.

That's the advice from some people in humanistic psychology on how to form meaningful relationships and experience life fully. Be right here, in this moment, wholly aware of this place with your eyes, ears, nose, and skin, fully involved psychologically and emotionally with others - rather than have one foot here and the other sunk into the distracting thoughts, memories of the past, and anticipations of the future that fog our minds.

Be present.

That might be another way to put it. As Zen-like advice, it makes powerful sense. But this notion was born in a time and place before everyone started going online. So how do online relationships and lifestyles challenge the "Be Here Now" principle? How do we attain and experience "presence" in cyberspace? To answer that question, we need to explore two basic issues: I am present here.
Others are present here.

I am Present Here: Environmental Presence

How do we know that we have entered a place? How do we truly feel that we are somewhere in particular, that the setting at hand indeed engages us with some measure of meaning and consequence?

We rely on at least five cues for perceiving presence within an environment:

Sensory stimulation from the environment
Change in the environment
Interactivity with the environment
The degree of familiarity

Sensory Stimulation and Character

As a general rule, the more multimodal sensory stimulation we receive from our surroundings, the more that environment feels real and the more present we feel in it. If we can see, hear, smell, touch - as we do in the ftf world - we know we indeed ARE somewhere. Cyberspace environments currently fall short on the dimensions of smell and touch, but they are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in the visual and auditory stimulation provided. Each degree of added sensory complexity and detail can heighten our perception of environmental presence because the setting acquires more *sensory character*.

We can feel present even within environments possessing low sensory character, such as no-frills text communication involving email, chat, instant messaging, weblogs, and message boards. Even though there may be no pictures or sounds, a rudimentary visual setting still arises from the very basic elements of text boxes, buttons, fonts, and overall window design. The simple rectangular window itself creates a visual sensation of place and a perceptual invitation to

enter it. Even the word "window" itself conjures up sensations of entering a new cyberspace, thanks to the insights of the original architects at Apple. However, as experts who design software interfaces well know, the particular visual features within a window can make it more inviting - more like a psychologically coherent and meaningful location. Even simple design elements - like color, the use of space, and suggestive text - make a difference.

Change in the Environment

A well-constructed visual image, such as a painting, can draw the viewer into that setting. Adding movement, as in motion pictures, may intensify even more the sensation of experiencing a real place. After all, as Heraclitus noted when we step into rivers, the real world never stands still and never repeats itself exactly. So too a cyberspace environment embodying movement tends to be perceived as more life-like. One of the most popular additions to html language was the "blink". Then came animated gifs followed swiftly by Java, Flash, and other tools to give cyberworlds even more activity.

Repetitious movement can become monotonous, resulting in boredom and a somnambulant dulling of the senses, including the sense of place. More complex and subtle patterns of motion have greater clout in creating the feeling of presence within a setting. The human mind is drawn to unpredictability, which is why we spend so much time talking about the weather. As in the river cited by Heraclitus, when we step into online environments that change unexpectedly over time, we are more likely to feel that variable flow as evidence of life-like presence.

Interactivity with the Environment

We reach a fuller level of presence when we can interact with the environment rather than simply witness it. A very basic element of interaction involves the ability to enter, move within, and leave a setting. Any sensory or verbal cue that heightens the sensation of entering and leaving an environment enhances its presence as a setting distinct from other settings. A window that springs forward from the hard drive icon augments the feeling that you have entered that space. A voice saying "Welcome" when you sign on lets you know that you have crossed a threshold from one area to another.

So too the ability to move within the environment - to see it from different perspectives - adds to its spatial quality and power of presence. In a multi-page web site, a navigation bar on each page creates the perception of being in one "room" among many possible rooms. In sophisticated 3D graphical environments, the ability to look 360 degrees around a room, and to move around an object and see it from various viewpoints, simulates life-like perspectives and life-like presence.

We know we are somewhere when we can have an effect on the setting, when it reacts to our actions. Reciprocal reactivity between you and environment enhances your sense of presence in that environment. We might even add, as some philosophers have suggested, that objects reacting to other objects (including us) is what makes them "conscious" in a petit way. Conscious, and hence present. Even something as simple as being able to click on a button   to make something happen enhances the feeling of doing and being in that space. As opportunities to interact with an online environment become more sophisticated and less predictably routine, the more fully present that environment feels.

To appreciate the power of movement and reciprocal interaction in creating presence within an online setting, notice what happens when your program crashes. Nothing responds to your mouse clicks. Everything freezes. The environment is suddenly dead and your sensation of presence in it evaporates almost immediately.

The Degree of Familiarity

The unfamiliar and unknown tend to make humans feel out of place, anxious. We are not sure what to do, resulting in confusion that may cloud the feeling of presence and compel us to leave. On the contrary, we tend to feel at home, present, in a familiar setting. We have "been" there before which makes it easier to "be" there now. Among the almost limitless choices of online environments to inhabit, we tend to stick to just a few - those familiar ones where presence has taken root in our consciousness. To the contrary, any setting that looks confusing or unintelligible, that doesn't make visual or linguistic sense, or that offers no meaning to us, will tend to scramble our feeling present there.

But let's not overstate the importance of familiarity, because novelty can pique our attention and curiosity. New environments create a challenge to explore, learn, and master them, thereby heightening immersion and presence. The fantasy quality of online games and communities also appeals to the unconscious: the human mind seeks out a dream-life. Although far from familiar, and sometimes even incredible, online fantasy environments can stimulate presence by addressing the basic human need for an altered state of experience and consciousness.

Balance is important. Settings that effectively blend the familiar with the novel - reality with fantasy - can be very powerful in engendering the feeling of fully "being there."

Others Are Present Here: Interpersonal Presence

How do we sense that other people are with us in a setting? How do we know that we are interacting with someone in particular, another human being with a unique identity and history, who thinks and feels and behaves in a distinct way?

As we will see later, the manner in which I have phrased this question already suggests ideas about the nature of interpersonal presence in online environments. But first, let's examine this issue by using a framework similar to that which we applied in understanding environmental presence. We rely on at least five cues for experiencing the presence of others:

> Sensory stimulation from the other
> Change in and doing by the other
> Interactivity with the other
> The degree of familiarity

Sensory Stimulation from the Other

As a general rule, the more multimodal sensory stimulation we receive about the other person, the more that person feels present and real. If we can see, hear, smell, touch - as we do in the ftf world - we indeed know someone is here. Throughout the life span, especially during childhood, humans rely heavily on the close stimulation of touch and smell in developing the awareness of, and intimacy with, significant others. Cyberspace currently falls very short on these dimensions - which is a limitation that cannot be ignored - but it is becoming increasingly more sophisticated in the visual and auditory stimulation provided. Each degree of added sensory complexity and detail can heighten our perception of the other person's presence because the person acquires more sensory character.

However, we also can feel very powerfully the other's presence within environments providing low sensory character, such as the text communication of email, chat, instant messaging, and message boards. The history of literature, journalism, and personal correspondence clearly demonstrates the human ability to create one's presence within the written word. Interpersonal presence involves more than seeing and hearing the other person.

Change In and Doing by the Other

People, like life in general, move. They DO. Any online environment that allows the person to move, change, or do something enhances that person's presence. Webcams obviously offer the opportunity to see facial expressions, shifting body language, and physical motion - but even much more simple indications of action and change can be effective in generating presence. In multimedia communities where members use real and imaginary pictures called "avatars" to represent themselves, the ability to move the avatar to different positions in a room mimics physical body movement. Switching from one avatar to another can create body language and a change in identity expression. Even in the pure text environments of chat, message boards, and weblog communities, your presence can be enhanced by the ability to move from one section of the environment to another, assuming other people are able to see your movement. In any environment, multimedia or text, the opportunity to add, remove, or change something enhances your presence in the minds of others who experience that alteration of the setting.

So too entering, leaving, and reentering an environment - which is possible in almost any online setting - signifies your movement, doing, and presence. Similar to the peek-a-boo game that delights children, cycles of appearing and disappearing reinforces your existence in the minds of others. When you vanish, the other's anticipation of your return sustains in his or her mind your being continuous over time - what psychologists call "object constancy." For example, whenever you send an email or post to a discussion board, your presence emerges and is felt anew by others. Only after a sustained period of no longer reappearing does your being and anticipated presence begin to fade in the other's consciousness.

<u>Interactivity with the Other</u>

We experience the presence of others more fully through their experience of our presence. Human presence is reciprocal and interactive. The more ways an online environment allows people to interact with and affect each other, the more present they will feel to each other. Conversing is one obvious method of interacting. When people respond to what we say in an online group, their presence tends to brighten and spring to the foreground, compared to the more faded background presence of those people who do not. Although limited compared to all the various ways we can interact ftf, online environments also enable file sharing, touring the web together, allowing another person to remotely control one's computer, playing games, and creating something together - for example, in an avatar community, creating a garden.

If others do not react to your being and doing, your subjective sense of your own presence tends to wane. As indicated in object relations theory and Meade's concept of "the looking glass self," our identity is affirmed in the eyes of others. When ignored, that sense of self and presence fades, perhaps resulting in feeling lost, powerless, frustrated, angry, lonely, or depressed. People whose presence is not acknowledged may avoid the environment or act out in negative ways to attain some kind of attention. Lacking eye contact, hand shakes, and hugs, people in text-only environments may be especially susceptible to feeling overlooked. If no one replies to your email or post, your very existence in that setting comes into question. Your sense of the others as being real and present also may fade, because people - REAL people - respond to each other's presence.

Any person's identity and the ways to convey it are highly complex. People feel more present to others - and even to themselves - when they are able to express a wide range of thoughts, memories, emotions, and motives. An online environment providing tools that maximize these expressions of personal identity will enhance the experience of someone in particular really being there. A simple example is the opportunity in some online communities to create a bio page. A more sophisticated example is the weblog, in which a person controls an almost limitless range of personal expression.

As the widening expression of identity becomes interactive, when others can give and receive feedback, the sense of presence intensifies. The more comprehensive the mutual exploration of each other's background and personality, the more people sense each other truly being there. Within any particular person's weblog, his or her presence acquires more power than those people visiting the site, in part due to the wider range of that person's expression of self - which is why, to equalize presence, webloggers often form social clusters in which they visit each other's site to offer comments.

Our ability to explore and interact with the presence of another person enhances our knowing not only THAT someone is here, but WHO that someone is. A person is saying nothing, but you see their avatar in the room or their name in the chat room user list. You may feel uneasy about that person because you are not sure who he or she is, or even if that person is a he or a she. You may not even be sure if the person is present at all. A sense of the "uncanny" arises when we can't be certain if someone is here, and, if indeed they are here, who exactly that person is - a common situation in cyberspace. Films about "monsters" draw on this sense of the uncanny because anxiety arises from this uncertainty about the presence, identity, and intentions of the other. Interacting more and knowing more about the other provides the remedy to that apprehension.

<u>The Degree of Familiarity of the Other</u>

As with environmental presence, we tend to feel more at ease interacting with people we know. Upon meeting them again, we quickly slip into the sense of their presence because they are familiar to us. Just a few simple cues - verbal, auditory, visual - can trigger the memory of who they are. On the contrary, when we encounter people whose behavior seems strange, erratic, or meaningless, we have a harder time forming a coherent impression of them. For this reason, people detract from their presence when they choose to express them selves in a peculiar or chaotic fashion - for example, with unusual images, incomprehensible web pages, or very loosely constructed and terse phrases in chat or IM.

Once again, let's not overstate the importance of familiarity, because novelty can pique our alertness, senses, and curiosity, while chronic familiarity leads to inattentiveness, boredom, and a dulling of presence. Relationships feel more alive as we discover new things about our companion. People seem more real when they occasionally act in ways we did not anticipate. This is why software" robots" and other forms of artificial intelligence possess more presence in the early stages of encounter, but tend to lose some or all of it over time. Even if the "being" they create possesses high sensory character, most AI programs are not complex enough to sustain their presence as a human-like entity. They become too predictable, too mechanical. A present machine, yes. A present sentient being, no. As research on the

Turing Test shows, some people, in a controlled text environment, may not at first be able to tell the difference between a machine and a human - but over time, very few if any programs can sustain the wide range of complexity, change, and interactivity that we interpret as human presence.

As along as an online environment is flexible enough to allow people to express the complexities of their identity - and as long as people use that flexibility - they can maintain as well as enrich their presence. People also may apply the fantasy features of online games and communities to enhance the presentation of their identity with a dose of imagination. It is the effective balance between the familiar and new - between reality and vision - that raises presence to new levels. With all its numerous options for manipulating and combining text, visuals, sound, movement, change, and interactivity, cyberspace offers many possibilities for the creative expression of presence.

Individual Differences

All of the variables described so far interact in highly complex ways to create the sensation of presence. Adding to this complexity is the very important effect of individual differences in how people create the impression that they are here, and in how people perceive that another person is here.

Some people are more skilled in making their presence known, in projecting themselves into an environment. For example, people experienced in text communication know how to write clearly to express themselves, as well as employ creative keyboarding techniques that convey body language and "subvocal" thoughts and emotions. In constructing their emails, web sites, weblogs, gaming characters, and avatar collections, people differ in how well they implement sensory character, change, interactivity, and the balance between familiar and novel. These skills often rest on an empathic attunement to the other person, on understanding how others might react to one's style of expressing presence. The savvy online communicator pays attention to the crucial interaction between self and other that generates the synergistic sense of mutually being here.

People also vary in their ability to sense the other person's presence. With only a minimal amount of text or a brief glance at an avatar, one person may know it is Joe while another has no idea. Empathic attunement to the identities and expressive styles of other people plays an important role in sensing presence, as does the need and desire to connect to another person. Prisoners in isolated cells contact each other with muffled taps on a concrete wall. Despite this extreme minimalist communication, they sense each other's presence intensely. These same needs and desires, operating at many levels of intensity, surface in all online environments, whether they offer simple or complex communication features.

The ability to establish and discern presence arises from a complex interaction among self, other, and environment. Due to differences in personality and cognitive style, people prefer some online environments over others because they feel more able to express their presence the way they would like to, as well as sense the presence of others the way they would like to. Hopefully, others in those environments also are well-suited for the setting and the particular people who dwell there. If any element is amiss in the optimal match between self, other, and environment, the quality of presence on all three levels may decay.

Adding yet another dimension of complexity, we must also consider the person's level of "object relations." According to various psychoanalytic and developmental theorists, people vary in the extent to which they have established a sense of separation and individuation from other people. So far, this article rests on the assumption that people have the ability to see themselves as a distinct, unique person separate from those people they encounter online. However, this is not necessarily true for everyone.

People who operate at a developmentally primitive level of object relations experience others as an extension of themselves, as merged with their self. In-person or online, they do not sense the presence of the other person as a separate being, but rather as a part of themselves. In fact, some online settings - especially text communication that lacks the visual cues to help establish a separate physical body - may exacerbate this poor self/other differentiation. For example, a narcissistic person in a message board or email group may experience the presence of others primarily as a source of attention and admiration to bolster his or her own sense of self. That person may not experience others as distinct individuals with their own ideas, needs, and feelings.

For people with deficient object relations, "presence" of self and other means something very different than for people with well-established object relations. In what has been called "selfobject transferences," others exist to mirror one's needs and feelings, to provide a twin that bolsters one's sense of self, or to serve as an idealized figure to merge with.

Generally speaking, online text communication may encourage a blending of the minds of self and other - a blending of presences - which magnifies the poor self/other differentation that is a chronic problem for people with poor object relations.

Even people at a developmentally advanced level of object relations may at times have difficulty establishing an accurate perception of the other person's presence. You may feel that another individual is here, but elements of that person's identity may be distorted by your own needs and feelings. These transference reactions tend to be magnified by the ambiguity of text communication. The mind-merging that sometimes occurs in text communication may even cause developmentally advanced people to dip into periods of selfobject transferences.

The Dimensions of "Here" and "Now"

Relationships in cyberspace encourage us to reexamine many of the traditional assumptions about presence implied in the Be Here Now maxim. As we have seen, the very notion of "here" is called into question. The environmental presence of "this place" always manifests itself, at least in our current state of technology, via a computer screen. All of the many "here's" we can experience online emerge from that screen. Our actual physical location has not changed at all, which points to the power of the mind to shape sensory character, change, and interaction into a psychologically real and meaningful environment. In fact, a very evocative "here" may be nothing more than an email message. The Be Here Now principle encourages us to let go of our mental cogitations so we can experience the here more fully and clearly, but as we sit and look into our monitors, cyberspace reminds us that what we see and experience is always shaped by what we think and feel.

Despite the powerful possibilities for presence online, we must remind ourselves that indeed our body sits in a room, in front of a computer, in a setting that is quite different from the online encounter. We may not even be consciously aware of that setting around us, which points to the importance of dissociation in allowing us to experience presence online. To fully immerse ourselves into the environments and relationships of cyberspace, we must be able to minimize awareness of the setting around us - at least for a time. If the phone rings or the dog barks to go out, we shift our attention back to our physical surroundings. We cannot immerse ourselves fully into cyberspace and in-person presences simultaneously, no more than we can completely immerse ourselves into different online settings or relationships simultaneously.

With practice, we learn how to manage a multi-tasking of presence. We can be here and now in one particular online system of environmental and interpersonal presences, while keeping an eye and ear open for something that might call our attention to another system - either the in-person setting or another online setting. Usually it is a change in one of the other environments that signals us to attend to it. For example, while fully engrossed with an email companion, part of us notices an IM icon blinking, the call to presence of another companion. The process resembles mindfulness meditation in which we focus our presence on and with one thing, but also allow another part of our mind to silently notice and then shift concentration to other things that might arise from the wide range of possible presences in the periphery of our field of awareness. Rather than being one-dimensional, presence involves shifts in magnitude, direction, and juxtaposition as we balance and redirect our awareness from here to there.

So too the "Now" of Be Here Now is multi-dimensional. Those humanistic philosophers advise us not to live in the past or present, but to be here in this very moment. In the synchronous communication of chat and instant messages, we remain true to that idea - and some people claim they sense intensely the companion's moment-by-moment presence in the exchange of typed text. But is presence less developed in asynchronous communication? When reading e-mails or weblogs, do those other people seem less like they are with us NOW? We know that they probably will not react, at least not immediately, to what we say, so interactivity is delayed - and some might say weaker - compared to synchronous communication. Yet in many other respects we sense that they are here now, just as writers of poems, stories, and essays create the sense that they are with us in the moment. When we open an e-mail message or enter a discussion board, we open the Now.

If this study of how to apply the "Be Here Now" principle to cyberspace tells us anything, it tells how the sense of presence arises from the objective cues of sensory stimulation, change, interactivity, and degree of familiarity - but that the impact of those cues is heavily influenced by the subjective interpretation of the individual. The worlds and relationships of cyberspace remind us that the being, here, and now of presence resides in the human mind.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The Online Disinhibition Effect

You Don't Know Me (dissociative anonymity)
You Can't See Me (invisibility)
See You Later (asynchronicity)
It's All in My Head (solipsistic introjection)
It's Just a Game (dissociative imagination)
We're Equals (minimizing authority)
Personality Variables
True Self?
Self Constellations Across Media
Altering Self Boundary

It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the "disinhibition effect." It's a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. Or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity. We may call this *benign disinhibition*.

On the other hand, the disinhibition effect may not be so benign. Out spills rude language and harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people explore the dark underworld of the internet, places of pornography and violence, places they would never visit in the real world. We might call this *toxic disinhibition*.

On the benign side, the disinhibition indicates an attempt to understand and explore oneself, to work through problems and find new ways of being. And sometimes, in toxic disinhibition, it is simply a blind catharsis, an acting out of unsavory needs and wishes without any personal growth at all.

What causes this online disinhibition? What is it about cyberspace that loosens the psychological barriers that block the release of these inner feelings and needs? Several factors are at play. For some people, one or two of them produces the lion's share of the disinhibition effect. In most cases, though, these factors interact with each other, supplement each other, resulting in a more complex, amplified effect.

You Don't Know Me (dissociative anonymity)

As you move around the internet, most of the people you encounter can't easily tell who you are. System operators and some technologically savvy, motivated users may be able to detect your e-mail or internet address, but for the most part people only know what you tell them about yourself. If you wish, you can keep your identity hidden. As the word "anonymous" indicates, you can have no name - at least not your real name. That anonymity works wonders for the disinhibition effect. When people have the opportunity to separate their actions from their real world and identity, they feel less vulnerable about opening up. Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. They don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of who they "really" are. When acting out hostile feelings, the person doesn't have to take responsibility for those actions. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those behaviors "aren't me at all." In psychology this is called "dissociation."

You Can't See Me (invisibility)

In many online environments other people cannot see you. As you browse through web sites, message boards, and even some chat rooms, people may not even know you are there at all - with the possible exception of web masters and other users who have access to software tools that can detect traffic through the site, assuming they have the inclination to keep an eye on you, one of maybe hundreds or thousands of users. Invisibility gives people the courage to go places and do things that they otherwise wouldn't.

This power to be concealed overlaps with anonymity, because anonymity is the concealment of identity. But there are some important differences. In text communication such as e-mail, chat, blogs, and instant messaging, others may know a great deal about who you are. However, they still can't see or hear you - and you can't see or hear them. Even with everyone's identity visible, the opportunity to be physically invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect. You don't have to worry about how you look or sound when you say (type) something. You don't have to worry about how others look or sound when you say something. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can slam the breaks on what people are willing to express. In psychoanalysis, the analyst sits behind the patient in order remain a physically ambiguous figure, without revealing any body language or facial expression, so that the patient has free range to discuss whatever he or she wants, without feeling inhibited by how the analyst is physically reacting. In everyday relationships, people sometimes avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. It's easier not to look into the other's face. Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.

See You Later (asynchronicity)

In e-mail and message boards, communication is asynchronous. People don't interact with each other in real time. Others may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply to something you say. Not having to deal with someone's immediate reaction can be disinhibiting. In real life, it would be like saying something to someone, magically suspending time before that person can reply, and then returning to the conversation when you're willing and able to hear the response. Immediate, real-time feedback from others tends to have a very powerful effect on the ongoing flow of how much people reveal about themselves. In e-mail and message boards, where there are delays in that feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards deeper expressions of what they are thinking and feeling. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as "running away" after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it "out there" where it can be left behind. In some cases, as Kali Munro, an online psychotherapist, aptly describes it, the person may be participating in an "emotional hit and run."

It's All in My Head (solipsistic introjection)

Absent f2f cues combined with text communication can have an interesting effect on people. Sometimes they feel that their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion. Reading another person's message might be experienced as a voice within one's head, as if that person magically has been inserted or "introjected" into one's psyche. Of course, we may not know what the other person's voice actually sounds like, so in our head we assign a voice to that companion. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, we may even assign a visual image to what we think that person looks like and how that person behaves. The online companion now becomes a character within our intrapsychic world, a character that is shaped partly by how the person actually presents him or herself via text communication, but also by our expectations, wishes, and needs. Because the person may even remind us of other people we know, we fill in the image of that character with memories of those other acquaintances.

As the character now becomes more elaborate and "real" within our minds, we may start to think, perhaps without being fully aware of it, that the typed-text conversation is all taking place within our heads, as if it's a dialogue between us and this character in our imagination - even as if we are authors typing out a play or a novel. Actually, even when it doesn't involve online relationships, many people carry on these kinds of conversations in their imagination throughout the day. People fantasize about flirting, arguing with a boss, or very honestly confronting a friend about what they feel. In their imagination, where it's safe, people feel free to say and do all sorts of things that they wouldn't in reality. At that moment, reality IS one's imagination. Online text communication can become the psychological tapestry in which a person's mind weaves these fantasy role plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition. All of cyberspace is a stage and we are merely players.

When reading another's message, it's also possible that you "hear" that person's words using your own voice. We may be subvocalizing as we read, thereby projecting the sound of our voice into the other person's message. Perhaps unconsciously, it feels as if I am talking to/with myself. When we talk to ourselves, we are willing to say all sorts of things that we wouldn't say to others!

It's Just a Game (dissociative imagination)

If we combine solipsistic introjection with the escapability of cyberspace, we get a slightly different force that magnifies disinhibition. People may feel that the imaginary characters they "created" exist in a different space, that one's online persona along with the online others live in an make-believe dimension, a dream world, separate and apart from the demands and responsibilities of the real world. They split or "dissociate" online fiction from offline fact. Emily Finch, an author and criminal lawyer studying identity theft in cyberspace, has suggested that some people see their online life as a kind of game with rules and norms that don't apply to everyday living (pers. comm., 2002). Once they turn off the computer and return to their daily routine, they believe they can leave that game and their game-identity behind. Why should they be held responsible for what happens in that make-believe play world that has nothing to do with reality? After all, it isn't that different than blasting away at your pals in a shoot-em up video game... or so some people might think, perhaps unconsciously.

Although anonymity tends to amplify dissociative imagination, dissociative imagination and dissociative anonymity usually differ in the complexity of the dissociated part of oneself. Under the influence of anonymity, the person may try to be invisible, to become a non-person, resulting in a reducing or simplifying of identity. During dissociative imagination, the self that is expressed, but split-off, tends to be more elaborate.

We're Equals (minimizing authority)

While online a person's status in the face-to-face world may not be known to others and it may not have as much impact as it does in the face-to-face world. If people can't see you or your surroundings, they don't know if you are the president of a major corporation sitting in your expensive office, or some "ordinary" person lounging around at home in front of the computer. Even if people do know something about your offline status and power, that elevated position may have little bearing on your online presence and influence. In most cases, everyone on the internet has an equal opportunity to voice him or herself. Everyone - regardless of status, wealth, race, gender, etc. - starts off on a level playing field. Although one's status in the outside world ultimately may have some impact on one's powers in cyberspace, what mostly determines your influence on others is your skill in communicating (including writing skills), your persistence, the quality of your ideas, and your technical know-how.

People are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. A fear of disapproval and punishment from on high dampens the spirit. But online, in what feels like a peer relationship - with the appearances of "authority" minimized - people are much more willing to speak out or misbehave.

According to traditional Internet philosophy, everyone is an equal: Peers share ideas and resources. In fact, the net itself is engineered with no centralized control. As it grows, with a seemingly endless potential for creating new environments, many people see themselves as independent-minded explorers. This atmosphere and philosophy contribute to the minimizing of authority.

Personality Variables

The disinhibition effect is not the only factor that determines how much people open up or act out in cyberspace. The strength of underlying feelings, needs, and drive level has a big influence on how people behave. Personalities also vary greatly in the strength of defense mechanisms and tendencies towards inhibition or expression. People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional. Compulsive people are more restrained. The online disinhibition effect will interact with these personality variables, in some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's baseline (offline) behavior, while in other cases causing dramatic changes.

True Self?

Does the disinhibition effect release inner needs, emotions, and attributes that dwell beneath surface personality presentations? Does it reveal your "true self." For example, a woman with repressed anger unleashes her hostility

online, thereby showing others how she really feels. Or a shy man openly expresses his hidden affection for his cyberspace companion.

Some people do report being more like their true self in cyberspace. If personality is constructed in layers, with a core or true self buried beneath surface defenses and the seemingly superficial roles of everyday social interactions, then does the disinhibition effect release that true self?

This is a tempting conclusion. In fact, the very notion of a true self is tempting because it is useful in helping people articulate their experiences in how and what they express to others about themselves. The concept also works well, in a humanistic fashion, as a motivational tool in the process of self-actualization.

However, a comprehensive psychological as well as philosophical analysis reveals complexities in this thing called self that stretch far beyond this tempting notion. In an in-depth exploration of the online disinhibition effect, the idea of a true self is too ambiguous, arbitrary, and rudimentary to serve as a useful concept.

Personal and cultural values: Personal and cultural values often dictate what we consider the true and false aspects of who we are. We more readily accept as valid those attributes that we regard as positive. An unpleasant aspect of one's personality is not really "me." However, sexual and aggressive tendencies, as Freud noted, are basic components of personality too, as are the psychological defenses designed to control them.

Personal and cultural values may also label the usually polite persona that we present to others during everyday living as superficial or false. However, this persona is the product of years of social and psychological development. As a critical component of the ego's construction and functioning, it is essential to interpersonal survival and no less important or true than other components of intrapsychic structure.

While online people may feel they have more opportunities to present themselves as they would like to present themselves, particularly in the carefully composed text of asynchronous communication. They may have more chances to convey thoughts and emotions that go "deeper" than the seemingly superficial persona of everyday living. These opportunities are very valuable aspects of cyberspace, but not necessarily evidence of a more true self. What we reveal about ourselves spontaneously, often right on the surface for others to see but without our being consciously awareness of it, may be just as real and true.

Some people are not fully satisfied with their in-person relationships. Perhaps they don't have opportunities to develop many relationships, or those that did develop turned out to be unfulfilling. In cyberspace they may find the companions they need. They feel more authentic in those online relationships, and this becomes a viable lifestyle alternative. On the other hand, some people who need to deny or rationalize the unfulfilling quality of their in-person relationships may resort to a personal philosophy that idealizes the disinhibition effect and the notion that the true self appears online.

The inhibiting self: The concept of disinhibition may mistakenly lead us into thinking that what is disinhibited is more real or true than the part of us that inhibits. If we can just peel away repression, suppression, and other defense mechanisms, we will discover the "real" self that lies below. Based loosely on the kind of archeological approach to intrapsychic structure proposed by Freud, this notion suggests that the personality is constructed in layers, with more true or real features of personality existing at a deeper level.

This is a simplistic interpretation of the much more dynamic psychoanalytic model which states that the inhibitory processes of repression and defense mechanisms are components of personality no less real or important than others. Psychoanalytic clinicians believe that understanding defenses is crucial to the success of the therapy because it reveals hidden thoughts, feelings, and needs. Why does a person repress something? Why is it being inhibited? Bypassing defenses to get to the "true" self may also bypass the opportunity to discover aspects of the inhibiting self that are just as true. When these defenses and elements of the inhibited self are worked through, remnants of them sometimes remain to serve an important function. Sometimes they evolve into productive aspects of one's personality independent of the problematic emotions that were originally defended.

The same is true online. Some people in some online situations become disinhibited and reveal aspects of themselves. However, at the same time, they may not be not grappling with the underlying causes of that inhibition, and therefore are missing an opportunity to discover something important about themselves - something very true about themselves, but often unconscious. If anonymity in cyberspace eases people's anxiety so they are more comfortable to express themselves, then they also are bypassing an essential component of who they are. Important personality dynamics are embedded in that anxiety.

People who are shy in-person may thrive in cyberspace when the disinhibition effect allows them to express who they "truly" are inside. This is a wonderful opportunity for them. But why is Joe's shyness a less true aspect of him compared to other features of his personality, especially given the fact that his shyness is a prominent feature of his day-to-day living? If online companions, who had formed the impression Joe was outgoing, finally met him in-person, might they not conclude that Joe is "really" shy? And what makes him shy? Are there underlying psychological problems and anxieties that caused it? Is it a biologically determined temperment, as much research in developmental psychology suggests about shyness. Aren't these possible causes of his shyness also true aspects of Joe? Here we see the arbitrary nature of the "true self" concept.

Compromise formations: Quite often when people are online and some aspect of their personality is disinhibited, some other aspect of their personality is inhibited. After all, the anonymity that contributes to online disinhibition means that the person is "without a name" - something about that person is not known. In online communication, consciously or unconsciously, people conceal or misrepresent aspects of themselves as often as they honestly reveal aspects of themselves. Any particular media encourages some aspects of identity to be expressed while inhibiting other aspects. Something is revealed while something else is hidden. Expressions of self are compromise formations within any particular media or communication modality. In email Joe reveals for the first time to Sue that "I love you," but his voice and body language, which in-person might reveal unwritten dimensions and even qualifications of his stated affection, are hidden.

This particular example also points to the polarities that operate within the dynamics of personality. Sometimes we act, think, or feel one way, and sometimes the opposite. We have ambivalent, sometimes opposing emotions. Online Joe says that he truly loves Sue, but in-person his voice indicates some doubt. Face-to-face he appears angry and rejecting, but online he admits that he feels insecure and guilty. Different communication environments convey different facets of these polarities in self. Here one side appears, and there another. Neither is more true than another.

Each media allows for a particular expression of self that differs - sometimes greatly, sometimes subtly - from another media. In different media people present a different perspective of their identity. Chat, email, blogs, videocams, telephones, face-to-face conversation, and all types of communication modalities, each uniquely highlight certain aspects of self expression and personal identity, while hiding others. The self expressed in one modality is not necessarily deeper, more real, or more authentic than another. This multiple modality framework for understanding the self-within-media bypasses the tendency to become bogged down in arbitrary arguments about the location of the true or real self.

Self Constellations Across Media

The self interacts with the environment in which it is expressed. It is not independent of that environment. If a man suppresses his aggression in life but expresses it online, both behaviors reflect important aspects of his personality that surface under different conditions. If a woman is shy in-person but outgoing online, neither self-presentation is more true than the other. Both are dimensions of who she is, each revealed within a different situational context.

Instead of thinking that personality is constructed in layers with the environment "out there" somewhere, we can conceptualize it as an intrapsyhic field containing clusters or constellations of emotion, memory, and thinking that are interconnected with certain environments. Some constellations overlap, others are more dissociated from each other, with environmental variables influencing those levels of integration and dissociation. Personality dynamics involve the complex interactions among these various clusters within the self and in relation to the environment. An extreme version of these dynamics occur in a multiple personality disorder, in which consciousness shifts laterally from one constellation of personality formation to another, with strong dissociative barriers between those formations. In the more "normal" person, the distinction between the formations may be less dramatic, and the dissociative barriers less intense, but the same alterations in identity expression does occur.

These ideas about self constellations extend as far back as William James' theory of consciousness shifting from one focus to another within a field of associations. They also are consistent with contemporary theories about dissociation and the information processing of experience.

Therefore, we can think of the disinhibition effect as a person shifting to an "online" personality constellation that may be dissociated - in varying degrees, depending on the person - from the in-person constellation. Inhibiting guilt, shame, or anxiety may be features of the in-person self but not that online self. This constellations model also helps explain other online phenomena, like identity experimentation, role-playing fantasy games, multitasking projects, and other subtle shifts in personality expression as we move from one online environment to another. In fact, a single disinhibited

"online self" probably does not exist at all, but rather a collection of slightly different constellations of emotion, memory, and thinking that surface in and interact with different types of online environments. Different communication modalities enable different expressions of oneself. They allow us to see the different perspectives of that complex thing we call "identity."

This is something to keep in mind for online psychotherapy. Using a multidimensional analysis of the various features of cyberspace, a comprehensive theory of online psychotherapy explores how the design of a computer-mediated environment allows for the inhibition, expression, and development of different aspects of a person's identity.

Altering Self Boundary

My discussion so far rests on the assumption that almost everyone online tends to be disinhibited, even if the effect is small. However, this isn't necessarily the case. Some people feel guarded and suspicious about cyberspace. You don't know who people really are, or how exactly they may be reacting to you behind their typed words. You don't realize who is watching you or what they know about you. You can't trust everyone's intentions. In black hole situations, you send out a message and receive no reply, for reasons not clear. Is anyone really there?

Online environments can stir uncertainty, frustration, and anxiety - even paranoia about the possible mishaps and calamities that may befall you if you venture into the wrong environment or connect with the wrong people. As a result, people sometimes proceed with hesitancy and caution.

Some vacillate between feeling disinhibited and restrained as they move in and out of the various areas of their online lifestyle. They shift up and down what we might consider a disinhibition/inhibition continuum. However, others may feel both ways simultaneously within a particular environment or relationship. For example, you reveal intimate details about yourself to someone you meet online, but you won't give that person your phone number.

How do we explain these alternating as well as concurrent experiences of both an open and guarded self? If we focus just on online disinhibition or only on online suspiciousness, we will overlook an important underlying psychological experience that gives rise to this disinhibition/inhibition polarity. That experience is "self boundary."

Self-boundary is the sense of what is me and what is not me. It's the experience of a flexible perimeter marking the distinction between my personality - my thoughts, feelings, and memories - and what exists outside that perimeter, within other people.

A variety of factors contribute to self-boundary, including the awareness of having a distinct physical body, the perception via the five senses of an outside world, the feeling of a psychological distinction between what I know versus what others know about me, and the sensation of the physical/psychological self moving cohesively along a linear continuum of past, present, and future.

Life in cyberspace tends to disrupt these factors that support self-boundary. The physical body and its five senses no longer play as crucial a role as in face-to-face relationships. What others know or don't know about me is not always clear. The feeling of a linear past, present, and future becomes more obscure as we move back and forth through synchronous and asynchronous communication. As a result, this altered state of consciousness in cyberspace tends to shift or destabilize self-boundary. The distinction between inner-me and outer-other is not as clear. The person shifts to what psychoanalytic theory calls "primary process thinking" in which boundaries between self and other representations become more diffuse, and thinking becomes more subjective and emotion-centered. Within the transitional space of online communication, the psyches of self and other feel like they might be overlapping. We allow the hidden self to surface because we no longer experience it as a purely inner self; but at the same time we also sense, sometimes vaguely and sometimes distinctly, the intrusion of an unknown other into our private world, which results in suspicion, anxiety, and the need to defend our exposed and vulnerable intrapsychic territory.

No doubt, there are important individual differences in how people shift along the inhibition/disinhibition continuum. The effect of inhibition or disinhibition might be weak or strong, depending on the person and the situation. People might experience small or wide oscillations between the two polarities. Some might be more susceptible to inhibition than to disinhibition, or vice versa. Studying what is revealed or hidden about people within the wide range of online environments can become a laboratory for understanding the subtle dynamics of the self.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Cyberspace as a psychological space
Identity management in cyberspace
The Internet Regression
The basic psychological features of cyberspace
Transference to one's computer and cyberspace
The Bad Boys of Cyberspace
Conflict in Cyberspace: How to resolve conflict online

The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space
in Multimedia Chat Communities

A Study of The Palace

Visual Chat	Types of Avatars	Bigger is Not Better
Prop Evolution	Taking It Personal	Avatar Collections
Visual Social Grease	Aberrant Av Behavior	It's Not Just Wallpaper
Let's Get Physical	Inside Your Av, or Out	What Lies Ahead

Visual chat is a simple way to describe them, although they have gone by a variety of other names, such as multimedia chat, GMUKS (graphical multi-user konversations), and "habitats," a term coined by Randy Farmer, the first to invent them. They are something of a cross between a MOO and a traditional chat room. As social environments, they are unique in that they are graphical. Rather than limiting users to text-only communications, as in most chat rooms, multimedia programs add a visual dimension that creates the illusion of movement, space, and physicality. It allows people to express their identity VISUALLY, rather than just through written words. The result is a whole new realm for self-expression and social interaction with subtleties and complexities not seen in text-only chat rooms.

One excellent example of a multimedia environment is the client/server program called the "Palace." There are basically two visual components to this environment. The first is the backdrop or "room" in which people interact with each other. There are hundreds of Palace sites located across the internet, many with their own unique graphical themes for the collection of rooms that make up the site (e.g., a bowling alley, a futuristic Cybertown, a haunted house, etc.). The oldest and one of the most populated sites is the "Main Mansion" (or simply "Main") which has consisted of approximately 30 rooms, including a bar, a game room, bedrooms, a study, a beach, a moor, and several surrealistic scenes, such as the orbit of an alien planet and an underground cave that looks like Hades. Users can move freely within and between the rooms. Like characters in comic strips, you communicate with others via typed text that appears in balloons that pop out from your head or body.

Head? Body? This is the second visual feature of Palace: "avatars" or "props." Although these words often are used interchangeably, there is a slight distinction in the minds' of some users. Avatars refer to pictures, drawings, or icons that users choose to represent themselves. Props are objects that users may add to their avatars (say, a hat or cigar) or place into the Palace room or give to another person (say, a glass of beer or a bouquet of flowers). In this article, I will use the terms interchangeably.

Inspired by Scott McCloud's concept of "masking" in comics, Jim Bumgardner, the creator of Palace, believed that avatars enable people to maintain partial anonymity - which allows them to loosen up a bit. It's like going to a masquerade party. Seated behind their masks, people feel more free to say and do what they please. No doubt, the avatar-driven lifestyle at the Palace sets up a self-selection process that determines which users decide to stay, and in some cases almost LIVE there. People who love graphics - and especially those who love costumes and masks - often make Palace their home away from home.

This anonymity is very different than that found in text-only chat environments, where only the name you have chosen publicizes your online identity. At the Palace, you also have a costume. Wearing a costume at a real-life party does indeed filter out many of the physical features of your identity. You are somewhat "anonymous." But the costume also symbolically highlights aspects of who you are. It amplifies one of your interests, some facet of your personality or lifestyle, or something you wish for. As we will see, the same is true of avatars in a multimedia community.

In this chapter, I will focus mostly on avatars at the Main Mansion Palace site which is maintained by Electric Communities ("EC"), the company that now owns and develops the Palace software. However, much of this discussion applies to avatars at many other sites and to multimedia chat communities in general.

Types of Avatars

"Avs," as Palace members affectionately call them, fall into two overall categories. The first are the standard set of "smileys" that come with the Palace program . Inspired by ASCII smileys, these faces are available to all users. They come in a set that displays basic human emotions and behavioral signals - happy, sad, angry, winking, sleeping/bored, blushing, head-nodding, head-shaking. The user also can change the color of the face or add to it one or more props, such as hats, wigs, scarfs, devil horns, a halo, a glass of beer, a bicycle, etc. Because the faces and props can be mixed and matched, users have at their disposal an almost infinite array of combinations to express themselves. Want to drink a beer and smile? Do it! Want to poke at someone who irritates you. Put on that frown and pitchfork!
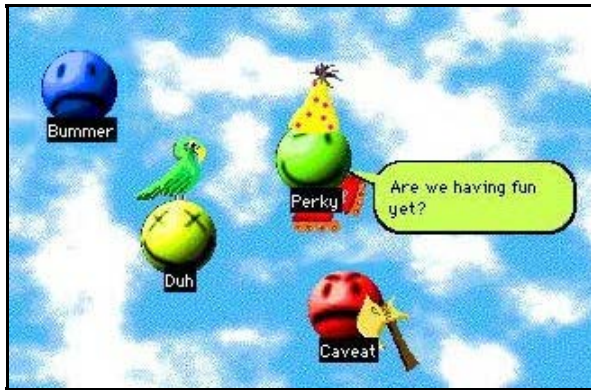
The Standard Palace Smileys and Props

The various colors, facial expressions, and accessories for the standard smiley avatars give users a wide range to express themselves. Yet most members prefer to create their own custom avatars. The smileys are associated with newbies because these unregistered users do not have the ability to create custom avatars.

As such, the standard set of avs are designed very cleverly and offer a wide range of behavioral and emotional expression. Because you quickly can shift among a variety of facial gestures to convey your emotional state, one member, Heyoka, told me these smileys are her avatars of choice. She is the exception rather than the rule. Most longstanding members of Palace rarely use them. In fact, some of them HATE the smileys. "They're dorky," one member told me, "I wouldn't be caught dead wearing those tennis balls."

On one level, his perception is inaccurate because the standard smileys and props are quite clever and artistic. On another level, though, he quite accurately touches on a pervasive attitude among many Palace members. The standard avs are associated with newbies, whom some consider a lower class in the Palace population. They are fresh arrivals who do not understand the Palace culture and have not yet established their identity and status in it. In the early days of Palace, new users who had not registered their software (i.e., paid for it) were restricted to using only the standard avs and props. They did not have the power create their OWN customized avatars, which is tantamount to establishing your own unique identity among a horde of avatars. Even for users who have that power, failing to create and display your own personal avs is taken as a sign that you don't know how to. The bottom line: to wear a standard smiley is to look like a newbie.

This leads to the second major category of avatars - those created by the members themselves. This is the key to what is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the Palace. Visually, you can be anything you want. Only your graphics skills and imagination limit you. Early in the development of Palace, Bumgardner noticed that people highly preferred the custom faces over the more anonymous smileys. In cyberspace, most people don't want to be totally anonymous. But they DO like control over how their identity is expressed.... They like it a lot. Hang out at the Palace for any length of time and a seemingly endless parade of avs of all shapes, colors, and styles pass before your eyes. Visit the Palace everyday, and within a few weeks your prop file (where the client program automatically stores any new image it encounters) can blossom to 10, 20, 30 megs (fortunately, there is an option to purge this file).

What kinds of avatars do members create for themselves? Some are pictures or icons borrowed from internet archives, scanned from hardcopy, or taken from other digital sources. Users might edit or combine these pictures according to their particular tastes. Some artistic members create props from scratch, although this is a fairly rare - and envious - skill. The technical and artistic ability one demonstrates through personal avs is an important source of self-esteem and social status.

We social scientists love to categorize the phenomena we study. So allow me to indulge my professional inclinations. One way to categorize avs would be to use well-known personality types as a guideline - for example, McWilliams (1994) system for psychoanalytic diagnosis. Although these types described by McWilliams are for clinical diagnosis, when translated to a non-pathological dimension, they also are very useful in categorizing "normal" personalities. The theme, characteristics, or interpersonal impact of an avatar may be closely associated with one of these specific types.

narcissistic - themes of power, status, perfection, grandiosity; draws for admiration and praise; feelings of being "special" and "privileged"

schizoid - themes of interpersonal detachment and indifference, perhaps combined with evidence of abstract or intellectual thinking; little evidence of warmth and tenderness; the "loner" themes

paranoid - distrust, isolation, hypervigilance, blaming or finding fault with others; cold, humorless, argumentative

depressive - gloom, darkness, loss, low self-esteeem

manic - energtic, grandiose, impulsive

masochistic - self-destructive, themes revolving around the "bad self" or "woe is me"

obsessive/compulsive - seriouis, formal; themes of control and perfection; shows evidence of a concern about details and rules

psychopathic - antisocial, violates rules; little evidence of shame or guilt; takes advantage of others; possible superficial friendliness or charm

histrionic - attention-seeking and seductive in flavor, dramatic, emotional, vain; themes involving dependency

schizotypal - themes of being aloof, indifferent; evidence of magical thinking or superstitious beliefs; peculiar characteristics

Another simpler approach to categorizing avatars would be to group them according to more general visual types. Here I'll outline several different categories of custom avatars. By no means is this list definitive or exhaustive. There are many ways to slice a pie. I've chosen these categories partly because some of them are fairly obvious, and partly because each one conveys interesting psychological and social themes - themes that, in some cases, overlap with the personality types described above.

Animal Avatars

Animal avatars are some of the most popular at the Palace. Some people come as their pets. Because animals symbolize certain traits or attributes in myth as well as popular culture (e.g., strength, loyalty, grace, independence, cunning, transcendence), the animal chosen for an avatar probably bears psychological significance to the person - perhaps representing some real aspect of his or her identity, or some characteristic admired by the person. Thinking in the tradition of the Native American, we might even regard an animal avatar as being an individuals "totem" - i.e., a symbol of one's essential nature or potential.

Cartoon Avatars

When Bumgardner designed the Palace, he specifically choose a "cartoony" atmosphere. For example, the balloons that pop out from one's head when speaking is a carry over from the world of comic strips. Bumgardner felt that people would readily identify with this atmosphere and find it intuitively easy to use. The cartoony ambience also fosters a playful regression among users. Bumgardner wanted people to feel like they were "getting away with something" - which surely is a familiar theme in comic strip plots. As a result, it's no surprise that cartoon props proliferate at the Palace. While younger users (adolescents) may be more inclined to don cartoon costumes, older members frequently use them as well. The psychological significance of the cartoon character probably affects the choice made by the user. People select characters with whom they identify or admire. Some cartoon characters have very specific cultural significance and may even represent archetypal personality types (e.g., Bugs Bunny as the confident trickster; Aladdin's genie as the powerful but benevolent friend). Rather than relying on childhood cartoon figures, some adults wear cartoon avs of a more sophisticated style - some of these classified as "anime." The psychological tone of these avs tend to be more seductive, whimsical, or mysterious.
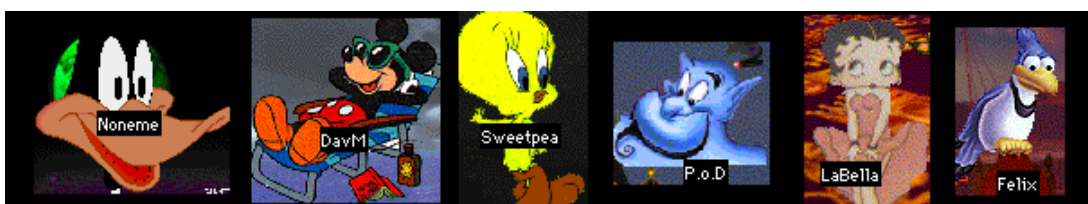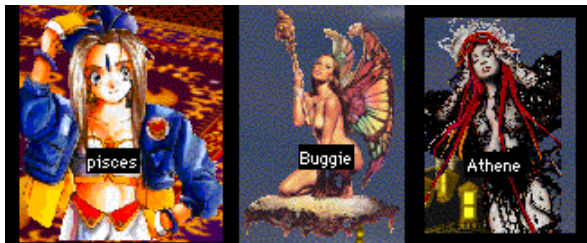
Celebrity Avatars

Celebrity avatars tend to follow trends in popular culture. And like items in popular culture, they may quickly become epidemic and then disappear. There may be a variety of motives behind the use of these avs. People may use them to express personality traits or social issues that are associated with the celebrity's image (sensuality, intelligence, power, corruption, rebellion, etc.). The user may identify with, desire, or be poking fun at these attributes. They may hope to bolster their self-esteem and identity by establishing their connection to the celebrity. They may simply wish to display a knowledge of current events in pop culture. Celebrity avs also advertise one's specific interests in entertainment in order to find like-minded users: "Hey, I like Seinfeld! Anyone else out there like Seinfeld?"

Evil Avatars

Everyone has a dark or "evil" side to his or her personality. The definition of "evil" varies from person to person, although usually it has something to do with malicious, aggressive fantasies and/or feelings of guilt. Note how many Halloween costumes fit this category. As a form of sublimation, evil costumes allow people to safely - and even creatively - express their dark side. While some members may wear an evil av as their facade for the evening (which may reflect their mood at the time), others may "flash" it as a momentary cue to others. Mess with wizards, for example, and they may flash their evil av as a warning that they're getting annoyed and may pin, gag, or kill you. On one occasion, I witnessed a male come on to an attractive female member wearing a real face prop. When her attempts to brush him off failed, she flashed a nefarious looking skull at him. He quickly backed off. Some people may use evil or aggressive avatars as a way (consciously or unconsciously) to alienate or "put off" other people. This might indicate their anxiety about intimacy and being vulnerable.
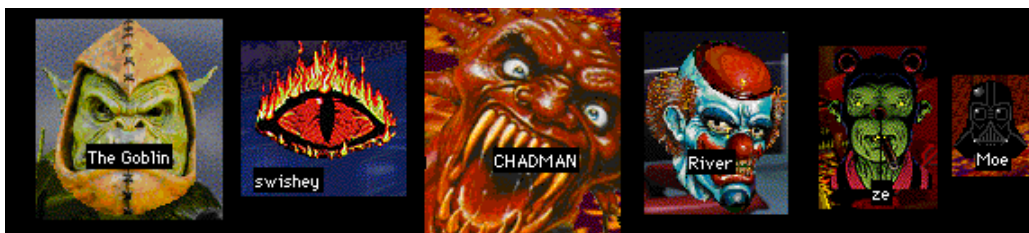
Real Face Avatars

Most users do not use pictures of themselves as their primary avatars. People prefer the partial anonymity of expressing only limited aspects of their personality through imaginative props. Or they simply enjoy the creative fun of experimenting with new identities through their avs. In more rare cases, members find the use of real face avs to be an uncomfortable, dissociative experience. "I have a picture of myself in the prop file but I really don't like to use it any longer than it takes for me to show it to a new friend," said River, a wizard. "It is a little disturbing to sit here at home and see myself speaking in cartoon balloons in a non-reality. Whew!!!!"

When users do present pictures of their real faces, it may be a gesture of honesty and/or intimacy - a sign of friendship, or even romance. Showing one's real face av can be a very poignant experience. Several members have described to me encounters when an intimate conversation culminated in their companion showing a picture of themselves. "That moment will stay with me for a long time to come," one member stated, "The value I placed on that particular moment was, friendship, trust, a sense of oneness." This same member described how there seems to be a pattern when an entire group feels compelled to use their real faces - what he called "face

nite." For that period of time, the intimacy and friendship level reaches a point where people wish to step out of their masks and out of their anonymity. They want be as "real" as possible.

Some members develop an entire set of real face avatars. Cleo, for example, designed each different one to convey a specific interpersonal message, such as "Hi!", "I'm sleeping" (a.k.a. BRB), and "Gimme Kiss."
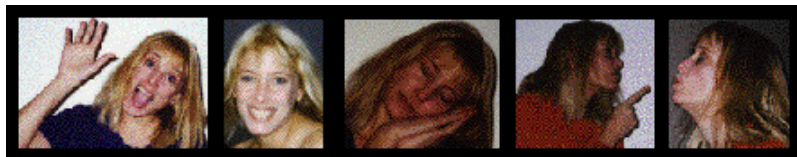
Idiosyncratic Avatars

These avatars become strongly associated with a specific member - almost as if it is that person's trademark. In some cases the avatar may be highly unusual or creative. Sometimes it is quite simple. Yet its association to the particular user is so strong that others experience it uniquely as that person. While trading props is a common practice, the owner of an idiosyncratic av rarely gives it away. It would be like giving one's identity to someone else to use. Conscientious members also don't "steal" (i.e., screen capture) an idiosyncratic av and use it as their own. They respect its integrity. If someone does steal and attempts to wear an idio av, they must be willing to put up with criticism by the friends of the owner.

Positional Avatars

These avatars are designed by the member to be placed into specific positions within the Palace rooms. The avatar may be created for a certain type of environment (e.g., a sky or water avatar), or may be designed specifically for a single room or even a very specific spot within a room (e.g., a favorite chair). These avatars illustrate how the graphics of the Palace rooms are NOT simply "background" that have little impact on behavior. Some members are exquisitely sensitive to the graphical environment. Creating props to match and interact with the features of the room is a highly creative activity. Such avatars also are a sign of status. By displaying them, the member is demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of the Palace environment as well as technical know-how in prop editing.
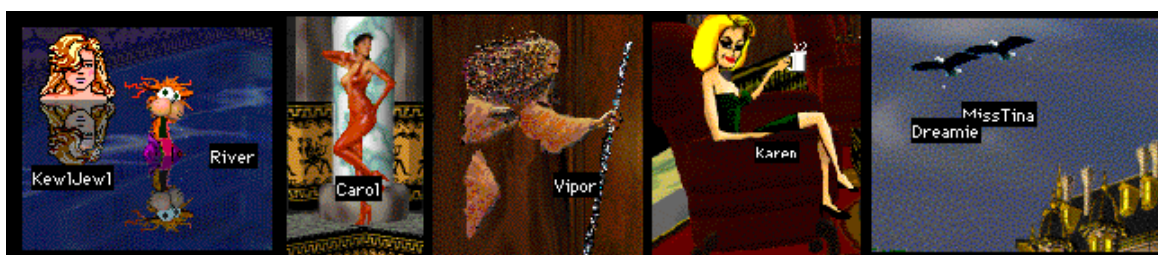
Power Avatars

Power avatars are symbols of... well... power. Many, if not all, people have conscious or unconscious fantasies of omnipotence. Who wouldn't want strength and invulnerability? These types of avs seem to be most common among male adolescent users. In some cases the power theme is benign. Sometimes not, which may be a variation of the "evil" avatar. Because competition invariably accompanies displays of power, members seem to vie with each other in creating the most "awesome" power av. This competition is probably more common among the adolescent users. Members who persistantly display power avs may be troubled by underlying feelings of helplessness and insecurity.

Seductive Avatars

Frontal nudity, including uncovered breasts, are not permitted at the Palace. Offenders first are warned by wizards, prop-gagged (forced into the standard smiley), and, if necessary, disconnected from the server. Adapting to these house rules, some users create avatars of partially naked or scantily clothed figures. Mischievious members sometimes push the envelope by wearing avs that test the limits and ambiguities of the rules. Supreme court justices have had a hard time defining what is pornographic, so the task has been no easier for the officials who run the EC sites. Even though the rules have become very specific about what body parts can and cannot be visible in an av, borderline cases always pop up (see The Bad Boys of Cyberspace).

Female seductive avatars tend to be more common than male - although these female avs sometimes are "manned" by male users (see Male Gender-Switching in Cyberspace) . In fact, the general impression among members is that males are more likely to prop up as females, especially seductive females, than women dressing up as males.

Members usually wear seductive avs to draw attention to themselves. This works very well. Male users, especially guests, quickly flock to a sexy female form. The owner may be interested in harmless flirting, or (less frequently) be advertising his or her availability for cybersex. I heard one story about someone's office friend who, when frustrated on the job, says "I need a Palace break" He then signs onto the Palace dressed as a sexy female and lures guys into bedrooms. Being sexy not only gets you attention. It also gives you power and control over others.

Some people wearing seductive avs wish to be admired as an attractive, sexy individual, without necessarily being interested in flirting or cybersex. "I have some very sexy stuff given to me by friends (all men!)," said one female member. "What do they say about me? Not quite sure, except that I would love to be younger and more beautiful and some of my avatars are that indeed."

The competition in creating and displaying props is especially visible for seductive avatars. "It's interesting how some of the women at the Palace are getting into more and more elaborate sexy props. Almost as if it's a contest," noted one member. "But then, some of the guys too are into 'comparing' props!" For men, the competition usually involves power props, rather than seductive ones. As one member stated, "the stag with the biggest rack thing, ey?"

A seductive, sexy, or simply "attractive" avatar can have a powerful impact on other members. One member described how his prop of a cartoon animal didn't seem to be getting him much attention from females. Most of them wouldn't talk to him. Curious about whether he could alter this situation, he searched the net and found a picture of Brad Pitt which he turned into a prop. The result?... Lots of attention. If he happened to be wearing his cartoon prop and found that he was being ignored by a woman, he would move to another room, switch to Brad Pitt, and then return. Or he would switch to Pitt right in front of her. Nine times out of ten, he said, the woman would strike up a conversation with him even if he hadn't said a word. He even established a relationship with someone who eventually wanted to meet him face-to-face. "The pic got her attention," he concluded, "but in the end it was me that won her over." The curious thing about this phenomenon is that members KNOW that people are not their avatars. Just because a prop is pretty to look at doesn't mean that the user is. Nevertheless, that seductive av has tremendous drawing power. Perhaps some people enjoy the illusion of interacting with (and hopefully winning over) an attractive person. Perhaps, as many critics of contemporary culture claim, some people can't resist the temptation of superficial appearances, despite knowing better. Or perhaps some people are just curious, "Who *IS* that person using that sexy av?"

Other members may display seductive avs simply to be admired for their skill in knowing how to create a seductive av. Because the Palace often feels like an ongoing party where people are going to flirt, playfully compete, vie for attention, and strut their stuff, it is almost a prerequisite that every experienced member owns a seductive av of some type. "Getting away with something" is an intrinsic component of the Palace culture, as Bumgardner intended. Having at least one seductive av is a cultural must.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. As one member said, "I don't really think that sexy type props are for me, just wouldn't be a true representation of what I'm about."

Other Avatars

Whenever we social scientists go about categorizing things, we always end up with a miscellaneous or "other" category. There is such a wide variety of avatars that it's impossible to neatly classify them all. The same is true of personality styles (which is the origin of the prop). Here let me briefly mention just a few other types of avatars.

Odd/shocking avatars are unusual, strange, and sometimes downright bizarre pictures - perhaps revealing people who like to surprise, goof on, or even startle and outrage others. Truly bizarre pictures might make you wonder about the person's grasp of social appropriateness, or even their mental health. Such very unusual avs are most popular among adolescents - for whom extreme behavior is a way to express independence and individuality, and to test the limits.

Abstract avatars may be used by people who enjoy enjoy symmetry, are good (non-verbal) conceptual thinkers, and/or are inclined towards visual artistic endeavors.

Billboard avatars are announcements of some sort - political, philosophical, personal. They are used by those who have something to say and are not reluctant to display their thoughts in a commercialized type format.

Lifestyle avatars, which are quite common and varied, depict some significant aspect of a person's life - usually something to do with occupation, hobby, or personal habit. It may be a way to attract like-minded individuals.

Matching avatars are designed to accompany each other and indicate the connection or bonding between the pair of members. Considerable imaginative and technical skills may go into creating such avatars.

Clan avatars - are worn by members of the same social group, some might even say "gang." These avs tend to be similar in basic design with slight variations to differentiate each one from the others. As such, each user announces his/her allegiance to the clan by adopting its collective visual appearance, while also maintaining some measure of individuality. It reminds me of the songs in some bird species. The species identifies itself and its members by a basic template that serves as the collective song. Yet each individual bird adds a small unique variation to that template in order to signify its individuality. Clan avs are found almost exclusively among adolescents for whom belonging to a peer group - and conforming to its standards - is a developmental hallmark.

Animated avatars contain motion, such as an eye tearing, a bird flying, or a flag waving. By visually diplaying "behavior" they can express a wide and subtle range of psychological meaning. Tapping a finger, blinking one's eyes, banging one's head against the wall - there are infinite expressive possibilties. The motion usually is cyclical and repetitious, which - depending on the type of avatar - may convey a feeling of persistance, determination, mindlessness, or rhythmic peacefulness.
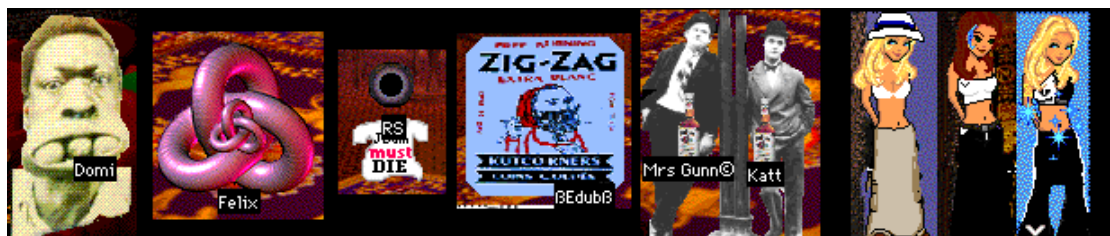
Bigger is Not Better

The default size for an avatar is about 40x40 pixels. That's about as big as your average computer icon. When members create their first avatar, it's usually this size. They're pretty happy with their accomplishment, until they realize that other people have much BIGGER props. It takes a bit more know-how to master the technique of building large avs. Some members quickly get into a competitive feeling about whose is biggest - although the contest quickly ends at about 130x130 pixels, which is the technical limit.

Are there significant psychological differences in who uses big and small props? People who like power avs tend to like big avs, especially big power avs. People may rely on prop size to gain attention and admiration. I've heard some members state that younger users, especially male adolescents, like large props, while women tend to wear smaller props in general than men. These hypotheses certainly are amenable to quantitative research.

The general consensus among Palatians is that "bigger is not better." Big avs sometimes are considered impolite. They take up a lot of precious space in a crowded room. They're a bit ostentatious. What matters more than size is the quality and style of your avatar. What matters is how you apply it to express yourself. "It's not the size of the prop, but how you use it."

Prop Evolution

Bumgardner designed the Palace not as a game with imposed plots and rules, but as a open social environment in which users would "make of it what they will." As a result, the culture is changing and evolving according to the psychological needs of the population. Because members have most control over their props, these elements are probably incisive visual signs of the transitory ebb and flow, and overall developmental path, of Palace life.

In my e-mail interviews with Bumgardner, he compared the history of props to biological evolution:

> "This last week I read "Naturalist" a memoir by the biologist Edward O. Wilson, and a fine piece of writing. My intent was to read something completely unrelated to the Palace, to take my mind off it, but I found Wilson's descriptions of island ecologies particularly relevant, as it turned out. In some ways one can compare Props to Plumage. More interesting, attractive (or I might even say "powerful") props tend to propagate, while less interesting, ugly ones don't. Some props have had incredible staying power - were created a long time ago and are still around, while others have had relatively short cycles. In addition there has been a marked evolution in the quality and size of props. A typical scene in Harry's bar this evening is quite different from a typical scene two months ago. You see more large elaborate props, and more sexy props. There was a big influx of sexy lingerie-clad female props at the Valentine's party and interestingly those have continued. Where competitive principles come in is that the overall quality of the props has been rising with time, as people keep up with the Joneses, and teach other how to make better looking props."

The 1996 Valentine's Day Party

The Valentine's Day Party was a big event at the Palace. Some members specifically created props for the ocassion. Note the mixture of real face and cartoon avatars. Quite a few seductive props appeared for the first time that evening, and continued to proliferate afterwards. BTW, my avatar is a picture of Rudolph Valentino.

Surely, there is a "survival of the fittest" among props. Those with real staying power are those that best capture universal human themes - such as sex, aggression, power, and spirituality. Other long-lasting props are those specifically adapted to the Palace environment (e.g., "be right back" and "I survived the lag" signs), and those that are icons of contemporary culture (e.g., cans of Spam,

Winnie the Poo, the Three Stooges). Carrying the biological analogy even further, Bumgardner suggested that the categories may be more specific than outlined previously in this article. For example - cartoon animals, cars, Japanese anime women. Those which are not "fit" eventually disappear into extinction. Those that ARE fit survive, develop, become more refined. The overall trend towards more variety and subtlety in props (not unlike biological evolution) points to a basic human need that Palace successfully satisfies - the need to pursue variety, to push the envelop, to advance.

This diversity is boosted by the need for personal expression of an individual's identity. The most fit types of props survive, but people also want and need to be unique - at least this is true of American culture. As Sammy Davis might have said, "I gotta be me." People prefer not to wear the exact avs that other people are wearing. The results are avatars that do not fall into the usual categories or species types and an almost infinite variety of subtle differences within the categories. This doesn't necessarily mean that avs become more complex or elaborate over time. While this trend does tend to enhance individuality and uniqueness, avatar complexity can get unwieldy, inefficient, overly ostentatious. A push towards elegant simplicity counterbalances the quest for complexity, resulting in developmental ebbs and flows of avatar intricacy.

A clear exception to this basic rule about avatar individuality are the clan props. Members sacrifice the quest for a totally unique visual appearance in order to belong to the group. Clan props are most likely to develop among adolescents. They also will tend to evolve in a large, changing population where some users will attempt to gain status, influence, and identity by joining an established group, rather than by forging ahead on one's own.

Taking It Personal

Like masks of any kind, avatars hide and reveal at the same time. Behind it, people can conceal some personal things about themselves, but the av also selectively amplifies other aspects of their personalities. It may reveal something about the member that otherwise is not immediately obvious - maybe not even obvious if you met that person in real life. Maybe not even obvious to the owners themselves. What users express in their props is not always a conscious choice. Sometimes it's unconscious. People may simply say that they are wearing a particular av because "I like it." When asked, they're not sure what it says about them. But other people may know.

On a few occasions at the Palace I suggested to the group that we play a prop game. The game goes like this. One at a time, people take turns standing before the group and trying on a few of their favorite avatars. Free associating to the image, the rest of us toss out ideas about how the prop looks, its psychological connotations, its possible symbolisms. The question then becomes - does this say something about the owner? More often than not, it does. The avatar is like a Rorschach inkblot, or the Draw-a-House/Person/Tree Test, or any work of art. It is selected from personal imagination. Consciously or unconsciously, people condense a multitude of meaning into it. They project their personality into it - who they are, who they wish to be, what they fear, what moves them. In the prop game, by free-associating, the other members help unpack all the feelings and meanings condensed into the avatar. It's very much like interpreting dreams. Of course, the other members may be projecting their "own stuff" into the ideas that they toss out about a fellow Palatian's avatars. But that's OK. In fact, it says something about how they are perceiving and reacting towards their fellow Palatian. It's what psychoanalysts call "transference."

People seem drawn to the prop game, probably for the same reasons that they are attracted to Palace as the haven of avatars. The Palace can be an entertaining, self-exploratory arena for expressing one's ideas, feelings, and creativity. It encourages people to experiment with new identities - all in a highly visual fashion. Casually, and intuitively, people are playing the "prop game" all the time as they socialize at the Palace. They display their different avatars and people give them feedback about it. In the best of circumstances, one learns something about oneself as well as others. It feels like "playing," and indeed it is. Playing is just another way to explore identity.

There is a serious side to playing. You don't steal someone else's toys. One sure sign of how attached members get to their avatars is their reaction when someone tries to "steal" one - especially if it's an idiosyncratic avatar, one that you put a lot of work into, or your "primary" or "home" avatar that you spend most of your time wearing. Your identity is tightly packed into these precious nuggets. That's how people recognize you as unique. When someone takes it with a screen capture and then wears it (which only takes a few minutes), they are stealing a piece of your identity, stealing your individuality.

One evening when I entered Harry's Bar, the social center of the Main Mansion site, I immediately was warned by a friend, "Watch out! Nightmare is stealing props." I quickly noticed that all of the people I knew were wearing the generic smiley faces rather than their favorite avatars. Except Nightmare. He wore River's idiosyncratic avatar, which, for a second, disoriented me, then made me angry. I switched off my own primary avatar, the gray owl, and automatically defaulted to the generic smiley. But it was too late. Nightmare had already captured my owl and put it on. I added my annoyance to those of others in the room. We told Nightmare this was unacceptable behavior, that people took their avs seriously, that what he was doing amounted to stealing. Our concern didn't seem to have too much of an impact on him. Adding insult to injury, he duplicated my owl and spread copies of it all around the room. With the "clean" command, I erased all the loose owl props, but later on I found others in the Armory. I indeed felt that something important had been snatched cavalierly from me - that my visual territory, my IDENTITY had been violated.

Not all people who take others' props are attempting to aggressively attack, manipulate, or steal someone else's sense of self. Sometimes it's just a naive mistake. If you explain to the person how it's a faux pas, they usually will take your av off with an apology. Or a friend may take and put on your prop as a goof (maybe they indeed admire or want something from you), which usually is

accepted by all in the spirit of fun.

One member told me the story of a friend who tried to change her "image" (prop) after her primary avatar had been copied. She could barely bring herself to do it. After a week or so of trying different themes and styles, she gave up. Eventually, she tried again and did create some new (idiosyncratic) props that built on her original theme.

Members who become prop design experts are especially sensitive to the themes of personal expression in their artwork. They like to cultivate their own personal style of avatars. This style makes them one of a kind. It also provides some continuity to their identity and recognition by others, even though they may be switching avatars. It is their "style" that is recognized by others. For one specialist, it may be fantasy anime figures. For another, who lives in Alaska, it may be themes revolving around "cold." One prop expert, an artist who builds her own avatars from scratch, commented on how she works within specific "parameters" that will make her stand out. "I know with my art, if you don't have 'gimmicks' you can go unnoticed or easily copied." She also noticed similar tendencies in other members. "When someone stumbles upon those self-induced parameters that get them noticed, they invariably stick with that persona and build on it."

The word "avatar" means "incarnation" or "manifestation." It is an appropriate choice to describe the icons people use to visually represent the facets of their identity. A more specific definition, from Hindu mythology, is the incarnation of a god. Perhaps, unconsciously, people take their avs seriously because it indeed feels like a divine product. To place oneself into a form created from one's own imagination is the essence of creativity. It's God-like.

Avatar Collections (That's Me All Over)

We all have different sides to our identity. Social psychologists would call them our "social roles" that surface in the variety of situations and relationships that make up our lives. Psychoanalysts would describe them as the constellation of "introjects," "internalizations," and "identifications" that comprises our intrapsychic world. On a daily basis, we juggle and shift between several rather distinct selves, sometimes without being fully aware that we are doing it. How, when, and why these different facets of our identity manifest themselves is the story of our lives. In the GMUKs of cyberspace, you can tell a lot about people by examining their collection of avatars and how they use them. Each avatar reflects a distinct aspect of the individual's personality and lifestyle - whether it is a mood, an interest pattern, a social role, one's attitudes and values, or a wished-for state of being. During my research on the Palace, I've often thought about how fascinating it would be to examine a member's whole collection, or at least his or her favorite avatars (since some members have hundreds!). Doing such an analysis would be a very personal affair, so I have hesitated to ask anyone to volunteer. Instead, I will describe here a few of the avatars in my own collection.

Gray owl - "AsKi" is my primary or "home" avatar. I spend the large majority of my time wearing this icon. I specifically chose this picture for several reasons. It is non-threatening. I did not hide the fact that I was doing research on the Palace in addition to socializing there, so I wanted to appear as benign as possible. The fact that it is a small prop adds to its innocuous quality, as well as makes it very portable and easy to fit into even a crowded room. An owl also is observant, non-intrusive, and "wise" - characteristics that I hoped would positively flavor people's reactions to me (and that I'd like to claim as my qualities). Also, the gender of the figure is unclear. My intention here was to allow other members initially to perceive AsKi as male or female according to their own projections (although I always revealed my gender when asked). Curiously, as I moved about the rooms of the Palace, I noticed myself looking for comfortable perches for my owl. Often I found myself sitting above and on the outside of a circle of people socializing - perhaps on a chair near the door, or on a picture frame on the wall. Was I acting like a bit of an outsider - observant, quiet, benign... maybe a bit distant? I would be lying if I said these qualities did not apply to me in "real" life. Many times I would have to catch myself falling back into this detached "observer" (lurker) mode. I didn't JUST want to do research. I wanted to get down, socialize, and have fun too.
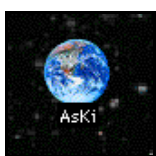
The Earth - This is next in line as my most frequently used avatar. It's a positional prop. Several of the rooms at the main Palace site (the Mansion) are actually outdoor scenes (a beach, the Moor, the front yard of the Palace, etc.). In these locales I place myself into the sky. I was inspired to create this avatar when I first visited Nrutas - an outer space scene where computer geeks (I use the term affectionately) like to hang out. The first time I sat silently in the Nrutas sky, a new member arrived and said to a fellow Palatian, "I don't remember that Earth being there in the background gif? Is that new?" Perhaps this says something about my personality. Perhaps I like to blend in. I *am* ecology minded, like to wear Earth tone clothes, am interested in spirituality, love outer space fiction (a Star Trek fan, of course), and, as a kid, very much wanted to become an astronaut. All of this, and probably more, is condensed into that image. This avatar reminds me of the final scene of 2001: A Space Odyssey, when the "Star Child" returns to Earth.

James Taylor - This picture of James Taylor dancing with his guitar is from his "New Moon Shine" album. When I'm in my party/"let's get down" mood I'll dance this figure across the carpet in Harry's Bar. Even quiet, reserved people like to let their exhibitionist side out once in a while. This also is a good example of a "Wannbe Prop." I play guitar and piano, but am average at it. If I magically could inherit anyone's musical abilities, it would be JT. I think everyone has a Wannabe Prop of some kind in their collection. A humanistic psychologist might say that it is an icon showing their path towards self-actualization. Using this prop also drove home for me the fact that avatars are powerful signposts for signaling to and attracting like-minded people. If not for this prop, I probably would not have connected to several other Palatians who also are JT fans.
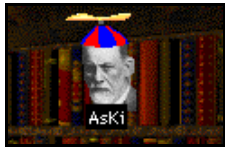
Freud - As a psychologist, I've always been interested in psychoanalytic theory (though I warn my students not to take any one theory too seriously... hence the beanie). I sometimes jokingly put on this avatar when people ask me questions about psychology, or if someone in the room, not knowing I'm a psychologist, says something to the group like "Maybe we should ask a shrink about that!" I enjoy psychology, and sometimes I enjoy making fun of it. On a few occasions I switched to this prop when obnoxious guests were harassing people in the room. As "Freud," I tried to find out why they were being so insulting in the hopes of either talking them down, or, if necessary, encouraging them to leave. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not.

Dressed to the Nines - This silhouette figure of a man dressed in a formal suit is a "flirting avatar." I've used it (on rare occasions, I might add) to approach women who seemed in the mood to flirt. It's my attempt to assume the persona of a sophisticated, debonair man-about-town. Another wannabe avatar? It also came in handy for those nights when everyone in the room was in the mood to dress formally.
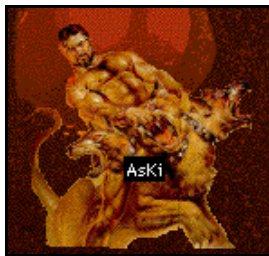
Hercules taming Cerberus - Let there be no mistake. This is a power prop. What could be more powerful than Hercules wrestling down the multi-headed dog who guards the gates of hell? Yet another wannabe prop? Power avatars, not surprisingly, tend to be big, and this is by far my largest. Some people are very impressed by it, others are put off by its size and aggressive quality. So I tend not to display it too often for fear of intruding on other people's personal space or offending their tastes. Technically, this was the most difficult prop I created. I had to dissect the original image into nine separate squares and then reassemble them in the Palace prop editor. As such, it was my competitive attempt to demonstrate that I knew how to make big props.

Other positional avs - I love to create avs that can be placed into specific spots in specific rooms. I selected the props to the right - the leopard's face, the wolf howling by the moon, and the lightning bolt - because they have a black background and therefore blend perfectly into dark doorways. Interacting with the Palace environment is fun for me. Perhaps this symbolically indicates how I like to "fit in." Sometimes, when I'm feeling left out of a conversation in the room, I'll play with this props in the background. It usually draws attention to me and brings me back into the conversation.
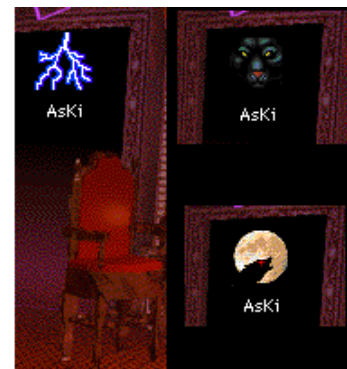
When we compare different people's avatar collections, some general patterns emerge. Many people have persona that are seductive, powerful, formal/sophisticated, silly/playful, and artistic/poetic. These may represent universal or archetypal sectors of personality. Most people cherish at least one original ("old") avatar because it represents their birth identity in the Palace community. It's like an old, reliable friend. Almost everyone has a primary, all-purpose av that they use most of the time. It's the familiar home base, the image they feel most identified with and most comfortable wearing. Often it's one of those original, birth avatars. But sometimes it's a relatively new one. Active members are always creating new avs. One's collection is a balance of new and old persona, which reflects the balance between experimenting with new identities and holding onto the familiar, stable aspects of self. The size and variations in one's collection probably reflects the extent to which the person explores and experiments with personal identity. Many people have a secret avatar that they use when they don't want others to know who they are, as well as an avatar they wear when they're with friends - an appearance that readily identifies them to their friends, often that birth or primary avatar. Curiously, many people have an av which they really like, but aren't sure why they like it. It is a conscious reminder of an unconscious aspect of identity.

Here's another av collection, by Nacey, along with her description of what they mean to her.

1912 get-up - I use this one mainly for my Titanic personal server with my friends. I'm known as Lady Concubine on there, and it is rather impressive to see when in a 1912 background like the Titanic. It doesn't go down too well in the Mansion or the like as I think people find it a bit unsettling somehow. Probably the 'what on earth do you think you are doing' face I'm pulling. I guess my friends on the Titanic chat know I'm not really like that, but having that av as a first impression isn't a good idea in a place like the Mansion. It's like going to a party in a suit and expecting people to feel comfortable around you even though they're in jeans and a t-shirt.

Xena, Warrior Princess - I wear these ones on the Xena: Warrior Palace Chat a lot, though the first more pouty one I wear at the Mansion too. Actually one guy was being an idiot and these came in handy. I put the pouty one on as soon as he started messing with me, then the second one and started pretending to stab him in the head with the sword bit. A bit violent I know but he soon wandered off after that. They're great power avs, except in Xena: Warrior Palace we're they have a totally different meaning (everyone wears Xena there). Not many people in the Xena chat wear the one with Xena going ballistic with the sword. It's more of a party av in Xena: Warrior Palace.

Cartoon I Drew of Me - This is most certainly a more flirtateous avatar. I wear this one around the younger people, and in the Mansion a lot. I drew it myself and I let people know it because I'm a real glutton for attention. It makes finding striking avatars hard. This one is a cute one, and of all the avatars I wear, this one tends to get the best response from people. People don't mind initiating conversation as much with me in this av. Totally different to when I'm in my other avs. I kinda drew this avatar in response to all the 'skater' avatars out there. I wanted something cartoony like those but none of them really suited me. Plus when I wore them I knew people would instantly assume I'm 14.
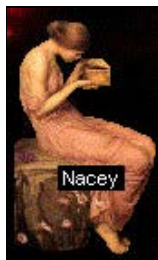
Pandora - This is from a Pre-Raphaelite painting (if I remember correctly) and when I saw it I instantly loved it. It's a bit arty, yet sweet, and it's a lot of fun. I pull it out after I get to know people in chatting. It's not a first impression avatar, rather a 'having some fun' av. Kinda like wearing Botacelli's 'Venus' except not as obvious and not as - well you're saying a lot about how you envision yourself if you're walking around wearing 'Venus' aren't you? It's good cause Pandora is sitting on something, and it looks really cool in a lot of rooms.

Olivia Newton John - I like this one a lot, I can't put my finger on why. It doesn't get that much of a response from people either, (as you can tell I like being noticed and/or talked to a lot). I made three Olivia Newton John avatars, and they're pretty cool. This one is the one I like the best. In the movie she's singing the last refrain of the main title song before disappearing off in a flash of light to Olympus (she's a muse). I'm a performer, so this is a real 'Look at MEEEE' kinda av. Also it's really 70's and being a great lover of all things 'genuinely retro' this avatar says a lot to me.

Visual Social Grease

By this point it should be obvious that props make interacting easier and more efficient by providing a visual means to express oneself. They are very useful communication tools. On the simplest level, they act as conversation pieces. If you can think of nothing else to say, express an interest in someone's prop. Talking about props is one of the most common topics of discussion at the Palace. It greases the social interaction, especially with people whom you are meeting for the first time. It's like discussing the weather - except people are more personally invested in their props than they are in whether it's rainy or sunny.

On a more complex level, changes in avatars convey changes in mood and intention, without the person necessarily having to speak (type). Many members have told me that what they are wearing affects how they behave, as well as influences how others will react to them. Wear a female seductive prop, or even just a pleasant looking female prop, and you will draw attention, whether you want it or not. If you're annoyed with someone and want to drive them away, put on that skull prop. One member said, "When I use my animated props" (props that show motion) "you can be sure I'm in a jovial mood." Another commented, "The ability to adjust a prop in any situation to meet the needs of the individual at that particular moment makes the Palace unique as compared to the rest of the cyber chat sites."

In some cases the prop is used in a very specific situation to convey a very specific meaning. One member described how he uses a prop of a man with his hand in the air as a "high-five" to greet one of his friends. "I also have a white dog with a stick and a bandera on the end that I use to signify my exit... packing it in for the nite, if you will. Some of the regulars note the avatar's presence and immediately say goodnight to me." The icon, he concluded, sometimes works much faster than key strokes.

What follows is a log excerpt illustrating some typical cyberspace flirting behavior - in this case facilitated and amplified by prop play. The key participants are SweetyPie, whose well-dressed female avatar is positioned in the sky at the Palace front gates, and AsKi (hey!... I'm allowed. It's participant-observation research!):

> SweetyPie: I look like a bride, I need a groom
> Misty: dont look here hahaha
> AsKi: (changes to avatar of a formally-dressed man and joins SweetyPie in the sky) Will you marry me, SweetyPie!
> SweetyPie: yes dear yes
> Misty: Wow...SP...a proposal online 5 mins..
> SweetyPie: my groom!
> Misty: thats power
> AsKi: (changes to prop of the earth) A match made in heaven!
> Misty: I will sing at the wedding
> SweetyPie: yes
> Misty: hahaha
> SweetyPie: He is now the world to me (changes to star-shaped prop)
> Misty: hahahaha
> AsKi: and you my shining star!
> SweetyPie: A BRAND NEW WORLD!!!!! (plays "kiss" sound)
> AsKi: (changes to a lips prop - plays "kiss" sound)
> SweetyPie: now he is all lips (plays "kiss" sound)
> SweetyPie: oh my groom
> AsKi: SweetyPie, we can't go on meeting like this, people will find out!
> Misty: swooning....
> SweetyPie: ahhh yes well what can we do, love is in the air
> SweetyPie: hahahaha
> AsKi: (changes to flying bird prop) you are the wind beneath my wings
> SweetyPie: lolol
> SweetyPie: awwww so cute
> AsKi: ah, shucks

Entire social events may revolve around specific themes that are highly amenable to avatar displays. Members may specifically create props for the celebration, as in a St. Patty's Day party or the historical Valentines Day party. At the Valentine's Party special visual events were planned, such as the Dating Game and the Props Contest and Showoff. The Dating Game was conducted similar to the TV show. In the screen capture below the "four dudes" on the left were competing for Rosy on the right, with Lovebot as the master of ceremonies. During the Props Contest and Showoff members took turns standing on a stage to display some of their best props. In the screen capture below, everyone present is showing off one of their "best" props. As good as these props are, avatars have become considerably more sophisticated since the party.

Some special theme gatherings, like a Hula Party, seem to pop up almost spontaneously, as if it was spontaneous theater. Showing off, trading, and talking about props is a big part of the festivity. I accidentally stumbled on this Hula Party one night while cruising the Palace. Note the use of theme specific avatars, props added to the background image, and painting onto the background - all as decorations to visually enliven the event. Although I didn't have any Hawaiian type props in my collection, several of the members generously gave me some of theirs. Here you can see me attempting to assemble the props onto my avatar. Once appropriately dressed, I changed my name to "TanakaOwl." Members often alter their names, as well as their props, to match the situation at hand.

On special occasions Jim Bumgardner entertained the community with his skills at creating visual effects. At the end of the Valentines he invited members up to Nrutas where he demonstrated some of his magic. Gathered in a circle, the members were turned to plain grey smiley icons, interconnected by lines of light, and "doubled" with another smiley appearing behind the original. The display was quite impressive. It also conveyed some underlying psychological, even mystical symbolism: (a) "deep down inside, we are all alike," (b) "we are all interconnected" (unity), and, (c) each of us has a double self - inner/outer, real/imagined, real/virtual. Thanks to the graphical touches provided by Jiim, the wizard "flash light" induction ceremony proved to be a fascinating blend of tradition and humor. All of these events were quite captivating, to a large extent because they were so visual. When the creator of another Palace site once asked me how he could draw people to his server, a few solutions seemed very obvious - prop contests, theme parties, and special visual events. These kinds of events now are springing up at Palace sites all over the internet.
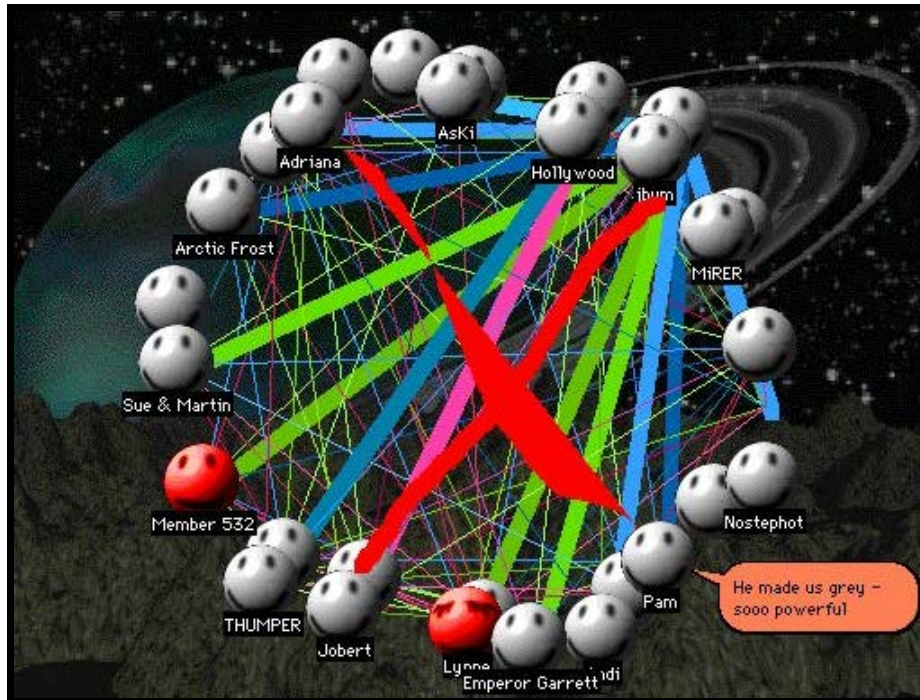
Aberrant Av Behavior

With the new visual dimension of cyberspace socializing comes new ways for people to be aberrant. Like all aberrant behavior, "deviant" behavior at the Palace ranges from mild to severe (see The Bad Boys of Cyberspace for a detailed discussion of deviant behavior and how wizards cope with it).

Mischievous Pranks - As Bumgardner intended, people do try to "get away with something" by playing jokes on their fellow users. Usually the naive guests are the victims. Sometimes it's just a good-natured prank. Sometimes it has an edge of hostility. Using the brush for painting on the background room image, some users adorn the walls with graffiti, obscene drawings or words. Other mischievous members smear black over an entire room, or they fill the entire room with props, leaving newbies totally confused as to where they are or what's happening. Freud would want to label them "anal expulsive personalities." By "spoofing" someone with the "msay" command, you can throw your voice to make the cartoon text balloon pop out of someone else's head. Or you can make the words hang in mid-air with no body attached. A member, rather inappropriately, kept putting the words "I'm gay!" into the mouth of another user as he was trying to carry on a conversation with me. Using msay like this may indicate the person's inability to contain some thought or feeling, while also being unable to own up to that thought or feeling for fear of how others will react.

Sometimes, it's hard even for sympathetic people to resist the antics and game-playing. One night, although trying to remain a neutral observer, I eventually found myself as an accomplice to another member in a prank where we set up an unmanned female prop in the spa pool. We used "msay" to talk THROUGH the prop while also talking TO it as if it were another user. Essentially, it was a virtual ventriloquist act. "Honey" (the prop) was rather seductive towards the guests, and the guests all thought it was a "real" person. It was quite funny, although perhaps a bit mean to the poor naive guests who were unaware of the msay command.

Flooding - Users who make rapid, multiple changes of their avatars - especially large avatars - may flood the server, resulting in lag that makes it difficult for people to talk. Usually the person is not aware that he is causing a problem. But sometimes people do it on purpose. It may be a hostile attempt to gain attention, or a jealous ploy to disrupt the socializing in the room. Wizards will warn, pin, or, if necessary, kill for this offense.

Blocking - Members consider it a social faux pas to place your avatar on top of or too close to another person's prop. Unless the person is a friend who's in the mood to be close, it's an invasion of personal space. "Please get off me!" and You're sitting on me!" are two common complaints. Again, some naive users do this without knowing it is inappropriate, or the person may be lagging and unable to move. But some hostile people deliberately accost others by blocking them. Wizards will warn, pin, or, if necessary, kill for this offense.

Sleeping - Sleepers usually are users who have walked away from their computer. They are completely unresponsive when you talk to them. The social norm is to put up a "BRB" (be right back) sign to indicate your unavailability. Sleepers fail to do this. Although sleepers may be found in text-only chat environments, the experience of them is a bit different in multimedia chat. It feels much more eerie to SEE a person (avatar) in front of you, yet the person fails to react.

Eavesdropping - By reducing their avatars to a single pixel and their usernames to only one character, members may try to become "invisible" and secretly listen in on conversations. As a type of "lurker," they are acting on voyeuristic tendencies to avoid intimacy and gain a sense of advantage and power over others. I wonder if chronic eavesdroppers last very long at the Palace. People enjoy so much the ability to express themselves visually through their avatars that it seems self-defeating to avoid this opportunity by hiding. Maybe that says something about eavesdropping. It *is* self-defeating and, literally, self-negating.

Borderline Avs - There are very specific rules about what avatars are acceptable and what ones are not. Unacceptable avs fall into four general categories: overly sexual; overly violent and aggressive; hate avatars (evidence of prejudice concerning gender, homosexuality, religion, ethnicity, and nationality); avatars that promote illegal activities (e.g., drug use). Looking for loopholes or pushing the envelope as far as they can, acting out members sometimes test the limits of the rules.

Flashing - Although nudity in avatars is not permitted at the Palace, some people nevertheless flash their naughty pictures. They may be goofing around with their friends, advertising their availability for cybersex, attempting to shock other people (like the typical exhibitionist), or defiantly and perhaps masochistically begging to be killed by a wizard. In private rooms, behind locked doors, people engaged in cybersex will display pornographic props to one another. Because this is not public behavior, it is not punished.

Prop Dropping - Not quite as brave as the flasher, a prop-dropper will toss an obscene prop into an empty room and then run, so as not to get caught. The exhibitionist and rebellious psychology of the prop-dropper is probably similar to the flasher, with the exception that they attempt to dissociate themselves from their "dropping." In the mind of a Freudian, the scatological implications of this behavior are very signficant.

Imposters - Stealing someone's avatar and wearing it is a no-no. Stealing someone's avatar, wearing it, and also using that person's name (or a variation of it) is a real no-no. You are abducting their entire identity. As a momentary joke to mimic your friends, this behavior is tolerated as fun. But some people are more insidious. I've heard rumors about a few people, in an act of revenge, snatching the identity of the person that offended them. Behaving inappropriately under that identity, they attempted to damage the person's reputation. Pretending to be a wizard or a god can get you into real trouble.

Identity Disruption - One day in Harry's Bar I was greeted by someone I didn't recognize. Something about how he spoke made me uneasy. He acted as if he knew me, but his abstract avatar and name were unfamiliar. After a few minutes, he changed his prop to another abstract design. For some reason, this made me more uncomfortable. "Do you know this guy?" I whispered to another member. "It's Octagon," she said. "He's been changing his name and props lately".... About a week later, I heard that Octagon was hospitalized. He had been suicidal.

This incident taught me something important about avatars. Unfortunate people suffering from disturbances in their identity may act out their turmoil in the props they wear. A virtual world where you can switch among alternate appearances might attract people suffering from "dissociation" - the splits in consciousness and identity as a result of trauma, as in the classic multiple personality disorder.

There is a lesson here as well for the average Palatian. Playing with your avatar and username as a way to express yourself can be fun and creative. It's a fascinating, synergistic combination. But change your prop and/or name too often - especially if you are a relatively new member - and you run into trouble. People won't recognize you. Your identity de-constructs. In order to be treated like a solid individual, perhaps even to FEEL like a solid individual, you must maintain some level of continuity in either your avatars or username. Most people choose consistency in their username, perhaps varying it slightly for different occasions (e.g., HappyAsKi, McAski, Dr. AsKi). If they are going to experiment with identity expression, they do it mostly with changes in avatars. Despite this experimentation, almost everyone has a primary or home avatar that everyone recognizes as the "real you." The primary avatar provides the necessary continuity, the core self. It takes time to establish it. Switch avatars too often as a new member and you will probably slow down people's ability to recognize you. Once your username and a few of your avs are firmly recognized, you have more leeway to express other aspects of yourself through other avs, without your identity becoming too diffused.

In fact, this may be the essence of a "healthy" Palace life - knowing how to handle that delicate balancing act of experimenting with who you are, while maintaining a stable baseline of public and personal identity.... Is this any different than "real" life?

It's Not Just Wallpaper

One afternoon at the Palace I happened to run into someone who was designing his own multimedia environment. He was visiting the Main Palace site to check it out, probably comparing this graphical environment to his own conceptual plans. Considering he was very interested in multimedia communities, I was a bit surprised by his underestimation of avatars and the graphics of the background rooms. "No-one has quite figured out what to do with an avatar to identify themselves," he said later to me in e-mail, "and the backdrops are largely that, wallpaper."

At this point in this paper, I surely hope I've demonstrated the invalidity of his first point. As to his second, it seems to me that the background graphics that make up the Palace rooms are anything but "wallpaper" - a word which implies that the graphics are basically inconsequential. In fact, that's a bit of a devaluing attitude towards wallpaper as well. Would wallpaper even exist if it did not significantly influence people's attitudes, moods, perceptions, even how they behave?

I'm sure that wallpaper does have this effect, as do the Palace rooms. For example, people are drawn to Harry's Bar, which is the social center of Palace life at Main. Why? The colors are warm, fuzzy, and inviting; there are chairs for people to sit down; it is a bar which people associate with get-togethers, partying and fun; there is a plush carpet in the middle of the floor which acts as a stage or even a dance floor for people to "get-down" and mix it up with one another. The psychological effect of Harry's Bar is not unlike that of the Study or Chess Room which also contain warm colors, luxurious chairs facing each other, and a fire place. Cohesive subgroups of members have formed in these rooms. Contrast these rooms with Grand Central where the mostly black and white color scheme feels cold, the floor is a stark checker tile, the sparse furniture is knocked over, and, quite bizarrely, a locomotive is crashing through the window. Fewer people gather there. Contrast these again with Nrutas, the outer space scene near a planet that looks like Saturn. You would think it's not a very hospitable place for humans. Yet people often do gather here, with the discussion often focusing on tech talk. A perfect spot for Star Trek fans.
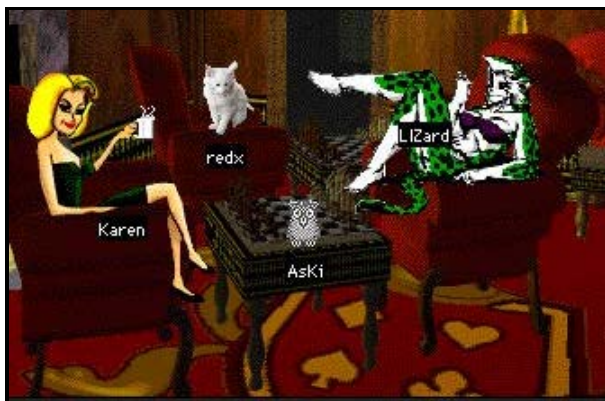
A Typical Gathering in the Chess Room

The Chess Room at the Mansion site is especially comfortable for gatherings of small groups. The circle of chairs around the chess board invariably becomes the nucleus of the group - usually with the core members of the group sitting in those chairs. The people who frequent the Chess Room at the member's only Mansion site have become a rather distinct subgroup within the Palace population.

What are other popular rooms at Main? The Palace Gate, where users automatically are deposited when they sign on, which makes it the perfect place to greet people as they come in. The Spa, where people meet to "bath". The Hallway upstairs, just outside the guest rooms where people can talk in private and get intimate. A graphical pathway or corridor where people tend to walk (and gather along the way) extends from this popular hallway, down the stairs, through the Armory, Game Room, and Red Room, and into the similarly popular Harry's Bar. The Red Room often serves as a "waiting area" for people to socialize as they are waiting to get into the bar, since the room occupancy is limited. This graphical pathway, with Harry's Bar and the Guest Rooms at opposite ends, were the original design of the Palace, with the other rooms added on by links through pictures or fixtures on the walls.

What have been the least populated rooms? The Void, a psychedelic swirl of colors that insults the eyes, looks like it's going to suck you up, and greets you with the message "Abandon Hope all ye who enter here." And let's not forget The Pit - a gloomy, fiery cavern that places horns on your head and a cigarette in your mouth.... Not exactly inviting places, except, perhaps, for trouble-makers who like the fact that the Pit's graphical theme matches their psyche. Anti-social gangs have claimed it as their home.

Even these unsavory locales are preferred over nothing at all. On occasion, I've traveled to other Palace sites where some of the rooms were under construction, leaving nothing but a black box. When other people popped in and quickly realized there was nothing there but empty nothing, they left in a hurry. People find it boring, and perhaps even disorienting. Backdrops of rooms and scenery give people a sense of place and space. It creates a necessary visual grounding for their virtual experience. Some people avoid the usual text-only chat rooms for similar reasons. With only text scrolling down a window, they feel like they are floating in a void with no visual or spatial frame of orientation.

At the Palace, users can place their avatars anywhere within a room - on the floor, walls, ceiling. But by no means do people move and position their avatars randomly. Even though there are no physical laws to restrict their movement, people behave as if there are. Responding to "gravity," such props as walking figures and cars tend to stay on the floor, while icons of flying or floating things remain up. Sometimes this is a purely unconscious reflex on the part of the user. Sometimes people deliberately play with the laws of physics and space - now obeying them, now defying them. Sit in a chair, or hang upside down from the ceiling. Whatever you like. It's part of the fun of Palace life. Rather than being static wallpaper, the background graphics are a playground. The positional props are a good example of how people consciously enjoy interacting with the visual features of a room. By providing tools for drawing on the background gif and the ability to place props into the scenery (flowers, bottles, artwork, etc.), the designers of Palace are encouraging this play. "Dr. Xenu," a longstanding member of the Palace community, offered some interesting observations on this phenomenon, which he calls "set-dressing:"

> There are now simple ways to automate such set-dressing. I have a friend who habitually decorates one or two particular rooms in the same way whenever we meet. There was also someone, for a while, who was relentlessly posting a pair of cherubs to the wall in the bedrooms of members' palace. I would find the cherubs there at all hours, and eventually began deleting them (though I liked them) to see when they would return -- sometimes in as little as 15 minutes! I never did find the unseen decorator.

Such behaviors allow people to personalize the environment for themselves and friends, or perhaps feel some sense of personal impact or "ownership" by leaving one's "mark" on the territory.
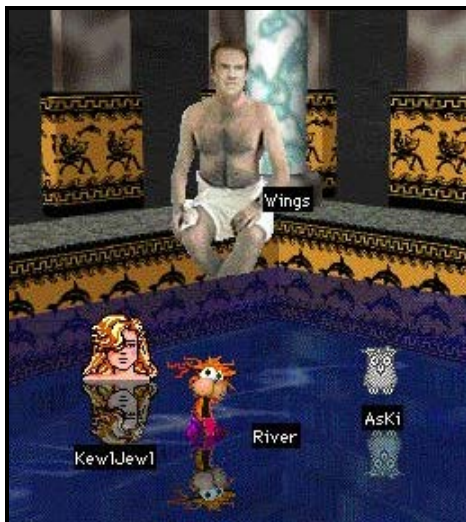
Bathing in the Spa Pool

Members enjoy "bathing" while socializing at the spa. Note the reflections in the water which members added to their avatars. This is a good example of how users enjoy interacting with the visual features of the background.

There are a wide variety of other ways that people intuitively respond to the spatial qualities of the rooms, as if they were "real" spaces. People like to "walk" the path from the Bar to the upstairs hallway - rather than using the "goto" command to pop right into their destination - because it feels like a real-world, architectural corridor. At the Spa, members actually bath in the pool, adding reflections of their avatars into the water to make the scene more realistic (perhaps, according to Rorschach inkblot research, a sign of an introspective personality). Some people frequently place their avatar at the same specific spot in a room - a favorite chair, or perch, or

perhaps the corner of the screen - almost as if that spot is their "territory." There seems to be an implicit norm that the carpet in Harry's Bar is for old-timers who want to be physically close as a group, while others gather at the periphery of the room to converse in pairs or occasionally chime in with the conversation on the carpet. Even the patterns of where people place their avatars follow familiar principles in group dynamics theory. Dyads, triads, isolates, alliances, leadership patterns, and fluctuations in group cohesion are clearly visible. At meetings of the Palace User Group, the visual format of the room - an auditorium with a stage and neatly aligned rows of seats - helps create order and structure for the group's behavior.

Palace users are not limited to the standard background graphics. The creators of Palace intentionally designed it as a virtual world where users could express themselves by shaping the environment. At the Member's Only Palace site, people could create their own room using any background image of their choice. Cooperative "set-dressing" in these rooms developed into a complex art form. These custom rooms became the focal points of friendship subgrouping and cliques. If you are ambitious, you can create your own Palace site on your own server, which gives you total control over the look of all the rooms. Each new space -whether it is a single customized room or a whole new site - will reflect the personality of its creator and will draw people of similar temperament. In order to attract people to a site, attempts are made to make the new environments as psychologically appealing to as many users as possible. Finchy, an old-timer at the Palace, describes her site, the "Nest:"

"In creating the Nest, we thought about the fact that people love a spatial relationship they can "fit" into. The rooms are designed with that thought in mind. Our goal was to create a space where people felt "at home". The Goddess Theater is considered exceptional by many, as the perspective is highly unusual. But it works perfectly for groups of participants. Jbum said `The Finch Nest gets the award for the Palace that is most habitable, yet Finch-like.'"

From a social psychological perspective, this flexibility in creating new graphical spaces is resulting in the formation of separate communities and subgroups within the Palace "universe." Issues of immigration, territory, recruitment, intergroup cooperation and competition, loyalty and betrayal are all beginning to surface in this universe.

Let's Get Physical

The visual and spatial qualities of Palace lead to something that is not found in text-only environments on the internet - something that has a subtle, yet profound impact on socializing. Human interaction feels PHYSICAL. Users have at their disposal not only words to communicate, but also non-verbal behavior that can create almost tangible sensations. So far in this paper, there have been numerous examples of this "physicality." Blocking or crowding someone's avatar feels like a palpable invasion. Maneuvering one's av back and forth in synchrony with another creates the intimate sensation of "dancing." When someone is excited or agitated, their av may fidget and bounce around the room. Someone who parades back and forth while displaying fancy props looks and feels like a strutting peacock. Animated avatars can mimic all sorts of real and surrealistic movements. While users in IRC may imitate such non-verbal behaviors with action command descriptions ("Sally gives Bob a push"), the effect is not the same. Visually SEEING the behavior has a much greater psychological impact.

A key component of this physical awareness involves the dynamics of personal space, not unlike face-to-face relationships. Users instinctively feel that the area on and immediately around their avatar is THEIR personal zone. Step on it without invitation, and they quickly ask, then demand you to get off. Persist, and some people will holler for a wizard to discipline you. If members don't interpret your behavior as an invasion, they will experience it as an intimate advance. Simply to move towards and stand next to someone is seen as an act of friendship, or more. Snuggling and climbing onto someone's icon ("piggybacking") may convey warm, sexual, or romantic feelings. They can very subtlety create emotional bonds. If someone's snuggling goes on for too long, or is not what you want at all, you may feel restricted, suffocated, and hesitant to move away for fear of hurting feelings. Right or wrong, other people may think that you two are an "item." The emotional depth of these non-verbal behaviors can be quite amazing. As in face-to-face interactions, they may provide glimpses into underlying feelings and attitudes that are not being expressed verbally.

After one member read this article, she told me about one of her incidents with snuggling which she did not experience as indicating any intimate relationship between her and the other person. Instead, it simply felt like playful fun - a kind of "playing to the room" or "public theater." She did add, though, that snuggling probably won't occur unless there is some measure of friendship between the participants. It's also interesting that she clearly remembered this particular incident - which suggests that it did have an impact on her. Being able to get close visually ("physically") in cyberspace does indeed have a significant psychological effect on people.

Some avatars are designed specifically to snuggle, piggyback, or somehow interact with other avatars. One member, for example, has a pair of upside legs that he inserts down the cleavages of unsuspecting women, giving the illusion of the rest of his body being inside their dresses. This typically is a harmless prank played only on people he knows will enjoy the joke. The correct response, one female member informed me, is "oooh, that tickles!!"

Evidence of the physicality of the Palace can be very subtle. Once in a while you will enter a room where two other users are sitting, motionless. Perhaps their avatars are next to each other, perhaps not. You speak, they give a minimal reply, or don't reply at all. It's very hard to shake the feeling that these people are telepathically linked to each other, especially if they are sitting side by side. They may indeed be using the private messaging feature called "whispering." It's very hard to shake the funny feeling that they are somehow PHYSICALLY connected as a pair, as if they are sitting together on a couch - and that you are NOT part of that dyad. Two is company, three's a crowd. Confronted with this uncomfortable dilemma, most people leave the room very quickly.

Even the simple act of giving someone a prop can be very meaningful development in a relationship. On a symbolic level, it is a sign of generosity and friendship (unless you don't want it, which makes the gift feel like an intrusion or a manipulation). On a more basic kinesthetic level, the act of "giving" someone a prop physically joins you to that person. It feels important because it feels like a tactile connection. Props as objects also allow you to physically DO something with someone. HoBob and Amber, for example, joined together in creating a garden out of flower icons. If you get tired of playing with props, you can always go for a walk together through the

Mansion - what some members call "cruising the Palace." These kinds of non-verbal, collaborative activities can solidify a relationship, much like "doing something" with friends in the real world. It's not just talk, it's a shared "physical" experience.

Inside Your Av, or Out

Some multimedia worlds are 3D. Usually the view also is first person, so you live "inside" your avatar, looking out into the world much as you do in real life, without seeing your own avatar (body). You have to move through the graphical space in order to see other avatars and objects that may be hidden from view. 3D advocates like the feeling of "immersion" that such worlds create. You feel like you are really there, in the environment. Some advocates claim that this 3D living creates heightened emotional reactions because it mimics the sensory experience of the real world. Things come towards you, or withdraw. You don't know what's around the next corner. There is an element not only of realism, but even suspense.

The problem with a 3D graphical experience is that it requires a lot of computing power and speed that cannot (yet) be handled too well by internet band width. The result may be a slow, jerky experience that feels disjointed, unreal, and that jars the brain. Even under ideal conditions, some people don't feel comfortable with the "head in a box" or "tunnel vision" view of 3D, first-person worlds. Lacking peripheral vision, some people feel closed in, claustrophobic.

The Palace is a 2D, third person experience. You look down onto the scene that includes your avatar and everyone else's avatar. Some people like this transcendent and somewhat paradoxical experience of being above but also in the scene. You get to see yourself, the way other people do. You move yourself about in the environment and then sit back to see what happens. Your perspective of the scene and what people are saying may seem more "objective." You may feel more free. There may even be a magical, mystical sensation to witnessing oneself within the world. Many mystical traditions emphasize the transcendent awareness that is the "observing self." The 2D worlds may address an archetypic need for such transcendence. This observing awareness is paradoxical. It simultaneously exists within the world and transcends it - a paradox that is manifested in the 2D virtual setting. Some Palace members take delight in the objective/subjective fluidity of being in the scene and above it, at the same time. The avatar appears as an independent entity that actually is a manifestation of your personality and will. Separate but connected. It can be like an artistic creation, a self portrait. It's an "out there" expression of what's inside. "It's me, it's not me.... it's both."

It's possible that when first person, 3D worlds becomes more sophisticated with the advance of technology, people will prefer them. On the other hand, some people may always favor third person, 2D environments. These differences in preference may reflect differences in cognitive and personality style.

What Lies Ahead

The wonderful, and sometimes frustrating, thing about computer technology is that it never stands still. Where are multimedia environments like the Palace headed? What advances in the world of avatar-populated environments wait for us around the bend? 3D, morphing, audio/video/tactile/olfactory-enhanced avatars? Are contemporary multimedia worlds the earliest forerunners of the Star Trek holodecks?

Gimmicks and flashy features may add some novelty to the experience. But the most successful advances will stick to basic rules that has made Palace unique and popular. Give users the opportunity to express themselves as they wish - to explore and experiment with their interpersonal identity. Give them the ability to participate in the creation of their environment. Offer a world that can stimulate

sensations of space, action, and physicality. It doesn't have to be a world that exactly imitates the "real" world. In fact, it probably would be better if it didn't. Offer a world that is an experientially robust alternative. Fantasy can be more entertaining, educational, and, paradoxically, more "true" or "real" than the real world.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Avatar Psychotherapy
Games Avatars Play
Second Life, Second Chance

Cyberspace as Dream World

Illusion and Reality at the Palace

You sit almost motionless, relaxed, your eyes focused on a glowing screen - the only source of light in an otherwise dark room. Your fingers tap lightly as your mind converges on the words and images that float before you. At times it seems like there is no difference between your thoughts and those images. At times it seems the distinction between inner and outer worlds almost disappears. At times, time itself evaporates. You are a computer user immersed in cyberspace. All melts into a new reality that transcends the rules of conventional reality. Like a Zen master in meditation, you have become one with with the virtual universe.

I dream therefore I am.

OK... This is not the typical, everyday scenario for the computer user. Most of the time we just hack away at the keyboard to get something done, without slipping into transcendent consciousness. But many experienced computer users can recall moments like this. Cyberspace is indeed an extension of the mind, which means it can extend all facets of mental life - including hypnotic reveries and other altered states of awareness. Under the right conditions, cyberspace becomes a dream world, not unlike the world which emerges when we sink into sleep.

This doesn't mean that these virtual experiences should be dismissed as whimsical mental meanderings with no value or purpose. Quite the contrary. Psychology clearly has established the necessity of nocturnal dreams for maintaining emotional health and promoting personal growth. The same may be true of virtual dreaming. Cyberspace is not simply an "information super-highway," It can offer the human psyche much more than facts. Virtual space can flex the boundaries of conscious and unconscious realities. It can tell us something about the meaning of "real."

In this article I'd like to explore the parallels between cyberspace and altered states of consciousness, especially the states of mind that surface in dreams. Some of these ideas may apply to a variety of environments on the internet, especially MOOs, MUDs, and other virtual "worlds." I will focus specifically on the Palace - a graphical chat environment where people use icons (avatars) to represent themselves while socializing with other users in visual scenes, including indoor rooms and outside settings (see Life at the Palace). While some of the dreamlike qualities of Palace can be found in other virtual worlds, several of its dreamy features are quite unique. Most important of all, the Palace, like dreams, is so captivating because it is a highly visual experience. As the old saying goes, one picture is worth a thousand words. Visual experiences are psychologically RICH. Images and symbols are the language of the unconscious.

Facets of Dreaming in Cyberspace

Psychology has mapped out many of the mental components of dreams and other altered states. Psychoanalytic theorists place them under the label of "primary process." Primary process is a style of thinking and experiencing that is quite different than normal waking states of consciousness (called "secondary process"). It defies conventional rules of time, space, and logic. It zooms in on subjective meaning and emotion rather than toeing the line of "objective" or "rational" truth. It's a primordial, magical type of thinking that usually remains unconscious, but can surface to fuel creativity, mysticism, and psychosis. Many of these facets of dream-like primary process can be found at the Palace.

Transcending Physics

In dreams, the conventional rules of space do not apply. The dreamer can rapidly shift from one scenario to another without having to travel any ground. The only sense of "distance" or "place" that has meaning is PSYCHOLOGICAL distance and place. Also, the restrictions of gravity and everyday physics may disappear. One can float, bounce, fly in patterns that would make Newton's eyes cross.

So too in cyberspace the user can transcend the laws of space and physics. One simply has to click on a button to be transported from one location to another. There is no swinging of feet or turning of wheels to confirm that one has moved. It is a change in the visual/psychological context that indicates transportation. In imaginary virtual worlds. a "goto" command magically shuttles the person from one room or location to another. At the Palace, one also can move from place to place by simply clicking on a doorway, a window or a picture on the wall. You immediately transcend visual space, even "pass through walls" and... POOF! You are there, materializing in the room of your choice, as if you just enjoyed the convenience of an Enterprise transporter. The fact that one can click on objects in rooms to trigger this transportation also lends a symbolic magical power to the object, just as objects in dreams wield symbolic power. They are portals to a new place with new meanings. Whenever I click on the rectangular stone monument standing at the center of the "Slabs," I think of the mystical Monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Unlike text-only virtual worlds, the highly visual Palace adds the opportunity to violate gravity and physics. Your avatar can float in mid-air, teeter impossibly on the edge of someone's shoulder, hang upside down from the ceiling. Jim Bumgardner, the creator of Palace, wove such gravity-defying features into Palace for both technical and psychological reasons.Simulating real world physics required more programming and system horsepower. Users also disliked the restrictions. "Early attempts by myself to create real world constraints," Bumgardner stated, "such as limiting a person's movement to the floor area of the room, were quickly removed, because they were perceived by myself and the other users as unnecessary obstacles... There is no attempt to mimic real world physics in the Palace. As far as I am concerned, physics basically present obstacles, and I wanted to create a world with few obstacles."

As in dreams, the Palace's suspension of the laws of physics and space satisfies conscious and unconscious fantasies of magic, omnipotence, and defiance. But at times members also take great pleasure in conforming to these laws. With "positional avatars" users do such things as sit themselves into chairs and bathe in the spa pool. They enjoy the option to play with the loose virtual boundary between physical law and improbable movement. It's a marvelous balancing act between the real/mundane and the surreal/magical. Like Merlin, they have the power to use or bend, at will, the laws of nature.

Spontaneous Generation

You can't create something out of nothing.

Well, that principle doesn't hold true in the world of dreams. People and things appear out of nowhere. They change shape and size with little regard for the physical laws of conservation. And when they have served their purpose, they fizzle out and recede into nothing. This feature of spontaneous generation in dreams may be a derivative of how we generally experience the unconscious. Whenever the unconscious manifests itself - as in creative inspiration or psychotic (including drug-induced) experiences - its symbols and sensations just "pop up" from nowhere, as if springing from the head of Zeus. In fact, classic myths, being vehicles for expressing universal patterns of unconscious thought, are filled with examples of spontaneous generation.

Some virtual worlds are based on a token or monetary system. You have to earn or win these tokens in order to use them to create (buy) new objects, rooms, and avatars. It's a world that adheres to the rational laws of economics, materialism, and physics.

The Palace, on the other hand, allows spontaneous generation. New objects (props) can be created out of nothing. To your hearts content, you can duplicate a can of Pepsi, a bouquet of flowers, or Tom Cruise's face over and over again, filling the entire room, if you so wish. With paint brushes, you can draw whatever you like on the rooms. And with the simple incantation "clean" you can sweep all of it away and start anew. There is no cost, no price to pay, no bartering. It's even better than alchemic magic. Like the ability to transcend space and gravity, it creates a feeling of freedom and omnipotence.

Transcending Time

In the unconscious, time is irrelevant. A personal experience dozens of years old may remain as pristine and new as the day it happened. That moment remains frozen in time. In dreams, it may surface in derivative symbols and images that feel as real as real life. The dream may transpose and blend the past, the present, and expectations about the future. Time is not a linear march of static moments, but flexible stuff to be manipulated for the purpose of expressing psychological meaning.

In cyberspace, one's time frame can be suspended, blended with other people's time frames, and, sometimes, even negated.

Despite the fact that Palatians usually complain about lag, it is a fascinating suspension of time. The whole scene freezes before your very eyes. People mostly experience this as a frustrating restriction on their ability to talk and maneuver, not unlike the familiar paralysis nightmares where your legs become sluggish or stuck in mud despite your desperate efforts to run. But in these nightmares your mind may remain active - and in cyberspace lag your mind always remains active. As in a episode from the Twilight Zone, this suspension of the moment may prove to be a unique opportunity. It affords you precious seconds or minutes to decide what you will say or do next. In some situations, that temporal bonus may come in very handy. Don't you sometimes wish you could freeze time in real life?

How we think, feel, and behave is partly determined by the circadian rhythms of our daily routine. How a group thinks, feels, and behaves is determined by the collective summing of these individual states of consciousness. You and your peers, for example, are not exactly the same at 8:30 am when you arrive for work as you are at midnight working overtime. The group moods, attitudes, and topics of discussion shift. In cyberspace, people arrive from different time zones. People's "heads" may be in very different places in their circadian cycle. Cyberspace blends these various individual states of consciousness into a collective group-consciousness that transcends time.

Have you ever intended to go online for just 15 minutes or so, but end up being there for hours? People say "I lost track of the time." They become totally absorbed in what they are doing. They become immersed in the moment - an "eternal" space that lies beyond time. This phenomenon is by no means unique to cyberspace. People become absorbed in all sorts of activities - especially creative ones. The common denominator for all these experiences is that people "lose themselves" in the activity. Individual identity yields to the timeless process of "being" - what some psychologists call "B-Cognition." As in dreams, the waking self-conscious ego (the ego locked into time) is forgotten while new dimensions of self express themselves un-self-consciously in the process of simply doing and being.

Loose Self Boundaries

In dreams one doesn't necessarily have to talk to communicate with the other dream characters. Thoughts, feelings, and intentions can be transmitted without speaking, as if the others can read your mind, and you theirs. As a matter of fact, the other characters ARE your own mind, which is why "they" can read it. Even in the waking state, the unconscious mind assumes an almost telepathic connection to other people, which developmentally dates back to early childhood when the baby assumes that parents can detect her thoughts and automatically anticipate her needs. The boundaries between self and other are loose and overlapping. In psychosis, an extreme version of this occurs when a person believes that his thoughts are being broadcasted to others, or that other's thoughts are being inserted into his mind. While this may be pathological, other examples of loose and overlapping self-boundaries are not. Empathy relies on the ability to extend one's own awareness into the zone of the other's experience. It's a blending of self and other. It's what the baby expects and needs from his parents. It's what everyone needs in order to develop psychologically and maintain a sense of emotional well-being. Our culture's fascination with ESP and science fiction "mind-melds" is partly derived from the (unconscious) recognition that this potentially empathic blending of self and other is a basic human need.

In chat and MOO environments on the internet, one usually has the ability to secretly communicate with others while in the presence of a group of users. At the Palace it's called "whispering." Palatians also can secretly communicate with people in OTHER rooms through what is called, not surprisingly, "ESPing." Whispering and ESPing can feel like a magical telepathic connection to the other, a blending of your mind with the other user. Some people may feel empowered by this special skill (another fulfillment of unconscious wishes for omnipotence). Others may expect the encounter to satisfy that basic human need for empathic support - and may be disappointed, even hurt, if that doesn't happen. Whispering to several people at the same time allows all of them into your mind at once, forcing you to divide your mind up into several separate compartments in order to carry out those distinct conversations. This multiple whispering thus requires your ability to "dissociate" (I'll say more about dissociation later).

The Palace software places the user's typed messages into balloons that pop out of one's head, similar to comic strips. One special type of balloon is the "thought balloon." As in comic strips, dots trail up to the balloon, indicating you are thinking. Essentially, you can "think out loud" - which is reminiscent of the psychotic's thought broadcasting. Thought balloons are a kind of mumbling or "half speak" where a person implicitly is saying, "I'll let you know what I'm thinking, but you don't have to respond if you don't want to, because it's ONLY a thought." It's a relatively safe way of letting down your self-boundaries and allowing people into your head.

When you signed onto Palace, there once was an automated message advising you not to treat Palace simply as a

game... that there are REAL PEOPLE at the other end of those avatars. Perhaps some people indeed think of it as a video game, which is why they may act out all sorts of asocial needs on the avatars walking across their screen. But maybe there is more to it than this. Perhaps people tend NOT to think of the other real people behind those avatars because they unconsciously experience all those entities as existing within the boundaries of their own minds. If cyberspace is an extension of one's own intrapsychic world, then those little avatars may be unconsciously experienced as being INSIDE one's head, rather than as external beings with their own needs and feelings. All of us show very little hesitation in acting out all sorts of feelings onto the "people" (what some psychologists describe as "internal representations" of the significant others in our lives) that reside within our fantasy and dreams. In fact, that's the purpose of fantasy and dreams - to give us space to ventilate and (ideally) work through those feelings. When cyberspace is experienced as a blending of our minds with the virtual world, it becomes another arena to act out those feelings. Seducing, fighting, opposing, ignoring, insulting, flattering, exalting, or demeaning those little avatars may all be actions taking place (unconsciously) WITHIN the user's own fantasy world. It's only when the other user says or does something really unexpected that you are nudged, or sometimes jolted, into the realization that there *IS* another real person present - that what you had been experiencing was an unconscious blending of the virtual reality into the boundaries of your own personal reality. It's what psychoanalytic thinkers call "transference."

Identity Shifting (dissociation)

A major attraction of the Palace is the ability to create avatars to represent oneself. At will, users can switch among various icons chosen to reflect their various moods, interests, and personality characteristics. In various ways, this shape-shifting is strikingly similar to dream life. The appearance of people changes from one moment to the next, generating questions about their true motives and identity. Users are thinking and communicating in images rather than language. Often those images are highly symbolic. They are the products of the same mental processes that produce dreams - such as symbolization and the condensation of multiple meanings into one picture. Avatars portray universal human themes and ideas, similar to the dreams expression of archetypes from the collective unconscious (for a more detailed discussion, see The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space).

Shape-shifting gives the user some conscious control over the psychological process known as "dissociation." By switching avatars, users are expressing various components of their identity in a disconnected or disassociated fashion. It's something like having a controllable "multiple personality." Although having this ability once again satisfies that unconscious need for omnipotence (as one user said, "What could be more powerful than a shape-shifter?"), users are not always fully conscious of exactly what they are expressing about their personality via their avatars. It's the same for the dreamer. Every visual element in the dream may be a representation of some aspect of the dreamer's identity. Each character and object in the dream is a split off or dissociated component of the self - but the dreamer is not fully aware of this. At the Palace, even OTHER people's avatars become a target for projecting and expressing aspects of YOURSELF. As I described earlier, there is at times a tendency to react to other people's avatars not as an extension of their personality, but as an extension of your own thoughts and feelings (representations) about important people in your life.

Dissociation is a common phenomena in cyberspace at large. It is a well-known fact that people use the internet to express and experiment with various aspects of their identity. Some people deliberately create a specific online personality for themselves. They have some conscious control over the same kind of wish fulfillment that fuels dreams. A very lively discussion on the Palace User Group mailing list once focused on whether people have an "online" versus "real life" personality. People argued over whether this meant they were suffering from schizophrenia or a "split personality".... For most people, it's definitely NOT schizophrenia, but it IS a splitting of identity between what one usually presents to others in the physical world and what one likes to create in the cyberworld. One is not necessarily less "real" than the other. All are aspects of one's identity, although some may be hidden or unconscious aspects.

A woman consistently referred to one of her online companions as "she" when she spoke about this companion in cyberspace, and as "he" when she spoke about being with this companion in real life. Both were equally real to her. Carl Jung, a pioneer of dream interpretation, might be pleased to see that many people use cyberspace to experiment, in this somewhat dissociated fashion, the male and female components of their personality - the "anima" and "animus." For example, online gender-switching is a fairly common practice.

It's very possible that, for some cybernauts, the experimenting with alternate personalities eventually UNDOES dissociation because they begin to understand, accept, and integrate those alternate personalities into their conscious sense of self. Likewise, self-integration is the goal of many clinical approaches to exploring the various facets of one's personality that surface in dreams.

The ultimate act of dissociation is to disappear - to eliminate your own manifestation - while still remaining conscious. Lurkers know this feeling well. At the Palace, some users attempt to reduce their avatar to a single pixel and their name to a single character in order to achieve invisibility. It's like a dream in which the dreamer is only consciously, but not "physically," present in the scene. One wishes to observe the action, to take it all in, to perhaps secretly inject some influence - but without owning responsibility for any of it. It's not unlike claiming that your dream is "JUST a dream" - thereby disowning and distancing yourself from it. At the Palace, users have the ability to throw their voice by placing their text balloon in mid-air or next to someone else's avatar ("spoofing"), rather than allowing it to emanate from their own avatar. They can also blot out their name from the supplemental text log of the ongoing conversation, so there is no evidence whatsoever of their having made a comment. It's not invisibility, but it indeed is the same attempt to dissociate and disown from yourself some thought or feeling you can't stop yourself from expressing.

Dreams about Palace

Because we have been exploring the parallels between cyberspace and dreams, it makes sense to focus on dreams ABOUT cyberspace. Here I'd like to describe some dreams that users have had about the Palace. Generally speaking, you know something has activated your unconscious mind when you dream about it. For some people, the Palace may have an even higher potential to stir the unconscious because it mimics many of the qualities of dream life. As a dream-like state of consciousness, it may draw to the surface a variety of unconscious thoughts and feelings. The issues that surface may reflect the personal concerns of the user or archetypic themes that apply to us all. Dreams about Palace may even highlight phenomenological insights into the very meaning of "dream" versus "reality."

This portion of this article is best read in hypertext. The title of each dream is linked to my general comments on the dream. Links within the description of each dream lead to more specific comments about particular elements in the dreams. After reading these comments, use your browser's "back" button to return to your previous place in the article.

Because I did not talk in-depth with these people about their dreams, and in some cases do not know these dreamers very well at all, my comments on their dreams should be taken with a grain of salt. The ultimate expert on any dreamer is the dreamer him or herself.

Dream 1: Empowerment and Individuality

"My dreams on the Palace have puzzled me. I am not confined but free-floating. I have not floated since I was a child. I am always in the cloud room , though I never hang out there. I am the problem solver in my Palace-dreams, everyone coming to me like I'm a Guru or something. And I go back and forth from wearing my props to being me (my head only). To tell you the truth I think these dreams are connected to my awareness of my improved self-esteem. This is trippy stuff so let me go hog wild here. I think I am floating because that is what the Palace format dictates, but more importantly I am not afraid to enjoy my belief in myself. I need no shelters to protect me, no walls to confine me, I am not afraid I'll do something stupid. I believe I am always in the cloud room because when making a 'new' room you start with the cloud room until you change the background. I feel my dream cloud room represents the 'new' me feeling I have since I started associating with the Palace. And I am there because others enjoy me. They need my help and I know I can sooth their fears. It's funny the problems they bring to me and how open they are for my solutions. They always think I am smart and right, so I totally assume this must have to do with my new found esteem. One interesting point here, I only have my Palace dreams when in reality I am solving some political situation on the Palace."

Dream 2: Belonging and Being Understood

"I dreamed about the palace last night. I went to the PUG meeting and it lasted until midnight. I went to bed almost immediately after the end. I felt a little frustrated because they are things I wanted to say and couldn't, for many reasons, the main is because I speak Spanish and have a hard time to express myself the right way and fast... The only time I spoke, I felt people misunderstood what I meant. I must say also that I like the palace because it gives me a few seconds to put my words in order and I can read what I want to say. And I can read what others say, instead of hear it. It help me very much with my learning of English... So I went to bed frustrated last night..."

"I dreamed I was somehow in real life, facing a person I saw in the meeting of last night. But I didn't talk. Like in the palace, even if that person was in front of me, I was writing to her, telling her exactly what I wanted to say last night but much more fluidly, like in Spanish (but it was in English). And it appeared in balloons, like in the palace. You know, when I go to the palace, I have the feeling that I speak: it's a mix of speech and writing. And I feel that my English is much better than it is in real life (hehe).... That was the same feeling in my dream, but more confused though..."

"Just a quick note. I speak Spanish, like I already told you. When I go too much on the palace, I'm confused when I go back to speaking Spanish. But I never tell one word of English, orally. It takes me sometimes half an hour to get my first thought in Spanish again."

Dream 3: The Ideal Haven

"I'm a VERY active Palace dreamer, perhaps even more so since becoming a wizard (I even find myself wishing I could `gag/`pin/`mute some people in real life :-). My most frequent dream is of a "real" Palace, where avatars are actually the "solid/real" version of the ones I see online (Finchy looks cute as a little talking bird, PH actually even smells like a horse and I myself feel funny as a bunch of floating silver spheres). Everything I can do at the Palace I can do in this world, including the ability to wish myself into a different room, esp, paging, etc... yet I actually have to mentally "type" these commands for them to work. This Palace is located on some sort of artificial island (more like an oil rig, but huge) full of glass towers following Gaudi's architecture. These towers are connected by walkways of bright red "plastic?" and full of light (phosforescence might be more appropriate). I simply walk/float thru these settings talking with other wizards and friends from the Palace. Mostly thru "pages". I always seem to be worried about this "big circuit" I have to build for which the parts are not available, other times I'm showing my wife around this city (she has never been online and is quite "atechnical"). She always looks like in real life, but I speak with her via esp. Something interesting is that, while the sea under this city seems to be quite turbulent (think of a hurricane in the Caribbean, down to the color of the sea) the weather in this city is always fair, be it sun or midnight, I get the "subliminal" feeling that there's some sort of "dome" that protects this city so I have nothing to worry. I can only remember one time in which there was rain in my dream, and that's because It struck me as resembling some "Blade Runner" scenes. I dream of the Palace quite vividly as you can see, at least twice a month (for a whole week once, while I was actually creating one for a client). But it always is the same city, even though it sometimes seems to be both at sea and on a green forest at the same time."

Dreams 4 & 5: Fate and the Nature of Reality

"I can't remember when or where the dream started. I never seem to be conscious of the opening credits ...is that unusual? Anyhow, here goes..."

"What I first remember was being in a warehouse district in a large city, no one else around (solo journey or "quest"). I felt as tho I were looking for something or someone. I was walking along and felt like I was close to what I was looking for when all of a sudden the background image, buildings etc, came undone in the center and peeled itself back in 4 directions. As it did this, I was aware of a person's face behind and above me. It looked like a human face but it was smiling as tho it were enjoying a practical joke (on me). All of a sudden a new background took the place of the old one. It was a construction site. It was a new building going up. (reconstructing the self?) I climbed onto one of the bulldozers and began knocking down remnants of the old building which was still partially standing. (the old "self"?) I was almost done leveling the site when the setting once again peeled itself away... same face in the background."

"It was at this point I sort of realized that I was stuck in some kind of computer "program" and that things were being manipulated and that I was not in control. I remember trying to get away from who or what was controlling things. I was fleeing through some city streets. Every time I thought I was "safe" the background would change again. I then found myself in a bar full of people. I talked to several people and had a drink. I must have picked up a woman at the bar because the next thing I remember was being in an apartment setting...in bed with this woman. We were just starting to get intimate when all of a sudden one wall of the apartment disappeared and the bar I had just left was now in my apartment. People came wandering over to talk to me. My "friend" disappeared. As I started to talk to the bar patrons, expressing my anger at having my privacy violated, they would "morf" into other people. I remember feeling frustrated that each individual would not remain long enough to listen to my complaint."

"It was at this point that the entire scene peeled itself away again, revealing the face which was looking much more sinister. I woke up then, feeling a little shaken but thought it would make a good movie script so I wrote it down."

"The 'point and click' dream was fairly short and simple. I dreamed that I was in one of the palace rooms (Harry's Bar I think). I was using my mind to click on objects to move them around. (I think that this was simply a dream about being at the palace or it may have been a desire to be able to control the things in my life as easily as things are controlled in the Palace????)"

Cyberspace as an Alternative to Dreaming

Human beings have an inherent need to alter their consciousness - to experience reality from different perspectives. We pursue this need through a wide variety of activities - meditation, drugs, athletics, sex, art. Some are more productive than others. Dreams are a necessary, built-in mechanism for achieving this altered experience of self, other, and world on a daily (nightly) basis. It allows the expression of the usually unconscious, primary process styles of thinking that provide a different perspective on reality.

Cyberspace may be a new and important addition to this list. Critics often complain that computers and the internet have, for some people, become an addiction that serves as a substitute for life. While this indeed may be true for some people, we should also consider the possibility that cyberspace may be a highly adaptive SUPPLEMENT to "real" life. It may be a viable alternative for altering consciousness by providing new, imaginative ways to interact with others and experience the world. As evident in the dreams described above, such programs as the Palace in particular stimulate a rich variety of basic psychological issues - probably because they are intensely social environments fused into a dreamlike state of consciousness. Sometimes users get so stirred up that the cyberworld intrudes into the "real" world. One person told me:

> "The problem is...I think the Palace is a "heightened" state of consciousness, and just like when one is under the influence of hallucinogens (the voice of distant experience) things take on a hyper-real intensity, these Palace experiences carry over into the non-cyberlife with undue seriousness and intensity."

People may be attracted to such virtual environments because - like dreams - they satisfy this need for an alternative view of reality by encouraging the unconscious, primary process styles of thinking. Like dreams, they also encourage the acting out of unconscious fantasies and impulses, which may explain some of the sexuality, aggression, and imaginative role playing we see on the internet. Stretching the analogies even further, we can think of addiction to cyberspace as an addiction to an altered state of consciousness, abstinence from computing to withdrawal or REM (dream) deprivation, and a fervid diving back into cyberspace as a cyberspace "rebound," not unlike REM rebound (which is the mind's attempt to make up for lost hours of REM dreaming).

What makes the Palace somewhat different than dreams is that the person has more control over the altered state of consciousness. You can hover in mid-air, walk through walls, or change appearance... at will. It's this control that satisfies that need for omnipotence. The experience is not unlike "lucid" dreaming, which is a dream in which the person KNOWS she is dreaming and is able to direct the outcome. Supposedly, more "primitive" people in ancient times were able to develop and refine this ability. Contemporary dream workers are attempting to revive those skills. Pointing and clicking in cyberspace dream worlds may be the computer geek's similar attempt to return to those more primitive times. It's an attempt to create and direct a recurring, lucid dream.

Although it has a big impact on the user, this control over the cyberdream is limited. As indicated in the dreams described earlier, the virtual world can stir up all sorts of personal anxieties. People may feel something is missing, that there's turbulence below the surface, that this scenario is not completely under their thumb. After all, we have control over the program, but not over the people who occupy it with us. Virtual worlds are not games where we control all the pieces. They are real worlds complete with all the interpersonal triumphs and struggles that stir us up in the physical world. But unlike life in the physical world, you can easily hit the "off" button if things get too uncomfortable in cyberspace. It's the virtual equivalent of the mind's switching off an anxiety dream or a nightmare by waking you up.

Once your mind leaves the dream, you realize it was JUST a dream.... Or was it? If it was a nightmare that woke you up, it must have "got" to you. If it was a satisfying dream, it was satisfying for a reason. Dreams speak to deeper needs within us. Cyberdreams may speak to those deeper needs as well. Life online isn't an artificial illusion disconnected from the "real" world. It's an alternative view of the individual's subjective reality. The man and the butterfly belong to each other.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The basic psychological features of cyberspace
Cyberspace as a psychological space
Networks as "mind" and "self"
Presence in cyberspace

The Two Paths of Virtual Reality

Practically the Real Thing?
True-to-Life VR
Imaginary VR
To Immerse or Not
The Ultimate VR Experience
- Body Immersion Environments
- Brain Stimulated Environments
What is the "Reality" in Virtual Reality?

Practically the Real thing

Lately, it's hard to go through the day without hearing the term "virtual reality" (VR) somewhere in the media or conversations going on around you. Did you ever wonder what the term "virtual reality" actually means? I know I have. Here's what my dictionary says about the word "virtual":

"having the effect but not the actual form of what is specified"
"having potency, validity"
"in effect, practically" (virtually)

So "virtual reality" is a reality that has the effect of actual reality but not its authentic form. It's a kind of simulation or substitute, but one with potency and validity. It gets close to the real thing. In its effect on people, it's practically the real thing.

The term, unfortunately, can be a bit misleading. It implies that VR is an attempt to recreate the world as we consciously experience it with our eyes, ears, skin, body. This, indeed, is one of the two paths of VR. But there's another path. VR also strives to create new environments that are more imaginary - fantasy realms that feel "real" in unique ways but do not directly correspond to the world as we usually perceive it. Let's take a look at these two paths of virtual reality and see where, in the future, they may take us.

True to Life VR

This path for computer generated environments takes us on a journey to more and more accurate simulations of real world situations. But just how accurate is the reproduction? Using current state of the art technology, you would wear goggles and headphones to recreate sights and sounds in a 3D space, with perhaps sensors attached to your head and limbs that could translate your body movements into the movements of your "avatar," the virtual body that acts within the computer generated environment. In a more sophisticated laboratory, you might even be surrounded by air nozzles and scent dispensers that could simulate changes in air movement, temperatures, and smells. A treadmill under your feet might work well in the virtual scenario of a walk through the woods, as you feel a cool breeze on your face and enjoy the aroma of wild flowers.

However, if you decide to climb a tree, that could be a problem. With your arms and legs, you could mimic reaching, grabbing, and stepping on limbs, and the computer might even do a good job of having your avatar tackle the climb. Although visually it may look like you're ascending, it's not going to feel like you're actually climbing the tree, with your arms straining and the sensation of bark in your hands. With very little actual physical effort, you could hoist yourself all the way up to the highest branch and not have to catch your breath at all once you arrived. For some people, that almost effortless climb might be a wonderful experience - even a therapeutic experience. Those who suffer from physical limitations could benefit psychologically from what we might call this VR amplification of physical vigor along with discomfort attenuation. In these cases, we're turning the sow's ear of VR - it's inability to recreate a realistic bodily experience - into a silk purse.

The amplification of physical vigor and the minimizing of discomfort is more fantasy than reality. It doesn't live up to the definition of "virtual." People who WANT the exertion, the thumping heart, the sweat, the feel of the branches in their grip, will be disappointed. It ain't nuthin like the real thing, baby.

Of course the VR laboratory might include a tree-like structure, or an actual tree, that you could climb while wearing the goggles. You're in a lab in a building somewhere, but as you look around during the ascent, you see the Rocky Mountains, feel the cool summer breeze, and smell the forest. Assuming technology can make these virtual scenes as realistic as possible, what will we use them for? The applications are endless - practical, educational, recreational, therapeutic. For example:

> - An architect take clients on a tour of their completed, fully decorated new home months before the foundation is poured.
>
> - A high school history class strolls through the busy streets of ancient Rome.
>
> - A daughter living in Hong Kong plays tennis with her father in New York, without either of them leaving home.
>
> - A professional dancer with a knee injury practices her routine on stage in the theater where she will perform later that year.
>
> - A psychotherapist accompanies her client to a family reunion that took place months ago.

It may never be possible for computers to generate highly true-to-life environments where these activities could take place. But crude approximations of these real world scenes are available now and will improve. VR "goggle technology" and interactive cyberspace environments are the predictors of things to come. More on that later in this article.

Imaginary VR

The beauty of computer simulated environments is their ability to transform reality as we know it. They do not have to recreate the actual world. Instead, they can construct imaginary environments, fantasy realms where the usual laws of reality are stretched, altered, or negated. You appear in any form you wish: animal, vegetable, or mineral. You shape-shift between persona as you please. You walk through walls, communicate telepathically, live out a scene from a movie or book, do anything your imagination can conjure up in any surrounding of your choice. It can be a dream-like experience, if that's what you want. We see the prototypes of these computer generated environments in online multimedia chat software such as The Palace.

Perhaps the term "virtual reality" applies to these environments in the sense that the imaginary experience could feel AS IF it was real. Fantasy becomes reality. It's important to note that the magnitude of these imaginary features could be controlled. Some scenarios might involve only a sprinkling of fantasy - like a walk to the top of the Eiffel Tower, where you eat lunch at your favorite cafe that has been transported intact from New York City. Other scenes could be intensely imaginative. Like being a flock of birds that dissolves into wispy clouds above the Grand Canyon. As with true-to-life VR, the applications are endless - practical, educational, recreational, therapeutic:

> - For a reunion party, college buddies gather in cyberspace to perform as a rock group in Madison Square Garden.
>
> - Grade school students take a Magic School Bus tour of the solar system.

- In preparation for filming, an actor experiments with a scene by trying out different bodies and changing the furniture and decor of the room.

- To better understand the species, a biologist spends a day living as a wolf in the Alaskan wilderness.

- In avatar psychotherapy, a therapist helps a client explore her identity by having her live out scenes as her mother, father, and as the character from her favorite novels.

A problem with highly unusual imaginary environments will be disorientation and sensory overstimulation. Nature shaped the human perceptual system to work efficiently within specific parameters. Designing fantasy environments for a person must take into consideration the biologically predetermined limits for sensory stimulation - as well as individual differences in how people can tolerate alterations in sensory stimulation. Problematic reactions to imaginary scenarios will involve complex psychological factors. Alterations in one's virtual body could trigger dissociation, identity diffusion and disruption, or disintegration anxiety. It will be important to assess the appropriate fantasy scene for any given person. From a research perspective, experimenting with imaginative environments can help psychology better understand the parameters of human sensation, perception, and identity construction.

To Immerse or Not

So far in this article, I've made the assumption that a good virtual environment is one in which people feel fully "immersed" - as if they actually are present in the scene. This may not always be the case. Third person views may in some cases be preferred over first person views. Using multimedia chat software, some people prefer the third person view of their avatars interacting in a visual scene (e.g., Palace), rather than the somewhat more claustrophobic tunnel-vision or "head-in-a-box" feeling of first person scenes. Once technology gives users more peripheral vision, that closed-in feeling may be less of a problem. Yet some people may still prefer the feeling of objectivity and even transcendence that third person views offer. A powerful virtual reality will offer both options - to immerse AND to step out and view the scenario from a distance. In "real" life, wouldn't it be very helpful to step out of a situation you're in so you can examine it from a safer, more objective distance? In virtual reality - especially scenarios that are especially arousing or disorienting - the ability to process the scene from a third person view might be very useful. Psychologists call it an "observing ego."

I've also made the assumption that virtual reality is interactive. Interactivity does enhance the sense of immersion. That's the way the real world works. You engage objects, animals, and people - and they engage you. But this too is a variable that can be controlled in virtual reality. You may choose to be a passive observer in a scene, without any power to alter it. You may choose to affect the things and people in the scene, but they cannot act directly on you. Or vice versa. You may even choose to have no avatar body at all, just pure consciousness in the scene. Of course, if we combine a third person view with absent interactivity, we're talking about TV and movies. Perhaps hundreds of years from now, media historians will consider TV and movies the earliest forms of VR.

The Ultimate VR Experience: Fact and Fiction

Seeing while hearing while smelling while tasting while touching while sensing and moving muscles. It's taken many millennium for the evolution of the human body and all its highly sophisticated, integrated network of sensations and behaviors. We're not going to duplicate that robust sensory and motor experience any time soon in a computer generated environment. Nevertheless, that doesn't stop us humans from imagining just how we might go about achieving that incredible technological feat. In science fiction stories and movies, we see two alternative methods:

Body Immersion Environments (BIE): Similar to the "holodecks" of Star Trek, the person physically steps into the virtual situation created by the computer. If you're going to walk through the woods and a climb a tree, it's you in your own body doing it, not an avatar. There are no goggles. That means the computer generates the ground, the trees, the sky, the breeze, the smells. The computer creates the environment, and you walk into it.

Now how does the computer do that? Well, maybe by converting energy into the matter of the virtual scene, and then setting it all into motion, and then creating the illusion that you can walk for miles in this space when really you've never left a 30'x40' holodeck chamber.... Not any easy technological trick! All of today's Internet technology is child's play by comparison.

Assuming it IS possible - or a watered-down variation of it - an important feature of a Body Immersion Environment is that it is "body bound." You are limited to activity and experience according to the parameters of the physical body. If you climb to the top of the tree, you're going to get tired. And if you fall from that high limp, the computer better have some very sophisticated injury prevention subprograms!

Brain Stimulated Environments (BSE): In the 1960s, the neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield used a thin electrode to selectively stimulate various areas of an awake patient's cerebral cortex, which was exposed during a brain surgery. Amazingly, when each area was stimulated, the patient reported a different sensory memory, such as the sound of piano music, or the smell of baking bread. It was as if each tiny section of the brain stored an intact sensory experience, which could be consciously recalled when electrically activated. Although replications of Penfield's research were unsuccessful, his work stirred up some fascinating speculations. Are all of our memories stored away in the cerebral cortex? Is it possible to tap that vast neuronal warehouse of intact sensory experiences, perhaps even activate complete memories we have long forgotten? Even more intriguing, could VR technology penetrate our unconscious, allowing us to live out scenes where we interact with our hidden fantasies, wishes, and fears?

Science still has no answer to these questions. Nevertheless, science fiction has had a field day with the possibility of brain stimulated experiences. In movies like "The Matrix" and "Total Recall," futuristic computer technology - using drugs, electrical and magnetic impulses, you name it - stimulates the cerebral cortex to create true-to-life worlds, down to every touch of the fingertips and the faintest whiff of perfume. The virtual scene all takes place inside one's head. In most science fiction stories, you have to wear a headset in order for the computer to work inside your skull. Exactly how the headset selectively stimulates the billions of neural pathways that comprise the gray matter - and how one goes about writing software that not only encodes the almost infinite sensory complexities of the real world but also translates that code into the control of the headset - well, that's really science FICTION!

How far will VR technology go on this path to realistic Body Immersion and Brain Stimulated Environments? For the moment, engineers are doing their very best to improve the visual and auditory components of goggle-technology. Computer-generated scenes tend to look somewhat artificial or cartoonish, which is fine for imaginary environments but falls short of the mark for true-to-life environments. Your movement through the virtual scene also is jerky and peripheral vision is weak. Some people get disoriented and sick - which, in a way, may be a good sign because their brain is fooled into thinking they have actually entered the scene, but a scene that is behaving in an unexpected, nauseating fashion. Another step forward will be to refine the technology enabling the fluid translation of your body movements into your avatar's movements. For narrow range activity, like dancing, the avatar's movements can closely mimic yours. For wide range activities, the avatar will amplify your movement. You jog in place, the avatar runs at top speed. Without that amplification, your real body is going to be running into the laboratory walls.

Virtual environments of the not too distant future most likely will be specialized and hybrids of BIE and BSE. A computer will use headsets to stimulate the eyes and ears, as well control an array of equipment and objects in the environment that interact physically with the person (air and mist jets; scent nozzles; passive and responsive objects like chairs, artificial trees, robotic and/or real animals and humans). Given the complexity of the software and hardware, each system will specialize in a particular set of virtual scenarios. "Reaching the Top of Everst," "Drinks at the Ritz," "Dodgers win the World Series." Actually, this is just a few notches above the special effects rides that many of us have enjoyed (or not!) in large theme parks. It's even possible that researchers will experiment with drugs - perhaps specifically designed psychedelic drugs - to enhance the intensity of immersion.

What is the "Reality" in Virtual Reality

Ultimately, all dichotomies are more a conceptual convenience than an absolute truth. It's probably more accurate to think of true-to-life and imaginary VRs as opposite poles on a continuum. In between, there are varying mixtures of reality and fantasy - some more reality-rich, others more fantasy-rich. Also, if we deconstruct any imaginative scenario, its elements are always drawn from reality-based experience. In your mind, you can visualize Lincoln pole-vaulting while wearing polka dot sweats. In reality, you have never seen this, but all of the elements - Lincoln, pole-vaulting, polka dots, sweats - are extracted from real world experiences. So an imaginary virtual scene always is constructed from tidbits of actual experience. It's a novel reshuffling and synthesis of the elements of reality.

There is at least one other way that the two paths of VR weave in and out of each other. Any fantasy has its roots in the unconscious - in hidden wishes, fears, and needs. Are those underlying elements of the human psyche any less important or "real" than what we see with our eyes or hear with our ears? We psychologists know that those inner fantasies shape how we perceive the world. So then what's the difference between "reality" and "perception" anyway? These are big philosophical questions. Perhaps we can use VR technology as a tool to explore this issues about the human mind and the realities it creates.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Cyberspace as a psychological space
Presence in cyberspace
The psychology of avatars and graphical space
Cyberspace as dream world
Avatar psychotherapy

The Black Hole of Cyberspace

(and the unanswered message)

So what crossed your mind when you came across that previous page and saw... nothing? Did you think it was just a glitch of some kind and moved on? Were you a bit perplexed, or annoyed? Did you doubt me or your pdf reader, thinking someone or something had made a error in presenting that page? Maybe you guessed I was intending to play some kind of trick on you. Maybe you weren't sure.

Welcome to the experience of the BLACK HOLE - those moments on the internet when we initiate some action and in return receive.... nothing. Not even an error message. As if our intentions were completely gobbled up by some mysterious beast akin to those pits in outer space that swallow anything that comes their way, letting nothing escape. The Black Hole defies and completely undercuts what everyone praises about computers - "It's INTERACTIVE!" In the Black Hole there is no interactivity. It's just you and the yawning void. The internet gives no response and spits in the face of it's own name.

The Black Hole may surface in many forms. Broadly defined, it's ANY situation in which the internet fails to provide you with any response or feedback. Nada. Zip. I'd like to focus on what is perhaps the most common and problematic manifestation of the Black Hole.... **The Unanswered Message**.

So what happens in email or texting when you hit "send" and the electrons you personally configured go flying out of your computer into the net - and days, or weeks, go by with no response from your e-mail partner? What happened to that message? Did it get to your ISP? Did it get into the internet? Did it get to your partner's ISP and down into her/his computer?... You don't know. You may never know. Even your most sophisticated computer guru can only suggest possibilities. It's a complete uncertainty that would make even Heisenberg's head ache.

That's what you're left with when you STILL haven't received a reply to your message. That's what the Black Hole is all about.... UNCERTAINTY. That uncertainty in turn generates a plethora of questions and self-doubts. Did the message get lost somewhere in all those thousands of miles of wires? Should I resend it, or would that just annoy him, or make her feel guilty, or put pressure on him, or make me look like I'm overly eager? Did the message indeed get to her, but she hasn't read it yet? Maybe he's away on vacation. Maybe she's got lots of mail and hasn't had time to read mine yet. Am I that unimportant to him, that she would read all those other messages before mine? Maybe she's in trouble or hurt! ... Maybe he did read it but hasn't yet replied. But why not? Don't I deserve a timely reply? I'm busy too you know! ... Maybe she's mad at me. Did I write something that would make him that angry? Or maybe she wants to keep me sitting on the edge of my seat. Maybe he's just toying with me. How dare she!... Did I forget to send the message? I better check my OutBox.

The Black Hole is like an inkblot test. It draws out whatever is on our mind. It's a blank screen onto which we project our wishes, fears, and insecurities. Deciding what to do about the unreplied message requires that you grapple with and resolve these projections.

But at least the inkblot looks like SOMETHING. The Black Hole has no texture, color, shape. It's completely formless, completely unresponsive. And it surfaces unpredictably. That makes for two strikes against basic human nature. Humans instinctively want and need an environment that gives responses and is predictable. We need people who react to us and are consistent. The Black Hole rubs us the wrong way. It's not giving us what we need to feel solid, sure, and empowered. At a deep unconscious level, maybe it even stirs up those primitive fears of being negated, eaten, and engulfed.

Now maybe I've overstated my case. But the next time you send an e-mail and receive no reply, take a look at those inklings in the back of your mind.

Online Lingo

Language at "The Palace"

Lingo defines a group and makes communication more efficient. These two basic principles are true for all groups - and are especially important in cyberspace where there is a plethora of newly developing groups and technical jargon. The distinct lingo that an online group adopts gives the group a unique identity among the hordes of other online groups. Learning the language is a socialization process. Insiders who know the language feel like they belong. They're in with the in-crowd. The group's vocabulary - especially its technical vocabulary - also has a more practical purpose: it makes communication more efficient. If you say "He's flooding the room" you don't have to explain what that means. Everyone knows. Sometimes the terms are written right into the software; sometimes they develop as a result of the community dynamics.

Listed below are explanations of some of the words often used in the multimedia (avatar-driven) communities collectively known as "Palace." The Palace language is a hybrid collection of commonly used internet terms and other words unique to the Palace community. These words were collected specifically from conversations at the "Main" Palace site, the oldest and one of the largest. Some of the terms (mostly those related to the social structure) are unique to that particularly community - different even from other Palace communities. The vocabulary at Main breaks down into some basic categories that are typical of many online groups:

> ACTIONS - words designating actions that can be taken towards the environment (like "clean") or towards other users. The actions towards other users are either communication terms (like "whisper") or power terms (like "kill" and "pin"). Often these terms are determined by the software.

> LOCATIONS - words indicating places to go within the community. For example, at Main "Harry's" refers to the room "Harry's Bar" while "DT" refers to the "Deep Thoughts" mailing list.

> SOCIAL STRUCTURE - words indicating different groups and classes of people within the community. Some of these terms are determined by the software (e.g., "wizards") because having that status entitles you to special software powers. Other terms (like "snert") evolve within the social context of the community.

> ACRONYMS - abbreviations that make communication more efficient, like "brb" and the ubiquitous "LOL."

Here are some of the words in the Palace language:

animate - a prop editing feature that creates moving avatars (flying, waving, dancing, etc.

avatar ("av") - the icon or graphic used to represent oneself. Guests are limited to a standard set of avatars, mostly the "smiley" faces. Members can create their own avatars. See prop.

ban - a command used by wizards and gods to prevent misbehaving users from connecting to a Palace site. Bans vary in length from hours to ... eternity.

bot - an avatar/prop that runs entirely on scripts and is not manned by a user. Bots may perform simple chores, like displaying information text when cued by a specific word - or complex tasks, like fetching a wizard from another site when paged.

brb - A widely used internet acronym for Be Right Back, indicating that a user is still connected to the site but is busy doing something else and probably won't respond to anything you say. Similar to "AFK" (away from keyboard), although this acronym is rarely used at the Palace.

client - the Palace software and interface that allows users to connnect to Palace sites.

clean - a script/command that removes all props (not avatars) from a room. The clean command will not work in rooms where scripts are turned off (such as Harry's at Main).

clone - to copy someone's avatar (an ability available only to wizards)

crash (as in "the server crashed") - when the machine running the Palace server software throws a fit and refuses to work.... temporarily. Users get knocked off the server and can't sign back on until the server returns to normal consciousness.

cybersex - an exercise in collaborative dirty talk and pornographic prop display. Skill at one-handed typing is a distinct advantage.

cyborg file - the iptscrae file that contains the routines used to automate aspects of your avatar's behavior online.

DT - the EC sponsored "Deep Thoughts" e-mail list which is devoted to a wide range of social and political discussions.

EC - Electric Communities, the company that now develops and sells the Palace software, as well as runs several Palace sites, including Main and Welcome.

ESPing - to communicate with a person who is in another room at the Palace. What one types to that person cannot be seen by other users. Sometimes referred to as "paging," although true pages can only be seen by wizards.

finger - a command that enables the user to display basic information about another user (assuming that other user has included that information in his or her finger script)

flame - a derogatory message. Considered poor netiquette

flooding - when the user rapidly sends a series of commands to the server, as in changing avs quickly or running multiple scripts. The server may automatically disconnect the user for this excessive activity, called "flooding out."

gag - a wizard's ability to silence a user in that the user's typing will not appear on the screens of other users. The Heimlich manuever does not solve this problem.

ghost - an avatar that remains on your screen even though the user of that avatar is no longer connected to the site. Ghosts will not move or respond to anything around them - they're working on unfinished business from their past lives. Fingering a ghost will produce nothing (unlike fingering a live/manned avatar that is simply motionless).

ghost prop - a translucent prop (not the same as a "ghost")

god - roughly equivalent to "sysop" (system operator).

guest - before the Palace client became free, guests were users who has not yet paid for their software. Guests could not create their own avatars or props and were limited in what they could do and where they could go at Palace sites.

hehe - an expression indicating a giggle: it indicates that the user finds something humorous, but not humorous enough to deserve a LOL, ROFL or LMAO. Also written as "hehehe,"Georgia, Times New Roman, Times, serif"hehehehe,"Georgia, Times New Roman, Times, serif"hehehehehe" (etc.) ... or simply as "heh" for the tired or somewhat unenthusiastic user. Sometimes mispelled as "heheh," or "hheh" or "hehhe" etc.

hosts - longstanding members who assist newcomers and, if necessary, discipline unruly users with "pins" and "gags." Unable to "kill," they are not as powerful as wizards.

IMHO - In My Humble Opinion

iptscrae (also spelled "iptscray") - the programming language for writing scripts. A difficult word to spell.

It - an unfriendly way to refer to a guest (unregistered user).

kill - the ability to disconnect (or "boot off") a user from the server. Only wizards and gods can kill other users. Wizards also can be killed, but not Gods.

lag - the excessive delay sometimes experienced between typing words and the appearance of those words on one's screen. Lag is usually due to excessive activity on the server and/or the networks connecting the user to the server. Complaining about lag is a favorite Palace pastime, although it's a great excuse for not responding to other users

LMAO - acronym for Laughing My Ass Off. Scientific research has not yet proven whether users typing a LMAO are actually emitting any sounds from their mouth.

log - the running text record of whatever conversation you happen to witness during a Palace session

LOL - acronym for Laughing Out Loud, a reaction to something humorous. Not as strong a reaction as ROFL or LMAO.

LTNS - Long Time No See

Magus - the organization of experienced Palatians who served as "helpers." The Magus organized many major Palace events, including the historic "24 Hours on the Palace." Members of the Magus were identified by the "?" in front of their names.

Main - the "Mansion" that is the oldest and one of the most populated Palace site.

member - a user who has registered his/her software. He or she can create their own avatars and props and have access to all rooms at the Palace.

Members - an EC site devoted to registered users (members).

mute - a script whereby a user can silence another person so that a muted person's typing will not appear on the screen of the user doing the muting. A useful defense against a persistent snert.

page - to call for a wizard's assistance

phone - usually posted as a "sign" balloon, indicates that the user is (duh) on the phone.

pin - a wizard's ability to immobilize misbehaving users by pinning them into the right corner of the screen. The victim's av is forced to a generic smiley and "chains" appear around it. As evident by some victims' exclamation, "Oooo, that feels good!", wizards occasionally pin as a playful activity.

prop - similar in meaning to "avatar" and often used interchangeably. However, some users reserve the word "prop" for (a) graphics that are moved about the room (e.g., a glass of beer, flowers, a sign), and/or, (b) graphics that are added to the avatar that represents oneself (e.g., a hat or roller skates added to your Bugs Bunny av).

propgag - a command that forces a user into the default smiley avatar. Used by wizards to control naughty avs.

PUG - the Palace Users Group; unrelated to those so-ugly-they're-cute dogs that snort.

purge - to reduce the size of the file which contains all the props that your client software has seen. The prop file can grow quite large otherwise.

register - downloading the Palace client software and thereby becoming registered with a Palace user identification number.

ROFL - acronym for Rolling On Floor Laughing

satchel - the briefcase where you store your props and avs. Also, a good trumpet player.

server - the actual machine the Palace program is running on and/or the software that interacts with the client software to allow users to do everything they do.

scripts - programs written in iptscrae that allow the user to automate activities such as moving one's prop, displaying graphics, and responding with a text message to other users words or actions. There are standard scripts that come with the Palace program. Users who learn iptscrae can write their own scripts.

site - a virtual "place in cyberspace" located at a specific address. Sites may be located on different servers.

Skaters - a group of users (some say a "gang") that use a skater avatar to designate their membership.

snert - an obnoxious, unruly user. The term originally applied to teenagers who were sexually annoying people ("snot-nosed-eros-ridden-twit"), but the current use of the term applies to any user who abuses others. You'll immediately recognize a snert when you meet one.

spam - a widely used internet term that usually refers to a person's attempts to repeatedly post the same message to an e-mail list or message board. Also, a word for an unpleasant meat-like substance in a can.

Sparkey - the name attached to the smiley faces (an historical tidbit - also the name of the first version of Palace that ran on IRC).

spikeys - the "excited" text balloons

spoof - placing a text balloon over the avatar of another user, thereby putting words into that person's mouth.

TPI - The Palace Incorporated, the company that sold and developed the Palace software after Time-Warner.

EC sites - Palace sites (servers) directly under the control of Electric Communities, including Main, Members and Welcome.

TW - Time-Warner (Incorporated), the original company that owned and developed the Palace software.

warp - using a script to jump to another Palace site.

whispering - to speak privately to another user in the room. What one types to the other user cannot be seen by anyone else in the room, including wizards. Whispered text appears in italics. As if in Some Enchanted Evening, everyone else in the room will fade into shadows.

Welcome - the Welcome Mansion Palace site that is the default setting in the client program. New users usually wind up going here first.

wizard - a user who has been selected for special duties at the Palace. Wizards meet with the "gods" to discuss and make changes in the Palace, and also enforce rules by disciplining unruly users - if necessary, by using their "pin,"Georgia, Times New Roman, Times, serif"gag," and "kill" abilities. Each Palace site has its own collection of wizards. At the Main site, only wizards can place an asterik (*) in front of their name - which is intended as a badge to make them easily identifiable by users who may need their help. Most wizards prefer not to wear the badge!

zap - to direct a laser-like flash with an appropriate sound at somebody; use it too often, and you will be labeled as a kid. Zap is a standard iptscrae script.

Internet Demographics 1998

"Just the Facts"

Ed Katkin, my advisor in graduate school, used to say that there are two types of researchers: lumpers and splitters. Lumpers look for universal rules and valid generalizations about human behavior. Splitters are more interested in studying how individuals differ from each other. Many of the discussions in this book The *Psychology of Cyberspace* come from the splitter's perspective. Much of it is based on psychological theory and conceptualization. Sometimes, however, it's nice just to have the hardcore facts about the people who inhabit the internet. The statistics below are Nielsen/NetRatings from a story in *Internet World* and were reported by John Grohol to the Psychology of the Internet mailing list. It's been several years since I first posted these stats here in *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, so they are dated now. Nevertheless, in addition to being an interesting glimpse into the past, such statistics raise important questions about how demographic factors might influence the social dynamics of cyberspace, as well as how cyberspace reflects the global culture. You can read the statistics for yourself and come to your own conclusions. For each of the categories of stats I've taken the liberty of adding my 2 cents. Whenever we evaluate statistics like these, we should keep in mind the problem of "sampling bias" - i.e., did the survey method result in a sample that is an accurate representation of all people on the internet? Mark Twain once said, "There are three types of lies: lies, damned lies.... and statistics."

Number of Americans Online: 76 million

Total people worldwide: 149 million

Male: 52.7%

Female: 47.3%

Age:

0-17	19.1%
18-24	11.3%
25-34	19.1%
35-44	23.0%
45-54	17.2%
55-64	6.7%
65+	3.7%

Income:

$0-25k	6.4%
$25-50k	25.8%
$50-75k	28.6%
$75-100k	17.5%
$100-150k	10.4%
$150-$1m	4.9%
No response	6.4%

Education:

Grammar school	1.5%
Some H.S.	5.7%
H.S. graduate	18.8%
Some college	20.9%
Associate degree	9.5%
Bachelor's degree	25.1%
Post-graduate degree	16.9%
No response	1.6%

Race:

White	83.5%
African-American	8.0%
Asian	2.1%
American Indian	1.0%
Other	4.0%
No response	1.9%

Geography:

North American	55.5%
Western Europe	23.3%
Asia Pacific	15.5%
Eastern Europe/Russia	2.0%
Latin America	1.8%
Middle East/Africa	1.9%

If Americans made up half of the cyberspace population, did the American character shape the atmosphere of cyberspace? How did people of other nations view the large numbers of Americans online? Were Americans more preoccupied with computers than the rest of the world?

It wasn't too long ago that many people believed males predominated on the internet. While some people may still hold that belief, these statistics say otherwise. It's possible that males and females may be pursuing different activities in cyberspace. How might the atmosphere of online life be shaped by the blend of male and female influences?

"Don't trust anyone over 30".... Looks like that's about half of the people on the internet, which contradicts the belief that it's mostly young people who hang out in cyberspace. Similar to gender differences, young people may be pursuing different activities in cyberspace than older people. In some environments, male teens do seem to be the ones who are the most mischievous (see the "Bad Boys" article). A solid 10% of onliners are seniors, which means old dogs can learn new tricks (see the article about The Geezer Brigade).

Some people say that there's an "equalization of status" in cyberspace because your appearance and background matter little in the impact you make. But what about people who can't afford computers or have no experience with them? Will the internet become yet another way that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Will there be a drastic split between those are cyberspace-empowered and those who are not? The digital divide is real.

These statistics about education level have surely changed over time. There are more grammar, middle, and high school kids on the internet than these numbers from the past suggest. In fact, the rising use of the internet among children has become a safety and mental health problem for our youth.

If this statistic about race was accurate, then cyberspace used to be dominated by white people. I've heard some critics claim that the internet is yet another form of colonization. If the internet becomes truly "global," then it must become truly multi-cultural and multi-racial. Will it then be a different place than it is now? Will the meeting of cultures and races in cyberspace transform the "real" world?

Obviously, the most technologically advanced countries will have a stronger presence in cyberspace. Is this more evidence for the theory that the internet is the new frontier for "colonization" by the world powers?

Cyberspace Humor

Truth comes out in jest. In other words, jokes can be silly and funny at the same time as revealing some serious truths. This cartoon from the Atlanta Constitution is a good example. It pokes fun at the issue of internet addiction - which looms large as one of the most pervasive concerns about the internet in this technology-driven culture of ours. The cartoon singles out a seriously addicted Phil while making us laugh about the situation. In reality, some people do become pathologically preoccupied with cyberspace, but also our culture - especially our media - is almost laughably addicted to scandals in general and to the topic of "addiction" in particular. Seeing the mouse up his nose, we're tempted to think that cyberspace is a mind-altering drug, a biochemical disorder, a transcendental entity to merge with, maybe even a phallic (and in Phil's case, homosexual) symbol. More icons of our contemporary cultural psyche! And is it a coincidence that it's a male who gets so narcissistically wrapped up in his machine while the women, bonding together, assess the situation?

There are many other jokes about internet addiction. Because we're a very medical oriented and symptom preoccupied culture, quite a few of them focus on the "signs" that one has gone overboard. For example:

The Top 10 Signs You're Addicted to the Net

10. You wake up at 3 a.m. to go to the bathroom and stop and check your e-mail on the way back to bed.

9. You get a tattoo that reads "This body best viewed with Netscape Navigator 1.1 or higher."

8. You name your children Eudora, Mozilla and Dotcom.

7. You turn off your modem and get this awful empty feeling, like you just pulled the plug on a loved one.

6. You spend half of the plane trip with your laptop on your lap...and your child in the overhead compartment.

5. You decide to stay in college for an additional year or two, just for the free Internet access.

4. You laugh at people with 2400-baud modems.

3. You start using smileys in your snail mail.

2. The last mate you picked up was a JPEG.

1. Your hard drive crashes. You haven't logged in for two hours. You start to twitch. You pick up the phone and manually dial your ISP's access number. You try to hum to communicate with the modem.

You succeed.

Extensis View Window Help

Undo Stupid Changes	Ctrl+Shift+S
Read Boss' Mind	Ctrl+Alt+R
Adjust Boss' Attitude	Ctrl+Shift+A
Create Idea	Ctrl+I
Insert Brilliance	Ctrl+B
✓ Extend Deadline	Ctrl+D
Enhance Salary	Ctrl+Y
Find Better Client	Ctrl+Alt+C
Restore Wasted Evenings	Ctrl+W
Save Weekend	Ctrl+S

Colored By Fayebe

What's amusing about these internet jokes - especially to avid onliners - is how they mix reality and fantasy. Hardcore e-mail users do seize the first opportunity they can to check their in-box. And 2400 baud modems indeed seem like silly toys to the experienced user. The fantasy turns to the absurd when cyberspace begins to take over your in-person life. Like an invasion of the body snatchers, it becomes your children and your mate. It becomes the loved one, the source of oceanic oneness and bliss. This quest to psychically meld into union with one's computer fueled the April Fool's prank about the telepathically controlled e-mail headset called "Orrechio" (see the article about cyberspace as psychological space). The fantasy relationship with our computer may express our grandiose wish to control everything in our lives. The bottom line is that the fantasy rests on both a wish AND a fear. We want omnipotent control with the computer. We want omnipotent control over the computer. But what goes around comes around. It may take control over us.

Here's another sound clip that Asia found during her journeys. I had to laugh out loud when she played it for me. Entitled "Trapped on the Internet" (wav file 464k), it's sung to the tune of the "Gilligan's Island" theme song. For a change, internet addiction is not (at least overtly) the gist of these silly lyrics. Instead, it portrays another pervasive cultural anxiety regarding the internet - the paranoia about malicious people coming after you, in this case, the mysterious, all-knowing, almost demonic "cybergeeks" who reign over the internet. They are the incarnation of the Boogey Man who hide in the corners of cyberspace rather than under our beds. Unable to escape them, the protagonist in the song resorts to pulling the plug on his computer, but to no avail. Caught by some supernatural intervention, he's STILL trapped on the internet! It's not just the cybergeeks we fear, but also the unearthly, almost mystical powers of this inescapable thing called "cyberspace." It threatens to overcome reality and swallow us up! Perhaps not coincidentally, this was a theme I tinkered with in my novel *Madman* when the protagonist Thomas Holden - a weary and stressed psychology intern - seeks help from a computerized psychotherapist program called "Siggie" (excerpt appears in the article about computerized psychotherapy).

Computers that act like people, people that act like computers. As our machines become more and more sophisticated - almost as sophisticated as their creators - we start to wonder whether there's much of a difference between the two. Does the human mind work like a computer? Can computers become almost human? Interesting scientific and philosophical questions! These issues could lead to some rather maladaptive attitudes about human relationships that are parodied in jokes like this:

Seeking technical support for Girlfriend:

I'm currently running the latest version of Girlfriend 2.0 and am having some problems. I've been running the same version of DrinkingBuddies 1.0 all along as my primary application, and all the Girlfriend releases have always conflicted with it. I hear DrinkingBuddies won't crash if you run Girlfriend in background mode with the sound switched off. But I'm embarrassed to say that I can't find the button to turn it off. I just run them separately, and it works OK. I probably should have stayed with Girlfriend 1.0, but I thought I might see better performance with Girlfriend 2.0.

My friend also told me that Girlfriend 2.0 expires within a year if you don't upgrade to Fiancee 1.0. And after that, you have to upgrade to Wife 1.0, which he said is a huge resource hog. On top of that, Wife 1.0 comes bundled with MotherInLaw 1.0 which has an automatic pop-up feature that can't be turned off. I told him to install Mistress 1.0, but he said that if you try to run it without first uninstalling Wife 1.0, that Wife 1.0 will delete MSMoney files before doing the uninstall itself. Then Mistress 1.0 won't install anyway due to insufficient resources.

Anybody out there able to offer technical advice.......?

Wanting to control women like they control their cars and computers. Wanting to understand women like they understand their cars and computers. But failing on both scores. Not exactly an admirable portrayal of the male psyche! There is a strong tendency to perceive computers as if they are people, a phenomenon known as "transference." Norman Holland even suggested that we can regress to thinking that our computers are sexual beings, which seems to be the confusion that plagues the desperate GirlFriend user. However, whether the computer acts more like a man or a woman is an issue open to debate. In one joke about a "scientific poll" of attitudes concerning computers, the findings were divided:

Women stated that computer should be referred to in the masculine gender because:

1. In order to get their attention, you have to turn them on;
2. They have a lot of data, but are still clueless;
3. They are supposed to help you solve problems but half the time they are the problem;
4. As soon as you commit to one, you realize that, if you had waited a little longer you could have had a better model.

Men conclude that computers should be referred to in the feminine gender because:

1. No one but the Creator understands their internal logic;
2. The native language they use to communicate with other computers is incomprehensible to everyone else;
3. Even your smallest mistakes are stored in long-term memory for later retrieval;
4. As soon as you make a commitment to one, you find yourself spending half your paycheck on accessories for it.

The ancient and never-ending battle of the sexes shines through once again! Cyberspace jokes - like any brand of humor - serve as a vehicle for expressing universal human issues. Other cyberspace bits, however, specialize in making fun of experiences that are unique to cyberspace - jokes that only experienced onliners will appreciate. Anyone who has participated in an online forum that is discussing the possibility of something about the group will this:

How many forum members does it take to change a light bulb?
Answer: 1,331

1 to change the light bulb and to post to the forum that the light bulb has been changed

14 to share similar experiences of changing light bulbs and how the light bulb could have been changed differently

7 to caution about the dangers of changing light bulbs

27 to point out spelling/grammar errors in posts about changing light bulbs

53 to flame the spell checkers

41 to correct spelling in the spelling/grammar flames

156 to write to the forum administrator complaining about the light bulb discussion and its inappropriateness to this forum

109 to post that this forum is not about light bulbs and to please take this exchange to another forum

203 to demand that cross posting to other forums about changing light bulbs be stopped

111 to defend the posting to this forum saying that we all use light bulbs and therefore the posts *are* relevant to this forum 3 to post about links they found from the URLs that are relevant to this forum which makes light bulbs relevant to this forum

306 to debate which method of changing light bulbs is superior, where to buy the best light bulbs, what brand of light bulbs work best for this technique, and what brands are faulty

27 to post URLs where one can see examples of different light bulbs

14 to post that the URLs were posted incorrectly, and to post corrected URLs

33 to concatenate all posts to date, then quote them including all headers and footers, and then add "Me Too."

12 to post to the forum that they are leaving the forum because they cannot handle the light bulb controversey

19 to quote the "Me Too's" to say, "Me Three."

4 to suggest that posters request a light bulb FAQ

48 to propose a new change.lite.bulb forum

47 to say there is already an alt.light.bulb forum

143 to ask if anyone ever did change the lightbulb

Or how about the freedom the internet offers in allowing everyone the opportunity to speak their mind? Is it too much freedom? Perhaps we don't want every narcissistic, opinionated, loud-mouthed pundit and his brother bending our ears, as this bit of humor suggests:

The NewsGroup Personality

(Based on the Major General's song from
Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Pirates of Penzance")

I am the very model of a Newsgroup personality.
I intersperse obscenity with tedious banality.
Addresses I have plenty of, both genuine and ghosted too,
On all the countless newsgroups that my drivel is cross-posted to.
Your bandwidth I will fritter with my whining and my sniveling,
And you're the one who pays the bill, downloading all my driveling.
My enemies are numerous, and no-one would be blaming you
For cracking my head open after I've been rudely flaming you.

I hate to lose an argument (by now I should be used to it).
I wouldn't know a valid point if I was introduced to it.
My learning is extensive but consists of mindless trivia,
Designed to fan my ego, which is larger than Bolivia.
The comments that I vomit forth, disguised as jest and drollery,
Are really just an exercise in unremitting trollery.
I say I'm frank and forthright, but that's merely lies and vanity,
The gibberings of one who's at the limits of his sanity.

If only I could get a life, as many people tell me to;
If only Mom could find a circus freak-show she could sell me to;
If I go off to Zanzibar to paint the local scenery;
If I lose all my fingers in a mishap with machinery;
If I survive to twenty, which is somewhat problematical;
If what I post was more mature, or slightly more grammatical;
If I could learn to spell a bit, and maybe even punctuate;
Would I still be the loathsome and objectionable punk you hate?

But while I have this tiresome urge to prance around and show my face,
It simply isn't safe for normal people here in cyberspace.
To stick me in Old Sparky and turn on the electricity
Would be a fitting punishment for my egocentricity.
I always have the last word; so, with uttermost finality,
That's all from me, the model of a Newsgroup personality.

In another problematic scenario quite familiar to the jaded cybercitizen, we are looking for an answer to an important question. We've been told the internet is a massive information superhighway, that people online are knowledgeable and helpful, so our expectations are high. Little did we know that ye may seek but NOT find. Sometimes the responses to our query may be everything except what we want:

I Shot A Query Into The Net

I shot a query into the Net.
I haven't got an answer yet,
But seven people gave me hell
And said I ought to learn to spell;

A posted message called me rotten
For ignoring mail I'd never gotten;
An angry message asked me, Please
Don't send such drivel overseas;

A lawyer sent me private mail
And swore he'd slap me in jail --
I'd mentioned Un*x in my gem
And failed to add the T and M;

One netter thought it was a hoax:
"Hereafter, post to net dot jokes!";
Another called my grammar vile
And criticized my writing style.

Each day I scan each Subject line
In hopes the topic will be mine;
I shot a query into the Net.
I haven't got an answer yet ...

The old timers understand all these in's and out's of living online. But for the newbies, cyberspace is a brand new world filled with goodies... and fears. Sometimes those fears are legitimate. Sometimes naive. They can't tell the difference between the two. They haven't yet developed an eye for discerning what's accurate information on the net and what's gobbly-gook. Eventually, the internet will force us all to develop that power to accurately evaluate data. In the meanwhile, the newbies' ignorance and trepidation about this strange new world may lead them astray - a dilemma the oldtimer may portray as satire:

****
WARNING, CAUTION, DANGER, AND BEWARE!
Gullibility Virus Spreading over the Internet!
****

WASHINGTON, D.C.--The Institute for the Investigation of Irregular Internet Phenomena announced today that many Internet users are becoming infected by a new virus that causes them to believe without question every groundless story, legend, and dire warning that shows up in their inbox or on their browser. The Gullibility Virus, as it is called, apparently makes people believe and forward copies of silly hoaxes relating to cookie recipes, email viruses, taxes on modems, and get-rich-quick schemes. Internet users are urged to examine themselves for symptoms of the virus, which include the following:

- The willingness to believe improbable stories without thinking.
- The urge to forward multiple copies of such stories to others.
- A lack of desire to take three minutes to check to see if a story is true.

Anyone with symptoms like these is urged to seek help immediately. Experts recommend that at the first feelings of gullibility, Internet users rush to their favorite search engine and look up the item tempting them to thoughtless credence. Most hoaxes, legends, and tall tales have been widely discussed and exposed by the Internet community.

Forward this message to all your friends right away! Don't think about it! This story is so timely, there is no date on it! This story is so important, we're using lots of exclamation points! Lots!! For every message you forward to some unsuspecting person, the Home for the Hopelessly Gullible will donate ten cents to itself.

I've presented only a few types of cyberspace humor in this article, so the sample is limited. Nevertheless, it's interesting how they all reveal our underlying fears and frustrations. That's the purpose of most humor - to help us ventilate our psychological tensions. Maybe we could boost its soothing effect by combining it with, say, poetry. Can you imagine anything more psychically therapeutic than Haiku that pinpoints and exorcises all our anxieties about this new Being we call "computer":

```
------------------------------
-----
First snow, then silence.
This thousand dollar
screen dies
so beautifully.
```

```
---------------------------
A file that big?
It might be very useful.
But now it is gone.
---------------------------
```

```
------------------------------------
The Web site you seek
cannot be located but
endless others exist
---------------------------
```

```
- - - - - --- --- ----------------------------
---------
Chaos reigns within.
Reflect, repent, and reboot.
Order shall return.
-------------------------------
```

```
------------------------------
- - -
ABORTED effort:
Close all that you have.
You ask way too much.
---------------------------
```

```
------------------------------------------------------
Out of memory.
We wish to hold the whole sky,
But we never will.
---------------------------------------- - -------------
-----------
```

```
----- ------------------------
------
You step in the stream,
but the water has moved
on.
This page is not here.
------------------------------
```

```
-- -----------------------------
Stay the patient course
Of little worth is your ire
The network is down
---------------------------------- -- -
```

```
---------------------------------
A crash reduces
your expensive computer
to a simple stone.
---------------------------
```

Defending the In-Box

The Psychology of Coping with Spam

In the early days, people on the Internet eagerly encouraged communication. They wanted to share ideas in an inviting, trusting atmosphere. As the population in cyberspace boomed - as large chunks of the internet took shape as market place, soapbox, and mischievous, even hostile playground - that atmosphere faded. Suspicion may override trust. Some users may find themselves wanting to shut down communication rather than open it up. I'd like to discuss one infamous trend fueling that isolationist desire, thereby contributing to the slow erosion of the old, idealistic Internet philosophy. It's a phenomenon that reinforces what used to be a paranoid stereotype about the internet - that cyberspace is filled with pornography and people trying to manipulate, deceive, and trick you. It's a mundane nuisance that everyone deals with everyday. It's called "spam."

What is spam....to you?

Some say the term comes from a Monty Python television episode in which a seemingly random and meaningless repetition of the song "spam, spam, lovely spam, wonderful spam" overpowered the rest of the show. Others claim the term originated among technology geeks at the University of Southern California who invented it because, like its lunchmeat namesake, almost no one seems to ask for or want it. If they do happen to get it, they most likely throw it away.

Definitions of spam vary. Advocates of the idealistic Internet philosophy may apply a broad stroke to include any message violating the traditional rules of netiquette that were intended to preserve online cooperation, helpfulness, trust, and, somewhat parsimoniously, bandwidth. Thinking like modern consumers, other users tend to define spam as the the electronic equivalent of junk mail. Some of the features of spam identified in the various definitions include:

- a communication that is unsolicited, including uninvited e-mail and messages that appear above and below your browser window ("pop-ups" and "pop-unders")

- an irrelevant, inappropriate, or repetitious e-mail or message board post

- an advertisement for some product or service

- a message sent indiscriminately to many people, including commercial messages, political and social commentaries

- email chain letters

- an attempt to flood and possibly crash a fixed-site by bombarding it with input data

In this article I'd like to focus specifically on email spam. Often I find myself comparing it to weeds. A weed, generally speaking, is anything that persistently grows where we don't want it to grow, that threatens to displace or choke out the plant life that we want to thrive. Those unwanted messages that steadily invade our in-box are spam. They obscure the communications we want to find, thwarting our attempts to cultivate chosen contacts and relationships.

A strong relationship exists between one's presence on the web and the amount of spam received. The more places in cyberspace that your e-mail address is listed, the more likely the spammers will find it and add it to their mailing lists. Paradoxically, then, the more available your address, the less likely people will be able to clearly contact you through the noise created by the spam you receive. Currently, I receive up to 100 spam emails a day.

The Invasion of Personal Space

As I've mentioned in various sections of this book, cyberspace is psychological space. The spaces we create with our online communication tools become extensions of our mind, of our personalities. Consciously or unconsciously, we may experience what happens in our email as voices and dialogues blended with our own thoughts. We may come to treasure the privacy of that personal space embodied by our in-box, where we encounter the presence of others that we choose to encounter. We might then perceive spam as an invasion of that personal space. It is an intrusion into our relationships and psyche.

Invasions trigger defensive responses. As territorial creatures, we protect our ground. But how you we stop spam from infiltrating our email? How do we keep the weeds out of our gardens? And if they succeed in implanting themselves, how easily can we spot them?

The strategy adopted by the spammer consists of two basic stages: (1) land the mail in your in-box, and, (2) entice you to open it. Likewise, your defensive campaign includes two basic tactics: using software filters and weeding by hand.

Juggling Software Filters

This tactic involves preemptive efforts to prevent spam from getting into your in-box, to vanquish those messages before they even reaches your eyes, like herbicides that destroy the weed seedlings before they get a chance to take root. This strategy relies on technology. Responding to demand, software companies now sell a variety of anti-spam products. The logic behind much of this software is basically the same: detect, then block or delete spam before it appears in the in-box. The concept is simple enough, but the detection of spam gets to be the tricky issue. Although most programs contain built-in filters, some spam will still get through. At that point the program usually allows the user to identify specific email addresses or keywords within the message subject or body that flag an email as spam.

But the spammers are clever. They continually alter their address and message content so their mail can successfully slip through the built-in and user-defined filters. The result is an endless cat-and-mouse game in which the user is continually modifying filters in order to screen out the ever-mutating old spam mail, as well as any brand new spam that starts to arrive. Some technically savvy users, who enjoy tinkering with software, may enjoy this duel. No doubt they feel empowered in knowing that they can use their skills to try to defeat the encroaching enemy. But this game is time-consuming. Some users feel that simply deleting spam by hand may require no more, or even less, time and effort than constantly patching up the holes in one's filters.

This software defense also requires a complex "signal detection" juggling act. How do you balance the false hits against the false misses? If you make your filters robust, you will eliminate lots of spam at the risk of also blocking out valid messages. Targeting any email with a subject title containing the word "penis" will quickly eliminate messages bolding claiming a product that will dramatically increase your size, but what about that long-lost, zany friend who decides to contact you with a surprise phallic joke as the title of his email? On the other hand, if you ease up on your filters you will increase the possibility of letting desirable mail through, at the cost of letting in more spam as well. Where is that delicate balance of just enough blocking? Just how open and vulnerable, versus closed and protected, does a person want to be? It's an interesting psychological question.

For those who desire an airtight defense, some programs will only let through mail that comes from specific people and addresses that have been approved by the user. All other messages are blocked. Obviously, the user may indeed wish to read some incoming mail that is not on the approved list - for example, a friend or colleague who is contacting the user for the first time. Because these programs place blocked mail in a specific folder or directory, a kind of spam detention camp, the user can go into that directory to review the list of messages to see whether any are worth redeeming.

Weeding by Hand

The user then faces the same challenge as someone who is not using any software filters software at all, who instead scans the list of messages in the in-box. Which ones are spam? Do you know a weed when you see it? Of course, one person's weed is another's flower, so the answer is partly personal and philosophical. Nevertheless, this defensive campaign of weeding out spam by hand turns into a fascinating psychological game. The spammer wants you to open that email so the message can spring before your eyes, if only for a second before you delete it. But you don't want to waste your time, especially if you're scanning down a list of dozens of messages, with some of them packed full of graphics that compel you to either wait impatiently while they load or forcefully click your way out before the weed can

finish growing. To spare yourself some time and frustration, you make your decision to delete by evaluating the sender's name and the subject title without opening the message. This, then, is the game: can you detect the weeds, or does the spammer succeed in tricking you to open that can of spam?

To Open or Not: Recognizing the Types of Spam Trickery

Here I'd like to share samples of some of the spam I've received. Not the whole message, because then I'd be spamming you. I'll just list the senders' names and subject titles. I'd like to use them as illustrations of that interesting duel between spammer and spammee - that game called "to open or not to open." Keep in mind that some of these crafty emails might also involve attempts to infect your computer with a virus. We can consider these viral-packed messages to be a type of spam - poisonous spam.

drgrv@msn.com	Eat pizza, watch TV ... and lose 22 pounds
pershaxa@msn.com	Make your Penis Huge
a0351mshw@hotmail.com	Want to make $ in the market? Easy...
investor relations	Double your money every week, here is proof!
deanot9@truesavings.com	Lower your mortgage payment
cheap_inkr@hotmail.com	save up to 80% for your Inkjets and toners

Activating Cultural Preoccupations: These advertizements are easy to spot as spam. but depending on personal needs, a person may be tempted to open one. Some of these messages are coming from well-known online services, which seems to lend some legitimacy. Who doesn't want to save money, lose weight, or increase penis size? We live in a culture that dwells on making comparisons. "Less" and "More" are on everyone's mind. These messages tap that reservoir of obsessions underlying our society. In a fascinating sociological experiment we might categorize and tally such messages as a barometer of American life. Someone is probably doing that research right now.

vfkefnvjkfln@dandy.net	Take hold of your Pleasure!
success	We Guarantee your success
cruising23@msn.com	Make IT big... FOREVER
Raplph Jinkins	IT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE
patrickmcgregor	Learn How To Love
leiy zhouh	Let's Dance and forget pains
Tracey	It worked for me - it will work for you
FREEDOM	What is Freedom to you ?

Activating Archetypal Concerns: Here we see the message titles playing not just on the obsessions of the American psyche, but also on fundamental existential and archetypal concerns - issues basic to simply being human. Success, pain, pleasure, love, freedom, celebration, life transformation. The message titles present these ideas in a very vague, generic manner, almost like an inkblot test. What does "pleasure" and "freedom" and "love" mean to you? Advertisers well know that ambiguous messages pull on one's imagination. They activate the unconscious mind. We can't help but project our own thoughts, feelings, and needs into that ambiguity, even if we aren't fully aware of that projection. If you sense something of yourself in the message subject, you will be tempted to open it.

Brian Velquez	Date a lonely housewife!
pandora	Darling
Dorothy	Pics Attached
Gabriella Nolsen	From Russia with love
Oloidia	adult products for you
girls324Oloidia	Nasty girls do it all!

<u>Activating Sexuality</u>: Here I'll highlight one particular primal concern that spammers often target - sexuality, along with all the nuances of seduction, romance, pleasure, wantonness, and depravity that one can imagine. These messages are easy to spot. For some people, they may be hard to resist. For others they may become an annoyingly chronic eyesore. Some people may wonder why spammers targeted them with these pornographic ads. They may wonder if online they said or visited something sexual that these spammers detected. Triggering all sorts of conscious and unconsciousness anxieties, sexual messages, even ones uninvited, can induce guilt. More often than not, these types of spam are randomly distributed, even, unfortunately and criminally, to children.

Sara Blake	Rejection Policy-7573
tracking328@network.com	Your computer is infected
Sim100DA@bigfoot.com	You are being investigated
admins@skyyynet.com	We are closing your account

<u>Activating Anxiety</u>: The title of these messages, even though they may have absolutely nothing to do with the content of the email, arouse anxiety. Did I do something wrong? Is something bad about to happen to me? It's hard to resist opening the message just to reassure ourselves that everything is OK. Horror stories about the Internet abound in the media, so cyberspace has evolved into a somewhat paranoid space, leading us to worry about our privacy and the safety of our computer systems. Some of those fears are not totally unjustified. Spam that activates those fears are difficult to ignore.

Lorna Blouin	Time in a bottle for suler
Leoma Intplan	suler Buy Generic and save
hassan_egueh	Hi,suler,some questions
Kassie Oam	suler return to your youth
deno_ran@hotmail.com	Suler, I'm very tired of viruses too
Michel Narayana	Grants for suler@voice.com
Rebbeca Amott	Information for JOHN SULER

<u>Faking a Personal Touch</u>: If someone addresses you by name, you respond. The first time these "personalized" messages appear in your inbox, you will most likely open them, thinking that someone specifically addressed them to you. After only a tad more experience, you'll see that a computer generated these message titles, with your name or email address awkwardly inserted. These messages also have a personal touch in that they appear to come from a specific person rather than an organization or business. Do I know a "Kassie Oam?" The spammer hopes that your curiosity and willingness to respond to an individual, particularly one who addresses you by name, will prompt you to open that message. Keep in mind that these names may be purely fictitious, or even more insidiously, stolen. In an identity rip-off that some people call "spoofing," spammers use programs that filch real names and email addresses , then insert them into their spam mail as the senders.

Henry	Re: Free Financial Consultation
Britney	re: your request
Matt	re: help
BrowningLuv	Fw: Enjoy Romantic life !!
bakerd	Fw: suler, some questions
correspondenceunit	Hello, please try again
big@boss.com	here is that sample you requested
Grazyna Shupe	You Were Approved
source resources	Service Notice

<u>Faking Replies and Interaction</u>s: When a "re:" appears at the front of a subject line, we assume that someone is replying to a message that we sent - or, if we belong to an email group, that someone is replying to another member of the group. That simple prefix implies people responding to people, human interaction that probably includes you. And so we open the message to see what that discussion is about. If we find ourselves trying to recall if we sent an email entitled "your request" or "help," we may open the message out of curiosity, perhaps to reassure ourselves that we aren't suffering from a lapse of memory. We can throw into this category spam including a "Fw:" prefix, which also

draws us into the illusion of human interaction by faking a person who decided to forward some important message to us. Some spam subject titles create the appearance of a reply to your actions without using a "re:" - as in messages that notify you of some service or product you supposedly requested.

whitny2003	re: purpose of this online hypertext book
atinuke ige	re: professor of psychology, Rider University
a0351rb@hotmail.com	re: why tell a zen story?

Snatching Quotes: A particularly devious use of the "re:" includes a subsequent subject title consisting of phrases stolen from one of your web pages. Apparently, spammers have robot programs that grab email addresses as well as text from web sites. These messages very likely will trick you into opening them, at least the first few times. They may give themselves away by the fact that the snatched quotes tend to be awkward and rather random.

Joey	hey
Jason Ching	whats up?
RoXyxPri@earthlink.net	Hiya!
mtch17@sina.com	How're you doing?
BakersBDF	Happy to see you
Justin	I'll keep this short...
carlandhelen	message from Anna, Mary's mother
jb_on_d007	Fw: Interesting relations for you
shuntel	fgrice, Check This Out
friends	are you :-)

Faking Informality and Acquaintance: Some messages contain subject lines worded in a casual, friendly style, which creates the illusion of someone who knows you. Seeing only the sender's first name reinforces that informal feeling. Other messages imply some kind of connection to you, as in suggesting that you saw this person recently or know someone that this sender knows. Again, keep in mind that these subject lines have absolutely nothing to do with the content of the email, which often is an advertisement of some sort.

agiliberto	goldfish
lei zhou	Shake it baby
chickfighting	
jennifer........	incredibile........
dziubany	Happy Epiphany
sounni	wrgwger
123@av.vcd	=?big5?Q
°Á¤¹Ì	¾È³çÇÏ¼¼¿ä..

Quirky attention grabbers: Some message titles leave you scratching your head, including the absence of message titles. A curious sender name adds to the effect. You may know it's spam, but open it anyway out of curiosity, just to see what's inside. Message titles containing strange glitches often indicate message bodies filled with glitches, sometimes due to email coming from other countries that use different character sets which are not translated properly by your email software. You will probably open these messages only once. Afterwards, they become easily spotted targets for the delete button, like shooting fish in a barrel.

Additional Assaults: Spam Droppings, Clogging, and Spoofing

Unfortunately, your defensive campaign doesn't end with the spam deleted from your in-box. Much spam contains attachments that may pile up in your email attachments folder. In fact, an attachment icon appearing next to a message in your in-box is an additional cue indicating that the message may be spam. If you haven't already heard, never open these attachments, unless you have a death wish for unleashing a virus or are very confident that the attachment is safe. Some email programs enable you to delete attachments automatically when you delete the message in your inbox, although a few sneaky attachments may still linger.

Some spam, along with their quite large attachments, also may pile up on your ISP server, even though other mail is downloaded and then deleted from your account. If left unchecked, this pile will build until your disk space on the server is full, creating a clog that will cause incoming mail to bounce back to their senders with a "mailbox full" error message. If your ISP does not inform you of your clogged disk space, you may never know that people can no longer email you. Essentially, these spam droppings have stopped up your email service. It's a case of constipation. Check your email program to enable features that will delete these messages on the server. A last resort is to delete by hand the lingering spam using webmail, which many ISP services offer.

Here I'm very conscious of using the word "droppings" along with the associated scatological metaphors. Cleaning spam and their attachments out of your drive and ISP account certainly may feel like clearing out muck. You may experience that purging process as somewhat satisfying, though not nearly as satisfying as it would be to never have to deal with spam again.

As I mentioned earlier, some spammers will "spoof" you. They'll send out email to many people, perhaps even addresses stolen from your own address book, using your name and return address. Without consent, you have been conscripted into the spam army. You have become the spammer that you intended to fight. Here's where setting up firewalls and deleting email attachments becomes important in keeping identity thieves out of your computer, out of your personal space.

Some conscription may be more willing on your part. Chain-letters alerting people to fictitious information can lure people into sending or forwarding messages to others. So, for example, "congress is considering legislation to make every call to an Internet provider a billable long-distance call , so email your congressman in protest and send this message to everyone you know"É orÉ "a dying child wants to receive thousands of email in order to die happy"É orÉ "forward this email to your friends to let them know that there's a new deadly virus called Have a Nice Day" (some would say that this message itself is the virus). Whether or not a person falls for these spam scams often depends on how knowledgeable they are about the Internet, and how susceptible they might be to alarmist reactions and pleas for protest and sympathy.

An old Zen saying states that "pulling weeds gives nourishment to the garden." I've taken this to mean that weeds, once pulled and buried beneath the dirt, become fertilizer for the other plants. What then of spam that we delete from our computers? In concrete terms, we create more disk space for other more useful files. Is it also possible that in learning how to identify, filter, and remove spam - in deciding what we do and don't want in our psychic space - we learn something about ourselves?

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Cyberspace as a psychological space
E-mail communication and relationships

Part 2

The Psychology of

the Individual in Cyberspace

Identity Management in Cyberspace

Who are you in cyberspace? Am I the same John Suler I am in-person or someone a bit different? One of the interesting things about the internet is the opportunity if offers people to present themselves in a variety of different ways. You can alter your style of being just slightly or indulge in wild experiments with your identity by changing your age, history, personality, physical appearance, even your gender. The username you choose, the details you do or don't indicate about yourself, the information presented on your personal web page, the persona or avatar you assume in an online community - all are important aspects of how people manage their identity in cyberspace. Identity is a very complex aspect of human nature. Here are five interlocking factors that are useful in navigating that maze of how people manage who they are in cyberspace:

1. Level of Dissociation and Integration

A single person's identity embodies multiplicity. You possess many sectors within your personality and play numerous roles in your life - such as child, parent, student, employee, neighbor, friend. Cyberspace offers a niche for each of these specific facets of selfhood. Some people even talk about how we can "deconstruct" ourselves online. We don't have to present ourselves in toto - how we look, talk, move, our history, thoughts, feelings, and personality, all in one big package. In different environments, we can divvy up and present our characteristics in packets of various sizes and content. Thanks to thousands of online groups each devoted to a distinct professional, vocational, or personal topic, we can express, highlight, and develop specific interests and life experiences while setting aside others. You don't have to mention to your stock trading e-mail list that you also hang out at the "I Dream of Jeannie" fan club site. When you join an online community, you often have a choice about how much, if any, personal information you place into the members' profile database. Online communication tools even give you the choice about whether you want people to see how you look or hear your voice. The desire to remain anonymous reflects the need to eliminate those critical features of your identity that you do NOT want to display in that particular environment or group. The desire to lurk - to hide completely - indicates the person's need to split off his entire personal identity from his observing of those around him: he wants to look, but not be seen.

> **The multiple aspects of one's identity may be dissociated, enhanced, or integrated online.**

Compartmentalizing or dissociating one's various online identities like this can be an efficient, focused way to manage the multiplicities of selfhood. William James, one of the greatest of American psychologists, talked about how the normal mind operates in a "field" of consciousness in which one's awareness shifts among different hot spots of ideas, memories, and feelings. Role theory in social psychology speaks about how a successful life is an efficient juggling of the various tasks and positions we accumulate and develop from childhood through adulthood. Cyberspace living is yet another manifestation of this shifting, juggling maneuver. It gives people the opportunity to focus on and develop a particular aspect of who they are. It may even give people the chance to express and explore facets of their identity that they do not express in their face-to-face world. Everyone in Jim's in-person world may not know that he is a romantic medieval knight in an online role-playing game.

However, the importance of integrating the assorted components of selfhood should not be ignored. Bringing together the various components of online and offline identity into one balanced, harmonious whole may be the hallmark of mental health - what I like to call the "integration principle."

2. Positive and Negative Valence

The different components of who we are can be categorized as either positive or negative. There are some universal criteria that can help us distinguish the two. Most of the time we will criticize a person's need to hurt other people and applaud compassion. But it's not necessary to present universal truisms about good and bad. Subjectively, a person can feel shame, guilt, fear, anxiety, or hatred about some aspect of their identity, while accepting and appreciating other aspects. People also strive to attain new, idealized ways of being. Those who act out in cyberspace - who are in some way hurting or violating the rights of others, or hurting themselves - are usually discharging some negatively charged aspect of their psyche. This purely cathartic act often goes no where. An insecure, passive-aggressive person gets stuck in an endless stream of online arguments. Others may use cyberspace as a opportunity to exercise their positive characteristics, or to develop new ones in a process of "self-actualization." Online romances, even those involving a clearly recognized element of fantasy, can be growth-promoting. In some cases people may express a negative trait in an attempt to work through it. They are trying to transform the negative feature of their identity into a positive one, or perhaps change their attitude about that feature. A gay person who learns to accept his homosexuality as a result of participation in an online support group has changed the valence from negative to positive.

> **Negative aspects of identity can be acted out or worked through. Positive aspects can be expressed and developed.**

Whether we view something about ourselves as positive or negative can become a complex issue. Is it good or bad that a person tends to be quiet? Sometimes we have mixed feelings. We are ambivalent. The various environments and styles of communication on the internet serve as a flexible testing ground for exploring those intertwining pluses and minuses. In back-channel e-mail, a fellow lurker in a listserv for professionals may help the quiet person learn the value of being silent in some situations. In a chat room, that same quiet person comes to realize the freedom and delight of spontaneously opening up, and how that leads to friendships.

3. Level of Fantasy or Reality

In some online groups - for example, professional e-mail lists - you are expected to present yourself as you truly are. You don't pretend to be someone other than your true identity. Other groups in cyberspace encourage or even require that you assume an imaginary persona, as in the fantasy worlds of MOOs, MUDs, and other game environments. In multimedia chat communities, you have no choice but to wear an imaginative looking avatar to represent yourself. Many other environments fall somewhere in between reality and fantasy. You could get away with pretending to be someone very different than who you are, or you could alter just a few features - like your name, occupation, or physical appearance - while retaining your other true characteristics. No one will know, especially in text-only environments. In fact, you don't know for sure if other people are altering their identities, or how many people are altering their identities. This power to alter oneself often interlocks with dissociation and valence. Hidden positive and negative parts of oneself may seek expression in an imaginary identity that comes to life online.

> **One's online identity can be real-to-life, imaginary, or hidden.**

The tricky phenomenological issue with the real versus fantasy self is this: What is one's TRUE identity? We usually assume it must be the self that you present to others and consciously experience in your day-to-day living. But is that the true self? Many people walk around in their f2f lives wearing "masks" that are quite different than how they think and feel internally. All the time people are discovering things about their personality that they never realized before. Our daydreams and fantasies often reveal hidden aspects of what we need or wish to be. If people drop the usual f2f persona and bring to life online those hidden or fantasied identities, might not that be in some ways MORE true or "real"?

4. Level of Conscious Awareness and Control

How we decide to present ourselves in cyberspace isn't always a purely conscious choice. Some aspects of identity are hidden below the surface. Covert wishes and inclinations leak out in roundabout or disguised ways without our even knowing it. We're not always aware of how we dissociate parts of our identity or even of the emotional valence we attach to them. A person selects a username or avatar on a whim, because it appeals to him, without fully understanding the deeper symbolic meanings of that choice. Or she joins an online group because it seems

> **People differ in how much their unconscious needs and emotions surface in their online identities.**

interesting while failing to realize the motives concealed in that decision. The anonymity, fantasy, and numerous variety of online environments give ample opportunity for this expression of unconscious needs and emotions. One good example is "transference."

People vary greatly in the degree to which they are consciously aware of and control their identity in cyberspace. For example, some people who role play imaginary characters report how the characters may take on a life of their own. They temporarily have surrendered their normal identity to the imaginary persona, perhaps later understanding the meaning of this transformation. Those who are acting out their underlying negative impulses - like the typical "snert" - usually have little insight into why they do so. By contrast, attempts to work through conflicted aspects of identity necessarily entails a conscious grappling with the unconscious elements of one's personality. Striving in cyberspace to be a "better" person also requires at least some conscious awareness - a premeditated vision of where one is headed. Some people, on their own, make a fully intentional choice about who they want to be in cyberspace. Some are partially aware of their choice and with help or through experience become more aware. Others resist any self-insight at all. They live under the illusion that they are in control of themselves.

5. The Media Chosen

We express our identity in the clothes we wear, in our body language, through the careers and hobbies we pursue. We can think of these things as the media through which we communicate who we are. Similarly, in cyberspace, people choose a specific communication channel to express themselves. There are a variety of possibilities and combinations of possibilities, each choice giving rise to specific attributes of identity. People who rely on text communication prefer the

> **Different communication channels express different aspects of identity.**

semantics of language and perhaps also the linear, composed, rational, analytic dimensions of self that surface via written discourse. They may be the "verbalizers" that have been described in the cognitive psychology literature - as opposed to "visualizers" who may enjoy the more symbolic, imagistic, and holistic reasoning that is expressed via the creation of avatars and web graphics. Some people prefer synchronous communication - like chat and texting - which reflects the spontaneous, free-form, witty, and temporally "present" self. Others are drawn to the more thoughtful, reflective, and measured style of asynchronous communication, as in message boards and e-mail. There are personalities that want to show and not receive too much by using web cams or creating web pages; to receive and not show too much by lurking or web browsing; and still others who want to dive into highly interactive social environments where both showing and receiving thrive.

The media chosen can intimately interlock with the degree of identity integration and dissociation, and with the extent to which a person presents a real or imaginary self. One interesting question concerning the future of the internet is whether people will want to use audio and video tools. Do they want others to experience their identity as if it were a f2f meeting, with voice and body language? Or will they prefer the alternative communication pathways in order to express their identity in new and different ways?

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The psychology of avatars and graphical space
Presence in cyberspace
Do Boys Just Wanna Have Fun?: Male Gender-Switching in Cyberspace
Personality types in cyberspace

Personality Types in Cyberspace

The basic psychological features of online environments shape how people and groups behave in those realms. But that's only half the story. Online behavior will always be determined by how those features interact with the characteristics of the people in those environments. A variety of systems might be useful in classifying those characteristics. We might focus on specific features of the user, such as the person's computer skills, goals for using the internet, or demographic characteristics (age, social-economic status, occupation, etc). There also are several comprehensive theoretical systems in psychology that could help us examine how various personality types behave in cyberspace - for example, the Myers-Briggs system or Guilford's personality model.

In this book I've described cyberspace as a psychological extension of the individual's intrapsychic world. It is a psychological space that can stimulate the processes of projection, acting out, and transference - that can alter sensory experience and can even create a dream-like state of mind. A theory that specializes in understanding the intrapsychic world and the various dimensions of consciousness would be especially useful in understanding this "person" side of the person/environment interaction.

Psychoanalytic theory fits that bill very well. It contains a very rich, comprehensive model of personality types resulting from 100 years of research and clinical practice. Nancy McWilliams' book *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis* (Guilford Press, 1994) is an excellent resource that summarizes and integrates the various psychoanalytic concepts about major personality types. For each of these types, McWilliams explores the characteristic affects, temperment, developmental organization, defenses, adaptive processes, object relations, and transference/countertransference phenomena. The personality styles discussed are:

- psychopathic (antisocial)
- narcissistic
- schizoid
- paranoid
- depressive and manic (impulsive)
- masochistic (self-defeating)
- obsessive and compulsive
- hysterical (histrionic)
- dissociative

One highly productive area of research would be to explore how these personality types behave online, how they subjectively experience and react to the various psychological features of cyberspace, how they shape the online experience for others, and the pathological as well as potentially salutary aspects of their online activities. Clinical research also suggests that there are distinct cognitive styles - patterns of thinking and perceiving - associated with the different types, which might explain why different people choose one type of online activity but not others. Some interesting questions to explore might include the following:

- Does online anonmity and freedom of access encourage antisocial personalities? Are they some of the hackers of cyberspace?
- Do narcissistic people use the access to a numerous relationships as a means to gain an admiring audience.
- Do people with dissociative personalities tend to isolate their cyberspace life from their f2f lives. Do they tend to engage in the creation of multiple and distinct online identities?
- Are schizoid people attracted to the reduced intimacy resulting from online anonymity. Are they lurkers?
- Do manic people take advantage of asynchronous communication as a means to send measured responses to others, or do they naturally prefer the terse, immediate, and spontaneous conversations of chat and IM?
- Are compulsives generally drawn to computers & cyberspace for the control it gives them over their relationships and environment.
- Do histrionic people enjoy the opportunities for theatrical displays that are possible in online groups, especially in environments that provide software tools for creative self-expresssion?

Another type that frequents online discussion groups is the "oppositional personality" - sometimes referred to as the "passive aggressive" or "yes but" personality. With a strong predilection towards disagreeing with people, their messages in email and discussion board groups often begin and are peppered throughout with words like "but" and "however." A more subtle oppositional message may start off with "well" or the namesake "yes but." Psychodynamic theory proposes that these people struggle with underlying feelings of hostility that can only be expressed passively or indirectly, via the act of disagreeing. They also may need to oppose others as a way to firm up their somewhat fragile identity or to boost self-esteem by proving themselves right and others mistaken. People with oppositional tendencies may be drawn to the intellectually contentious atmosphere of online discussion groups. That atmosphere, combined with the difficulties in establishing one's presence in a somewhat chaotic environment that lacks the identity-grounding cues of face-to-face contact, may also amplify oppositional tendencies.

Elements of the oppositional individual and some of the other personality types are evident in jokes about the "Newsgroup Personality" - which probably represents a humorous composite of all the problematic features of these personality types (see the article about cyberspace humor).

Implicit in much of what I've written in this article is that people choose the online environments or online communication strategies that are compatible with their personality style. But do people simply slip into online interactions that feel comfortable to their intrinsic nature and cognitive style? Do some of them simply act out the underlying needs and emotions that determine who they are? It's also possible that some people choose online environments and communication tools that help them stretch beyond their usual style, that enable them to expand and enrich the ways they think, feel, and express themselves.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The basic psychological features of cyberspace
Identity managment in cyberspace
Transference to one's computer and cyberspace
The online disinhibition effect

Mom, Dad, Computer

Transference Reactions in Cyberspace

Let's do a quick exercise.

Think of your husband or wife, or your romantic relationship, or a close friend. Think about some important characteristic of that individual's personality - a characteristic or trait in that person to which you have a strong emotional reaction, positive OR negative.... Now think about one of your parents, or perhaps a sibling. Do they have that very same characteristic, and are the reactions you have to that aspect of them similar to those concerning your current close relationship?

The phenomenon of "transference" is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalytic theory. Rows of bookshelves could be filled with what has been written about it. The basic premise is that we tend to recreate in our current relationships the patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that were formed early in our life, most importantly in the relationships with our parents and siblings when we were children.

Critics challenge this idea. They accuse psychoanalytic theory of dwelling too much on the effects of childhood and family dynamics on the evolution of one's personality. Surely, one's personality does develop and change throughout the course of one's life as a result of our friends, lovers, and new life experiences. It is not solely determined by how our parents raised us as children.

I think this is a perfectly valid criticism. We are not SIMPLY the products of our families. Nevertheless, our parents (or other parental figures) and siblings did indeed spend a great deal of time with us during those formative years, when our minds were young, impressionable, and eager to learn about how we humans relate to each other. Based on our relationships with them, we created models or templates in our mind about what constitutes the expected ways in which people will behave in relationships. We formed basic impressions about the kinds of needs, wishes, fears, and hopes that shape relationships and our image of ourselves in those relationships. Often we don't realize these are OUR OWN models. They may be very different than the models taking shape in the heads of other people. Think of a time when, as a young person, you went to a friend's house and were totally surprised, maybe even shocked, at how differently that family behaved as compared to your own family.

As we grow up we take these models with us. Often operating at an unconscious level, they affect the choices we make in the kinds of people we get involved with as well as how we experience those people. For example, think of your first boyfriend or girlfriend, and how similar that person might have been to one of your parents (usually your opposite sex parent). How often have young men said to their girlfriends "You're just like my mother!"... or vice versa.

These models also shape how people select and experience things in their lives that are NOT human, but so closely touch our needs and emotions that we want to imbue them with human characteristics. We humans can't help but anthropomorphize the elements in the world around us. It's in our blood. We use our internal models to humanize and shape our experience of cars, houses, pets, careers, the weather.... and COMPUTERS.

Yes, computers can be a prime target for transference because they may be perceived as human-like. They are complex machines that almost seem to "think" like humans think. In fact, some people say they WILL someday be able to "think" like us. Unlike TV, movies, or books, they are highly interactive. We ask them to do something and they do it - at least, they usually do (like humans they sometimes disobey and surprise us). With the new generation of highly visual, auditory, and customizable operating systems and software applications, we also have a machine that can be tailored to reflect what we expect in a companion. The science fiction fascination with robots and androids is the culmination of this perception of machines as being almost like one of us.

What makes computers especially enticing targets for transference is that they are VAGUELY human and PROGRAMMABLE to be whatever we make them out to be. Psychoanalysts discovered that if they remain relatively ambiguous and neutral in how they behaved with their clients, the clients would begin to shape their perceptions of the analyst according to their internal models from childhood. When faced with an indistinct, seemingly malleable "other",

we instinctively fall back on our familiar mental theories about relationships and use those theories to shape how we think, feel, and react to this new, somewhat unclear relationship. This whole process often is unconscious. We are so used to these old templates that they automatically start to mold our perceptions and actions without our really thinking about it.

So now we go back to the exercise at the beginning of this article. Only now we substitute in "computer" for husband, wife, lover, or friend. Do we unconsciously experience the computer as being like our mother or father, or sibling? At first glance the question may seem silly. Keep in mind, though, that I am not saying that we think the computer IS our parent or sibling, but rather that we recreate in our relationship with the computer some ASPECT of how we related to our family members. Still, even if you apply the exercise to an important person in your life or to your computer, you may insist that they are nothing like your mother or father! Here's where we need to examine the process of transference more carefully - for there are curious twists and turns in this phenomenon that make it considerably more complex than what I have described so far. We'll see that the same pattern of relating to a family member can be played out in various ways in one's relationship to the computer. In the descriptions that follow, I'll focus mostly on relationships with parents, though these also could apply to other family members.

You as You, Computer as Parent

This is the most basic, obvious type of transference - the type I've already described. You experience the other as being like your parent and yourself as the child you once were.

So let's say Leonard had a mother who had many rules for how he should behave as a child, but the rules always seemed to be changing. Even though he tried to figure out and obey his mother's requests, he never quite succeeded and never satisfied her. He could never seem to do anything right. As a result, he felt frustrated, helpless, and defeated whenever he tried his best but ultimately failed in the eyes of his mother. As an adult, Leonard experiences his computer in the same light. He is intimidated by it, is never quite sure how to please it. When he tries to accomplish something, the computer doesn't seem to like what he does. It won't respond. He gets error messages. He has failed once again. His computer makes him feel frustrated, helpless, and defeated. Maybe he even tries to avoid it, just like he did with his mother.

Jenny had a father who was frail and not quite competent as a person. She loved him, and so took care of him and was very attentive to his needs. Perhaps she sometimes sacrificed her own needs in order to attend to his. As an adult, she perceives her computer as something that is a bit fragile and vulnerable. She is very careful about how she uses it because she doesn't want to cause damage. She is very conscientious about running diagnostics and anti-virus programs. The health and well-being of her computer, she feels very earnestly, is in her hands. Some might even say she is bit over-protective of her machine.

Leonard and Jenny are only two examples. This first type of transference can take many different forms. Traditional psychoanalysis ("Freudian" theory) often described it in terms of sexual wishes and fantasies towards the parent. The child hopes to possess the opposite sex parent as someone to satisfy their sensual/emotional desires. Later, after resolving the conflicts associated with these wishes, the child learns to identify with the sexuality of the same sex parent. In his article "The Internet Regression," Norman Holland focuses on these types of transferences towards computers. The computer is seen as seductive, as a sex object, a satisfier of desire, as a symbol of sexual power and prowess. As an illustration, consider this real conversation from a cyberspace chat room in which the members are discussing how one of their friends "Suzy" on CUseeme (internet video conferencing) was flashed by a exhibitionist.

Daisy: so all she sees is a big penis on her screen! lol!
Hawkeye: lol
Daisy: I can't figure out why he wanted to see *Suzy's* penis!
Dragon: next ur gonna say she has a 15 inch monitor, right?
Daisy: 20 inch, Dragon
THR: geez and black and white haha
Mr. Tops: 17 in rotating
Daisy: hahahahhahah
Tweety: bigger is... bigger!
Dragon: wow, no wonder you gals like macs so much
Daisy: doesn't have to be bigger, just better
Daisy: and rechargeable
Tweety: or plugged in the wall...

Hawkeye: what about bigger AND better?
Mr. Tops: its not the size of the monitor, but the driver behind it
Tweety: with loads of amps
Hawkeye: as one of my friends like to say, "How hard is your big drive?"
Daisy: lol!
Dragon: more importantly, Hawkeye, is it compressed?
Daisy: more importantly, is it unzipped
Hawkeye: and how often do you optimize it?
Lola: or is it backed up?
Dragon: only in san francisco
Daisy: LOL!

Freud would have a field day with this dialogue. It's not too difficult to detect themes about phallic power, penis envy, castration fears, and a miscellaneous collection of heterosexual and homosexual issues. However, I don't want to dwell on the idea of computers as powerful (parental) sex objects. This type of transference applies to some people, but not all. I'm not even convinced that it is a prominent type of transference. The language of classical Freudian theory also gets downright sexist and culturally biased.

What I think is most important about this "erotic" transference is not the sexual feelings towards computers, but rather the perception of the computer as POWERFUL, perhaps in ways similar to how parents are perceived as powerful. This perception of power is obvious in the dialogue from the chat room. The computer can think faster than us, often has more knowledge on a subject, can perform tasks that we couldn't do alone... and now, in the age of the internet, is a link and guide to a vast, wondrous "outside" world. For some people, these qualities may stir up feelings of admiration, awe, fear, competition - not unlike transferential feelings towards any authority figure.

You as Parent, Computer as You

In this type of transference, a person's mind reverses the roles played by the child and parent. A clearly visible, and pathological, example of this is when the abused child grows up to become a child abuser. This is a process of "turning the passive into the active" where the child's feelings of helplessness and anxiety in the face of being controlled, manipulated, and used is warded off in adulthood by assuming the role of one who is powerful and in command.

It's possible that some users might abuse their computers just as they might have been abused, to a greater or lesser extent, within their family of origin. But computers are expensive. For most people, the possibility of damaging them would not be very satisfying in the long run. On a more subtle level, people who once were controlled, dominated, and manipulated within their family - as if they were not really people at all, but just objects to be used - may very well as adults treat their computers in the same manner. Anger and outright rage at the computer, when it doesn't behave the way YOU want it to, may be a symptom of this kind of transference. This may have been the same emotional reaction of the disappointed, "betrayed" parent.

The computer also can be perceived, almost lovingly, as one's baby. You attend to it's needs, nurture it, help it develop and grow (by adding software and hardware). Not unlike Jenny, who assumed a parental role towards her father, you feel protective and responsible for the computer's well-being. You become invested in it's strivings and achievements, even taking pride in the new things it can do. With delight and wonder, you take part in the creation of a new individual with it's own unique abilities and personality. It is a reflection of you, YOUR abilities and personality, but you also realize that much of what you have done is to direct and shape the raw qualities and potentials that already existed inherently in your "baby." And quite unlike real life babies, this silicone substitute will never become independent and leave you. For some people, that may be a very attractive proposition.

You as You, Computer as Wished-For Parent

Many people wish, consciously or unconsciously, that their parents could have been different in some way. That wish may shape their perception of the computer as possessing those desired characteristics.

Sam's mother was, to use a less than technical term, "crazy." Her behavior and emotions were unpredictable. One moment she would be caring and loving, and the next harsh, critical, and punishing. Never being able to tell what was coming his way next, Sam became a hypervigilant, paranoid child. He needed always to be on the lookout for subtle cues indicating how his mother would behave. He tried to anticipate her moves, but often was not successful. Feeling

helpless and angry (in some ways similar to Leonard), he experienced life as unpredictable, dangerous, and beyond his control.

As an adult, Sam takes comfort in his computers. They possess the qualities he wished his mother had - predictable, reliable, non-judgmental, and no unexplained emotional outbursts. If he applies his hard-earned skills at analyzing the subtle details of how it behaves, almost all of the time he CAN predict and control how it will behave. There is very little intimacy and "loving" feelings towards his computer. But that's quite OK by him. Those things only got him entangled in trouble with his mother. In fact, he takes some pleasure in his cold dominance over the submissive machine.

Lorna experiences her computer quite differently. She sees it as a benign presence. It is always there, waiting for her. It pays attention to what she wants and gives immediate feedback. It allows her to express her thoughts, her feelings, her creativity. It takes and accompanies her wherever she wants to go on the internet. She almost sees it as a very responsive, compassionate companion who recognizes her value and individuality as a person. It even HELPS her develop her individuality.... How unlike her parents who were so busy and preoccupied that they often neglected to show an interest in her life.

You as Wished-For Parent, Computer as You

In this last type of transference, a reversal once again occurs - only this time the user acquires the wished-for parental qualities and the computer becomes like the child. Often people strive for the benign qualities that were missing in their parents - which is often a matter of reversing some characteristic of the parent. Sometimes that reversal may go too far. If your parents were too strict, you may become too liberal with your child. If your parents were uninvolved in your life, you may become too intrusive in your child's life.

Becoming the wished-for parent of one's computer may follow the same pattern. Users strive to be "good" to their computer in ways that their own parents were not "good" to them. In some cases they carry that effort too far. One user is careful about making sure her computer is safe and healthy. Another becomes so worried about viruses and possible damage to his machine that he refuses to explore the internet, is wary of installing new software, and rarely lets anyone else use it. One user takes interest in what goes on "inside" his computer and so tries to learn about its hardware and software. Another becomes so invested in the technology of her machine that it becomes an obsession that rules her life.

You are Me, I am You, We are All Together

Some type of transferences (called "selfobject" transferences) involve a bolstering and enhancing of one's sense of self. When the parent admires the child's painting, acknowledges her thoughts about a TV program, or empathizes with her feelings of anger, sadness, and delight, the child's identity is fortified through this "mirroring." When a boy imitates his father mowing the lawn, or a girl plays with Mommy's briefcase, this identifying with the parent in an "idealizing" relationship augments their self-esteem and sense of self. So too in a "twinship" relationship when siblings play and work with each other. The feeling that "we are doing this together" satisfies their thirst for knowing who they are by what they do with others. In these forms of transference, there is a blending of oneself with the other, so that the other person is not necessarily experienced as a separate person, but as part of oneself.

Users may rely on their computers to clarify and strengthen their sense of identity. The computer is attentive and accommodating to their needs. It mirrors them. As users customize its hardware and software, the computer becomes more and more like a responsive reflection of their needs, feelings, and ambitions. It is part of them, a reflection of who they are, a world created from within themselves. By idealizing it, by participating in all the amazing, powerful things a computer can do, users strengthen their own confidence and feelings of success. By spending time together with their computer, it becomes a reassuring extension of their motivations, personality, and inner psychological life - like a good buddy, a sibling.... a twin.

But there is a danger in relying too heavily on the computer as a support to one's identity. Placing all your eggs in one basket is never a good idea. The system may crash at exactly the wrong moment. The hard-drive may fail. For any of a wide variety of reasons, your treasured machine may be taken from you. The rug has been pulled out from under your feet. You feel betrayed, abandoned, lost..... resulting in anger and depression.

Perhaps all computer transferences involve a blending of the user's mind with the "cyberspace" created by the machine. Cyberspace indeed is a psychological space, an extension of the user's intrapsychic world. Using psychoanalytic terms,

we would say that computers create a transitional space - an intermediate zone between self and other - where identifications, partial identifications, internalizations, and introjects interact with each other. In more plain language, we would say that cyberspace is a zone where the big and little bits of our parents and siblings that we've taken into our own minds and personalities become free to express themselves, to play, work, fight, and, ideally, make peace with each other.

How Do You Know It's Transference?

Psychological reactions to one's computer (and any significant "other") may be a complex combination of some or all of the types of transference described above. Mother, father, and sibling transferences can interact and change over time. It's often difficult detecting the interpersonal origin of one's thoughts or feelings towards the silicone-other. When thinking about transferences in real life, clinicians often ask themselves, "Who is doing what to whom?"

So how do you know when you're having one of these transference reactions to your computer? .... There are some tell-tale signs. When you want to throw the damn thing against the wall. When it "makes you" feel betrayed and disappointed. When you feel lonely and empty because you have not had enough time to spend with it. When you often want to be at your keyboard more than you want to be with family and friends, or when those people comment on how attached or emotional you get towards it. Any seemingly exaggerated or "inappropriately" strong feelings towards your machine probably means you think of it as more than just a machine.

Transference also may be rearing its head whenever one feels addicted (see "Why is This Thing Eating My Life"). Computer addictions often mean that the user is attempting to use the cyberworld to satisfy some strong internal need, but the strategy never quite works. One never feels fully satisfied or complete because the frustrated need arises from something that was or is missing from one's relationship to real world people. The computer has become an inadequate substitute target for that unfulfilled need.

Adult and Machine

Growing up into a mature adult is a gradual process of realizing how the mental models from our childhood have shaped our relationships and our lives. Sometimes these models steer us in the right direction - towards the right people and activities - and thereby enrich our lives. Sometimes not. We may need to challenge, develop, or outright abandon some of them. In all cases, the enlightening path is to see these models for what they are - simply models. After all, the computer is not Mom, Dad, Sister, or Brother. It's just a computer.

Online Others in the Machine

All of the transference reactions described in this article also can explain how the user reacts to other people that he or she encounters in cyberspace. Communicating only by typed text in e-mail, chat rooms, texting, and forums results in a highly ambiguous environment. We can't see or hear other people. They become a shadowy figure, a screen onto which we may launch any of the variety of transference reactions.

Because we experience online others THROUGH the computer, it's also possible that our reactions to them might be shaped by the transference reactions to the computer. Transference to the computer may spill over to, amplify, or be contradicted by the perception of the online other. For example, if William perceives the computer as a passive thing to be manipulated (like Dad manipulated him), he might extend that perception to other people he meets online, treating them as weaker people to be controlled. If they happen to say something that sounds passive, or if their personality style is indeed a bit passive, William may greatly amplify in his own mind how passive they seem to be. As a result, his reactions to them may be inappropriate. If others do something that grossly contradicts William's perception of the computer as passive - if they act assertive or independent - William may react with severe disappointment or anger at the perceived "betrayal."

Even setting aside transference reactions to the computer and cyberspace, there is a tendency for the user to project a variety of wishes, fantasies, and fears onto any ambiguous figure one encounters, especially in text-driven environments. The "blending" of one's mind with the other, as some users describe the experience of relating in cyberspace, may reflect this transference process. In fact, some users describe this blending of mind with the computer itself. Transference to the computer and to other users may interact in very subtle, complex ways. As one avid cybernaut once told me, "wherever I go on the internet, I discover myself."

Unconscious motivations related to the transference will also affect the "filtering" process that determines the choices the user makes in establishing relationships. Users may be surprised to find that the close friends they make online all seem to be the same types of people, even though this was not immediately obvious at the start of the relationship. This unconscious "homing" device can be very sensitive. Even when communicating only via text and in cumbersome or distracting online environments, we nevertheless zoom in on relationships that touch some hidden need within us.

When people exchange photos, call on the telephone, or finally meet the other, they are often surprised at how the real person does not always match the image they had developed in their mind. Meeting face-to-face challenges and reshapes the transference reactions.

Healthy online relationships are those in which we realize that our perceptions are not always accurate. Other people are other people, not extensions of our beliefs or ghosts in our machine. Given the complexities of transference reactions, this isn't always easy to do. As Otto Kernberg was fond of saying about unraveling transference in psychotherapy, one must continually ask, "Who is doing what to whom?" Once we fully realize that the computer AND online others aren't our Moms, Dads, Sisters, or Brothers, we become free to enjoy cyberspace in the ways that we wish, without any unconscious strings attached.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Cyberspace as Psychological Space
Why is This Thing Eating My Life?: Computer and Cyberspace Addiction at the Palace
The Internet Regression, by Norman Holland
Computerized Psychotherapy
Y2K: Apocalyptic Thinking and the Tragic Flaw

Computer and Cyberspace Addiction

In 1996 the psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg, M.D. posted a message to the Psychology of the Internet mailing list (see appendix for this article). In it he proposed criteria for internet "addiction" that were remarkably similar to those of other researchers and clinicians who later began studying this phenomenon. However, Goldberg, who also proposed the creation of online internet addiction support groups, intended the message as tongue-in-cheek, as evident, very subtly, by the word "humor" in the url of his web page that contained similar text. Joking about being "addicted" is commonplace among avid internet users. Are those jokes just a self-conscious poking fun at one's personal passion, perhaps even a positive indication of self-awareness? Or could it be, in some cases, a sign of minimizing one's problems, even a version of the denial that is so common among many types of addictions? The idea of an internet support group for internet addicts indeed seems ironic. It would be like holding A.A. meetings in bar, or Gambler's Anonymous meetings in a casino. And yet, reaching out through the internet to those who are problematically involved in cyberspace could be a viable strategy. It might be a first step towards helping them reduce internet use. The history of psychotherapy is filled with seemingly paradoxical yet viable approaches, such as flooding, implosion, and strategic therapy. As silly as it seems, might an online internet support group also work?

Over time mental health professionals began to take the idea of internet addiction very seriously, along with some debate about what exactly to call this phenomenon. Some label it an "Internet Addiction Disorder." But many people are addicted to their computers long before the internet enters their lives. Some people are extremely attached to their computer and don't even care about the internet. Perhaps we should call the phenomenon a "Computer Addiction." Also, let's not forget the very powerful, but now seemingly mundane and almost accepted addiction that some people develop to video games. Video games are computers too... very single-minded computers, but computers nevertheless. Or how about telephones? People get addicted to those too, and not just the sex lines. Like computers, telephones are a technologically enhanced form of communication and may fall into the category of "computer mediated communication" (aka, CMC) - as the researchers are dubbing internet activities. In the not too distant future, computer, telephone, and video technology may very well merge into one, perhaps highly addictive, beast.

Perhaps, on a broad level, it makes sense to talk about a "Cyberspace Addiction" - an addiction to virtual realms of experience created through computer engineering. Within this broad category, there may be subtypes with distinct differences. A teenager who plays hooky from school in order to master the next level of Donkey Kong may be a very different person than the middle aged housewife who spends $500 a month in AOL chat rooms - who in turn may be very different from the businessman who can't tear himself away from his finance programs and continuous internet access to stock quotes. Some cyberspace addictions are game and competition oriented, some fulfill more social needs, some simply may be an extension of workaholicism. Then again, these differences may be superficial.

Not many people are waving their fingers and fists in the air about video and work addictions. Not many newspaper articles are written about these topics either. They are passé issues. The fact that the media is turning so much attention to cyberspace and internet addictions may simply reflect the fact that this is a new and hot topic. It may also indicate some anxiety among people who really don't know what the internet is, even though everyone is talking about it. Ignorance tends to breed fear and the need to devalue.

Nevertheless, some people are definitely hurting themselves by their addiction to computers and cyberspace. When people lose their jobs, or flunk out of school, or are divorced by their spouses because they cannot resist devoting all of their time to virtual lands, they are pathologically addicted. These extreme cases are clear cut. But as in all addictions, the problem is where to draw the line between "normal" enthusiasm and "abnormal" preoccupation.

"Addictions" - defined very loosely - can be healthy, unhealthy, or a mixture of both. If you are fascinated by a hobby, feel devoted to it, would like to spend as much time as possible pursuing it - this could be an outlet for learning, creativity, and self-expression. Even in some unhealthy addictions you can find these positive features embedded within (and thus maintaining) the problem. But in truly pathological addictions, the scale has tipped. The bad outweighs the

good, resulting in serious disturbances in one's ability to function in the "real" world. Almost anything could be the target of a pathological addiction - drugs, eating, exercising, gambling, sex, spending, working, etc. You name it, someone out there is obsessed with it. Looking at it from a clinical perspective, these pathological addictions usually have their origin early in a person's life, where they can be traced to significant deprivations and conflicts. They may be an attempt to control depression and anxiety, and may reflect deep insecurities and feelings of inner emptiness.

As yet, there is no official psychological or psychiatric diagnosis of an "Internet" or "Computer" addiction. The most recent (4th) edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (aka, DSM-IV) - which sets the standards for classifying types of mental illness - does not include any such category. It remains to be seen whether this type of addiction will someday be included in the manual. As is true of any official diagnosis, an "Internet Addiction Disorder" or any similarly proposed diagnosis must withstand the weight of extensive research. It must meet two basic criteria. Is there a consistent, reliably diagnosed set of symptoms that constitutes this disorder? Does the diagnosis correlate with anything - are there similar elements in the histories, personalities, and future prognosis of people who are so diagnosed. If not, "where's the beef?" It's simply a label with no external validity.

So far, researchers have only been able to focus on that first criteria - trying to define the constellation of symptoms that constitutes a computer or internet addiction (see appendix for this article). Psychologist Kimberly S. Young at the Center for On-Line Addiction (see the links at the end of this article) classifies people as Internet-dependent if they meet during the past year four or more of the criteria listed below. Of course, she is focusing specifically on internet addiction, and not the broader category of computer addiction:

- Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet or on-line services and think about it while off line?
- Do you feel a need to spend more and more time on line to achieve satisfaction?
- Are you unable to control your on-line use?
- Do you feel restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop your on-line use?
- Do you go on line to escape problems or relieve feelings such as helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression?
- Do you lie to family members or friends to conceal how often and how long you stay online?
- Do you risk the loss of a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of your on-line use?
- Do you keep returning even after spending too much money on on-line fees?
- Do you go through withdrawal when off line, such as increased depression, moodiness, or irritability?
- Do you stay on line longer than originally intended?

In what he intended as a joke, Ivan Goldberg proposed his own set of symptoms for what he called "Pathological Computer Use." Other psychologists are debating other possible symptoms of internet addiction, or symptoms that vary slightly from Young's criteria and Goldberg's parody of such criteria. These symptoms include:

- drastic lifestyle changes in order to spend more time on the net
- general decrease in physical activity
- a disregard for one's health as a result of internet activity
- avoiding important life activities in order to spend time on the net
- sleep deprivation or a change in sleep patterns in order to spend time on the net
- a decrease in socializing, resulting in loss of friends
- neglecting family and friends
- refusing to spend any extended time off the net
- a craving for more time at the computer
- neglecting job and personal obligations

On a listserv devoted to the cyberpsychology, Lynne Roberts (robertsl@psychology.curtin.edu.au) described some of the possible physiological correlates of heavy internet usage, although she didn't necessarily equate these reactions with pathological addiction:>

- A conditioned response (increased pulse, blood pressure) to the modem connecting
- An "altered state of consciousness" during long periods of dyad/small group interaction (total focus and concentration on the screen, similar to a mediation/trance state).

Dreams that appeared in scrolling text (the equivalent of MOOing).
- Extreme irritability when interrupted by people/things in "real life" while immersed in c-space.

In my own article on "addictions" to the Palace, a graphical MOO/chat environment, I cited the criteria that psychologists often use in defining ANY type of addiction. It's clear that the attempts to define computer and internet addiction draw on these patterns that are perhaps common to addictions of all types - patterns that perhaps point to deeper, universal causes of addiction:

- Are you neglecting important things in your life because of this behavior?
- Is this behavior disrupting your relationships with important people in your life?
- Do important people in your life get annoyed or disappointed with you about this behavior?
- Do you get defensive or irritable when people criticize this behavior?
- Do you ever feel guilty or anxious about what you are doing?
- Have you ever found yourself being secretive about or trying to "cover up" this behavior?
- Have you ever tried to cut down, but were unable to?
- If you were honest with yourself, do you feel there is another hidden need that drives this behavior?

If you're getting a bit confused or overwhelmed by all these criteria, that's understandable. This is precisely the dilemma faced by psychologists in the painstaking process of defining and validating a new diagnostic category. On the lighter side, consider some of the more humorous attempts to define internet addiction. Below is one list from The World Headquarters of Netaholics Anonymous. Although this is intended as humor, note the striking similarity of some of the items to the serious diagnostic criteria... There is a kernel of truth even in a joke:

Top 10 Signs You're Addicted to the Net

10. You wake up at 3 a.m. to go to the bathroom and stop and check your e-mail on the way back to bed.

9. You get a tattoo that reads "This body best viewed with Netscape Navigator 1.1 or higher."

8. You name your children Eudora, Mozilla and Dotcom.

7. You turn off your modem and get this awful empty feeling, like you just pulled the plug on a loved one.

6. You spend half of the plane trip with your laptop on your lap...and your child in the overhead compartment.

5. You decide to stay in college for an additional year or two, just for the free Internet access.

4. You laugh at people with 2400-baud modems.

3. You start using smileys in your snail mail.

2. The last mate you picked up was a JPEG.

1. Your hard drive crashes. You haven't logged in for two hours. You start to twitch. You pick up the phone and manually dial your ISP's access number. You try to hum to communicate with the modem.

You succeed.

There's also the intriguing epistemological dilemma concerning the researchers who study cyberspace addictions. Are they addicted too? If they indeed are a bit preoccupied with their computers, does this make them less capable of being objective, and therefore less accurate in their conclusions? Or does their involvement give them valuable insights, as in participant observation research? There's no simple answer to these questions.

The Integration Principle: Bringing the Worlds Together

As a result of all the online work I've been doing, here's the premise I'm thinking about a lot: It's a problem when your face-to-face life becomes dissociated from your cyberlife. It's healthy when your f2f life is integrated with your cyberlife.

People become "addicted" to the internet, or act out pathologically in cyberspace, when they have dissociated it from their f2f life. Their cyberspace activity becomes a world unto itself. They don't talk about it with the people in their f2f life. It becomes a walled-off substitute or escape from their life. Cyberspace almost becomes a dissociated part of their own mind - a sealed-off intrapsychic zone where fantasies and conflicts are acted out. Reality testing is lost. Fixing this dissociation is an implicit or explicit component of many of the techniques for helping internet addicted people.

On the other hand, healthy internet use means integrating the f2f and cyberspace worlds. You talk about your online life with your real world family and friends. You bring your real identity, interests, and skills into your online community. You call on the phone or meet in-person the people you know online. And it works the other way too: some of the people you knew primarily in the real world, you also contact through email or chat. "Bringing in the real world" is an important principle for helping people who are addictively stuck in cyberspace. And its also a powerful tool for intervening with people who are addicted to misbehaving in cyberspace, such as snerts. How do you cure an acting out adolescent who is hiding behind cyberspace anonymity? Address him by his real name. Find out about his real world interests and talk to him about it. And if all else fails, contact his parents.

Now let me go back again to the basic premise: "It's a problem when one's in-person life becomes dissociated from one's cyberlife." The beauty of this premise, I think, is that it also applies to the mirror image scenario. Some people vilify the internet. They want nothing to do with it. That also is dissociation, a failure to integrate. That also is a problem.

Appendix

Internet Addiction Support Group
Is There Truth in Jest?

The following is the July 1996 message by Ivan Goldberg, M.D. that was posted to the Psychology of the Internet mailing list. It was presented as as tongue-in-cheek, but also prescient humor about compulsive compulisve computer use. Goldberg's message:

> Here is the message I posted on the Internet to announce the formation of the Internet Addiction Support Group. I would now change the name of the disorder to "**Pathological Computer Use**" and the criteria to:
>
> The use of Computers takes up so much time as to cause: (A and/or B)
>
> A. Discomfort
>
> B. Decreased occupational, academic, social, work-related, family-related, financial, psychological, or physiological functioning.

As the incidence and prevalence of Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) has been increasing exponentially, a support group, The Internet Addiction Support Group (IASG) has been established. Below are the official criteria for the diagnosis of IAD and subscription information for the IASG.

Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) - Diagnostic Criteria

SEE revised criteria above!!

A maladaptive pattern of Internet use, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress as manifested by three (or more) of the following, occurring at any time in the same 12-month period:

(I) tolerance, as defined by either of the following:

    (A) A need for markedly increased amounts of time on Internet to achieve satisfaction

    (B) markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of time on Internet

(II) withdrawal, as manifested by either of the following

    (A) the characteristic withdrawal syndrome

        (1) Cessation of (or reduction) in Internet use that has been heavy and prolonged.

        (2) Two (or more) of the following, developing within several days to a month after Criterion 1:

            (a) psychomotor agitation
            (b) anxiety
            (c) obsessive thinking about what is happening on Internet
            (d) fantasies or dreams about Internet
            (e) voluntary or involuntary typing movements of the fingers

        (3) The symptoms in Criterion 2 cause distress or impairment in social, occupational or another important area of functioning

    (B) Use of Internet or a similar on-line service is engaged in to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms

(III) Internet is often accessed more often or for longer periods of time than was intended

(IV) There is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control Internet use

(V) A great deal of time is spent in activities related to Internet use (e.g., buying Internet books, trying out new WWW browsers, researching Internet vendors, organizing files of downloaded materials.)

(VI) Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of Internet use.

(VII) Internet use is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical, social, occupational, or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by Internet use (sleep deprivation, marital difficulties, lateness for early morning appointments, neglect of occupational duties, or feelings of abandonment in significant others)

Cold Turkey
Messages from an Ex-Palace "Addict"

Many members of the avatar community called The Palace talk and joke about being "addicted." A few members take the issue seriously and decide that it's time to "quit the habit." Below are the e-mails I received from one such person.

Hi John!

I thought I'd drop you a note saying "Thank you." I've been on the Palace ever since I entered college back in September, and I found that it was slowly but surely sucking away my time and social life (small as it was). Even though my grades were fine (Dean's List), I had a feeling it was effecting my ... studies as well. I had become addicted, and I had even tried to stop once or twice, but got back on after a few hours of my supposed permanent exit.

Anyway, I quit for *good* a week or so ago. The god at the Palace I hung out at offered to wiz me -- meaning MORE time had to be spent along with the greater responsibility. The same evening, I found your page and read your entire study, and was in a state of shock, since I realized that there WAS something wrong with me.

In any case, around 2:00 AM, I transferred my registration code to a deserving guest, and asked the wiz to banish me. I made a nice little dramatic exit, and wiped that sucker clean off my hard drive. (Interestingly enough, I found that

rollerblading is an adequate alternative for Palace, so whenever I get the urge to Palace, I just hit the streets instead). Amazingly, two other of my fellow Palatians followed suit within the next few days, transferring their registration codes to random guests and nuking their copies. One of them even called me up over the phone to say good-bye and good luck (the first actual vocal contact I've ever experienced with another net-dweller).

In any case, I think I might still be veg'ging out in the Palace were it not for your study. Thanks -- you've opened my eyes, and helped me reclaim a good chunk of my life. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go rollerblading. ;)

- ex-Palace Member

After receiving this message, I wanted to let this ex-Palatian know that I appreciated his contacting me and being honest about his Palace experience. I also wanted to ask his permission to quote his message on this site, and to find out more about his decision to quit. In particular, I was curious about what he read in my articles that prompted him to go "cold turkey."

Well, just the title alone ("Life" at the Palace) kinda freaked me out -- I realized that I WAS spending my entire life on the damn thing. I also realized that there was basically nothing new or exciting every time I logged on. It was kinda like Seinfeld, a show about 'nothing' (heh).

I studied Maslow's self-actualization beforehand, and found that your section called "Is This the Real Me?" I started to wonder if I could cultivate my true self by sitting on my rump interfacing with avatars.

Also contributing to my decision was the "But is it an Addiction?" section. Palace disrupted my life when I could be doing other, more fun things (AKA being a typical college doofus and going out and partying, yadda yadda yadda). I also write professionally for a magazine, and felt that my work was being affected.

I also had been promising myself to cut down for a long time. My social life was never that great to begin with (I'm a loner, basically), so I suppose that Palace gave some of the social aspects that I was missing in 'real' life. BTW: I am not fat, butt-ugly, or a social outcast. (I don't think I am, anyway :)

One more interesting thing: Around 2 hours before my final log-off, I got my first PHONE CALL from a fellow Palace-dweller ... who just called me up to say hello. We chatted for a long while, and I realized that this was a real person who I was talking to, not a graphical avatar. I also saw how much easier it was to just communicate with someone without a keyboard, and then it just hit me: I was making relationships and being social by typing words to little colored smiley-faces on a cold computer monitor. I also realized that over fifty percent of communication comes from non-verbal cues (this statistic may be off, I dunno), so there was something wrong here.

In any case, I've gotten a bunch of E-Mails from people just begging me to come back, and I have to turn them down. If you want a view from the inside, go to [Palace site] and ask about me...

Take it easy, and thanks for putting up with my rambling --

In a later message, he offered to send me a transcript of his very last session at Palace. He also offered an interesting observation about how he was reacting to having quit cold turkey.

Here's the edited transcript of my last session. Boring stuff has been edited out. I suppose it's a tad on the dramatic side, but I like to go out with a bang. Heh.

> Krel: Okay, anyway, this is Krel, and Krel is signing off
> zig: what happend Krel
> Krel: Krel is signing off for the rest of his life, since Palace is an Evil Addiction and I have to stop it
> Krel: It's just taking too much control of me life
> zig: no dont do it
> Krel: YES
> zig: please
> Krel: MUST DO IT
> zig: TR
> zig: is that really Krel
> Krel: Yes it is me
> Krel: And TR is gonna get Kevorkian on my ass

TR: yeah it is him
zig: and if so why is he threatenin to leave palace
TR: i dont know
zig: whats goin on
Krel: This is it... my Palace Hari-Kari
zig: oh my god
zig: i cant watch
TR: krel. i cant ban you from ign though
Krel: Say goodnight, Gracie...
zig: please krel
zig: as annoing and biased as you are your part of the family
Krel: Ba-ha-ha
Krel: Anyway, TR... do your duties
Krel: finish it now
TR: krel you sure its you
Krel: YES
Krel: God dang it
Krel: Daisy... daisy... give me your answer true (2001 reference)
zig: how could you want to leave palace for all eternity
TR: you wont be able to get back on
Krel: Yes... I understand that
zig: dont do it id
zig: DONT
Krel: Let's countdown to extinction, baby!
zig: HES DRUNK NOW
zig: HES ON DRUGS
Krel: when I reach one... finish it!
Krel: 10.
TR: and of course trunks is goiing to be awefully disappointed in you
Krel: 9.
Krel: We'll stay in touch through email.
zig: HE CANT BE IN HIS RIGHT MIND
Krel: 8
zig: OH MY GOD
Guest 824: hehe
Krel: Save this log file if you wish...
Krel: 7
Krel: 6
zig: say it again krel
Krel: 5
zig: i just started my log
zig: say it one more time
Krel: 4
zig: what are you doin
Guest 824: hehe
Krel: 3
zig: krel
zig: please
Krel: 2
zig: please
zig: please
Krel: 1
zig: KREL
zig: no
Krel: !END IT NOW
Krel: !NOW TR
Krel: !DO IT NOW
No Connection
No Connection
You have been terminated

Your web page looks nice! Hope I can help some other addicts to quit.

One more interesting thing: during the five or six days after I quit Cold Turkey, I experienced extremely vivid nightmares (I very infrequently remember my dreams). I don't know if it was due to lack of Palace or not, but they've managed to go away. Bizarre...

Suler's Interview with Morris Jones of Internet Australasia Magazine

* You write in your article on Computer and Cyberspace Addiction that the two are quite distinct. What makes Internet addiction unique? Are there sub-categories within it?

I think all cyberspace "addictions" can be separated into two very general categories: social and non-social types.Some people may be very preoccupied with their computers but have little interest in using it l to communicate and socialize with others. These people may use their computers, as well as the internet, to play solitary games, work, collect information, or explore. In other words, they may be game, information, or adventure junkies - or simply workaholics - but they aren't not necessarily using cyberspace to make interpersonal connections.

My guess is that most internet addictions are the social type. People get hooked on chat environments, MOOS, and mailing lists. They may have extensive email relationships. They are looking for SOCIAL stimulation. The needs underlying this social internet addiction are interpersonal: to be recognized, to belong, to be powerful, to be loved, etc. In contrast people addicted only to their computer often avoid the interpersonal "chaos" of chat rooms and the like. For them, the need for control and predictability may be dominant.

But at the deepest level, the psychological problems underlying ALL types of addictions have their origin in emotional conflicts, trauma, and/or deprivation. As a psychoanalytically trained psychologist, I tend to think that almost all addictions can be traced to difficulties in relationships during childhood. In the non-social type of cyberspace addiction, the interpersonal needs are probably more deeply buried.

* You also mention the distinction between enthusiasm and preoccupation. How can you measure this with the Internet?

This is semantics, and essentially boils down to the definition of an "addiction" or a "compulsion." When is a behavior healthy and when is it pathological. There's no quick and simple answer to this question. When a behavior "significantly" interferes with your functioning, then it is considered pathological. But what's "significantly?" In articles I and others have written, a variety of criteria have been proposed for defining the extent to which the addiction interferes with a person's relationships, work, and ability to live a healthful, fulfilling life. But there is no black and white in diagnosing behavioral problems - just many shades of gray. One person's "pathological" addiction is another's passion for living. Was Mozart "addicted" to music? Or Einstein to physics?

Almost all journalists who contact me want to know about internet addiction. Does this reflect our culture's enthusiasm for or preoccupation with the idea of an "internet addiction?" Are we addicted to the concept of addiction? I really do believe that focusing too much on the idea of an "internet addiction" can result in oversimplifications and launch us straight down a dead end. Spending a lot of time in cyberspace is a behavior, one facet of a person's life, and needs to understood within the entire landscape of an individual's psyche and lifestyle. I cannot emphasize this point enough.

* To what extent does Internet addiction relate to the broader scope of pathological addictions such as gambling, sex, etc.?

I think there are a core set of psychological issues that underlie all "psychological" addictions. Probably the most common and basic problem is a deficit in one's sense of self - a "hole" or "void" in one's identity, self-esteem, or self-worth that needs to be "filled". Then, on top of that core deficit, there may be another layer of psychological issues that is unique to that particular addiction. Drug addictions may be unique unto themselves since there is a distinct biochemical component to the problem. "Social" internet addictions may be unique because the internet allows people to interact in ways that are very different than face-to-face encounters.

Various people have mentioned DSM 4 and its lack of a definition. Do you think it is appropriate to put a definition for Internet addiction into the next revision?

I'm not sure there's much to be gained by creating an "internet addiction" category. I think it's biggest effect would be on the political level in that it would become an "official" disorder and therefore legitimate for treatment within the mental health system. Maybe that would be a good thing, I'm not sure. For the clinician working with the person, the label might not make much of a difference. The addictive behavior still needs to be understood and treated within the context of the person's whole life.

* You have explained that there are no precise diagnostic criteria yet for Internet addiction. Apart from the generic examples of addiction that you cite, are there any other points that could be singled out as applying to the Internet?

I think the signs of an internet addiction have been clearly outlined in the work of such people as Kimberly Young and Ivan Goldberg. But as I mention in the articles on my web site, even when research delineates a clear collection of symptoms that seem to constitute a "disorder," it doesn't necessarily mean that you have a valid diagnostic category. The "validity" of a diagnostic category means that the category correlates with something meaningful. Do the people who meet the criteria for an "internet addiction" have similar personality features, or similar elements in their history, or similar prognoses, or respond similarly to the same treatment, or even similar physiological make-ups? If the answer to these questions and others like them is "no," then you have a label, a category, but it relates to nothing.

Let me give you a somewhat silly example, but I think it will help clarify what I'm trying to say about this important but very technical issue about what constitutes a genuine "disorder." If I claim that I have a new diagnostic category which I call "Bliknot" and the criteria are people who are (1) tall, (2) wear gray pants, (3) like baseball, and (4) refuse to eat spinach..... I certainly will find people who fit this rather unusual collection of criteria. But whether these people have anything else meaningful in common, or whether there is truly a distinct underlying cause or process or disease condition resulting in "Bliknot," is still an open question.

MUCH research is needed to establish a diagnostic category as reliable and valid. The concept of an internet addiction is new, so there hasn't been enough time yet to do this research. Until then, it's unlikely the DSM will be modified to include a category such as this. Internet addiction might be listed as yet another form of addictive BEHAVIOR, or as yet another type of compulsion, but this is not the same as saying it is a reliable, valid diagnostic category.

* What advice would you offer a potential addict?

Set a realistic limit on the amount of time you are comfortable spending at the computer. Listen to the feedback of the significant people in your life. Ask yourself if your life is being enriched or depleted as a result of your time spent in the computer world. Realize that we can all go over board in a new and exciting activity but most of the time we are able to examine it's impact on our life and cut back on it if it's causing us problems.

Here's a simple exercise I suggest to people who worry about whether they are "addicted" to cyberspace and spend too much time there. Take a week off. Just one week without turning on the computer.... and see what happens. Notice when and how the urge to fire up the machine hits you. Notice how you feel when you don't give in to that urge. Notice what you do with the time and energy that you would have otherwise given to cyberspace. This exercise can help people understand the underlying needs and feelings that fuel the potential "addiction."

If you see that your time in cyberspace is causing you problems and yet you can't seem to make a change, then you may need to seek some counseling. The three forms of treatment that are useful for any type of addiction are: (1) behavioral approaches designed to modify the addictive behavior, (2) self-help groups, (3) good old-fashioned, insight-oriented "psychotherapy." My bet is the most powerful treatment would involve combinations of the above, perhaps all three.

* Is the problem getting worse?

More and more people are getting involved in the internet, so more people will likely become "addicted." But part of the apocalyptic concern about internet addiction is a cultural perception. It's the new "disease" of the week. After all, very few people are leaping out of their seats with worry about video games addiction anymore. I wonder if there was a lot of concern about "telephone addiction" when the telephone was first introduced.

* What do you think of the research of Ivan Goldberg and Kimberly Young?

Although I'm still not convinced that the "internet addiction" is a reliable, valid diagnostic category, there's no doubt in my mind that it is new behavioral phenomenon that deserves to be studied and understood. Goldberg and Young are two of the pioneers in this field, and I respect and admire their efforts.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Why is This Thing Eating My Life?
To Get What You Need: Healthy and Pathological Internet Use
Bringing Online and Offline Living Together: The Integration Principle
Cold Turkey: Messages from an Ex-Palace "Addict"
Mom, Dad, Computer (Transference Reactions to Computers)
Cyberspace as Dream World: Illusion and Reality at the Palace

To Get What You Need

Healthy and Pathological Internet Use

One day, early in my explorations of the Palace chat site called "Main Mansion," I found myself in the spa with several other avid users. Main Mansion is the oldest and perhaps the most popular of communities that uses the Palace chat software - software that enables members to interact in a visual scene using icons called "avatars" to represent themselves. In the spa, a curious thing happened whenever we mentioned the word "Palace" in any of our typed-text communications with each other. For instance, when I typed "What do you people think of Palace?", I was surprised to see what actually appeared on the screen: "What do you people think of this thing that is eating my life? " When I finally figured out that the Palace program itself made this seemingly silly little substitution of words, my confusion turned to delight. Indeed it was an insightful comment by the Palace creator, Jim Bumgardner, who built that trick into the program. It raised an important question, perhaps a worrisome question for some users... IS Palace eating my life?

In many environments on the internet, some users find themselves so captivated by their cyberspace lifestyle that they want to spend more and more time there, sometimes to the neglect of their in-person life. They may not be entirely sure why they find themselves so engrossed. They can't accurately verbalize an explanation for their "addiction." The humorous substitution of words in the Palace spa suggests that it is an unnameable THING - a compelling, unnameable, hidden force. It's not the chat room or the newsgroup or the e-mail that is eating one's life, but the internal, unconscious dynamic it has ignited.

Human motivation is organized around a system of interlocking needs. A person can easily identify the conscious ones. It's those unconscious needs that constitute "the thing." When people become passionate, even obsessed with an activity or person, it is because that activity or person addresses some important desire, often an unconscious one. Psychological health is the fluid expression, satisfaction, and realization of needs - a natural rising and falling of appetite. When needs are suppressed, ignored, diverted, or caught in a vicious cycle of superficial or indirect fulfillment, the result can be pathological fixation and addiction. In psychological health, the conscious realization and fulfillment of needs leads to a more solid, integrated sense of self. In pathology and addiction, the self becomes hollowed out and fragmented.

One's passion for the internet can be healthy, pathologically addictive, or somewhere in between. A variety of factors interact in determining where a person falls on that continuum. Here I will suggest eight such factors that can help clarify the healthy or unhealthy qualities of one's commitment to cyberspace activities, as well the effect of those activities on the person's underlying needs.

1. The number and types of needs being addressed by the activity. Needs can be physiological, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spiritual. The more needs being addressed by internet endeavors, the more powerful the hold cyberspace has on the person.

2. The underlying degree of deprivation. The more an underlying need has been frustrated, denied, or neglected, the more intense the person's predisposition to seek fulfillment anywhere he or she can. Because cyberspace is such a diversified, compelling, and easily accessed environment, it serves as a ripe target for those thirsts - especially when one's in-person life has been the origin of the deprivation.

3. The type of internet activity. There are various facets to internet use. Some activities are non-social, such as games, creating software, and collecting information, literature, and graphics. Some interpersonal settings are designed

around games and competition, others are purely social. Environments may involve synchronous versus asynchronous communication (e.g., chat versus e-mail) or text-only versus visual/auditory communication. Different types of internet activities can vary greatly in how they influence different needs. Environments that combine a variety of features may address a wider spectrum of needs and, consequently, may be more captivating. For example, communities that involve both games and socializing, chat and e-mail, visual and text communication, can be very captivating on many levels.

4. The effect of internet activity on in-person level of functioning. Health and hygiene, success at work, and fulfilling relationships with peers, friends and family are all important features of adaptive functioning. How many of these features become by disrupted internet use - and the extent to which they are disrupted - reveals the depth of pathology.

5. Subjective feelings of distress. Increased feelings of depression, frustration, disillusionment, alienation, guilt, and anger may be warning signs of pathological internet use. The person may associate those feelings with cyberspace life or in-person life. Often they stem from internet activity that is superficially addressing or aggravating one's needs.

6. Conscious awareness of needs. The more a person understands his motivations, the more they lose their power as the unconscious "thing" leading to compulsive internet use. "Acting out" repressed needs and wishes in cyberspace is only a cathartic activity - a repetition compulsion - that will have to be repeated endlessly. "Working through" underlying needs means that one resolves the conflicts or deprivations related to them, in part, by consciously understanding what those needs entail. Whereas blatant denial suggests addictive behavior and a lack of insight into one's underlying needs, acknowledging one's intense preoccupation with cyberspace may be a step towards recovery - and in some cases may simply be a healthy acknowledgement of a productive passion.

7. Experience and the phase of involvement: New users may become enamored with the fascinating opportunities cyberspace offers. The "addictive phase" may eventually taper off as the novelty of the internet dissipates and the duties of the in-person world call. In some cases, high expectations for online life are dashed. Needs are not fulfilled and the resulting disappointment leads one back to the "real" world. Some seasoned onliners understand the pitfalls that lure users into intensely emotional and hence addictive dramas (e.g., the psychological effects of anonymity). That understanding helps them steer clear.

8. The balance and integration of in-person and cyberspace living. Under ideal conditions, the degree of commitment to online activities and companions is balanced by the commitment to offline activities, friends, and family. The two worlds also are integrated in that one brings online activities into the "real" world, meets online companions in-person, discusses online life with one's in-person friends and family, and establishes contact with some in-person companions via the internet. Pathological internet use often results in an online life that is completely isolated from one's in-person life and even guarded against perceived intrusions from the "real" world.

In the sections that follow, I will explore the various needs that may be addressed by cyberspace activities. Although it's helpful to categorize them, many needs overlap and interact in complex ways. Understanding these interactions can shed light on how and why people become healthfully or pathologically involved with the internet.

Sexual Needs, and More

One afternoon at the Main site I asked the group at Harry's Bar why they thought the Palace was addictive. Someone gave a simple, one word reply.... "SEX." A hundred years ago Freud claimed that sex was the primary human motive. Maslow placed it at the first level of his hierarchical pyramid of needs. Nowadays cybersex is a popular topic in the media precisely because sex IS one of those basic biological motivations that commands attention. Worry and outrage among the misinformed that "the internet is nothing but pornography and sex" is a symptom of technophobia. Most people in cyberspace are not out to satisfy their sex drive. However, some definitely are. When people become preoccupied with online sexual activities, they do so for the same two basic reasons people get obsessed with sex in any context: it satisfies that biological need, but it also addresses a variety of purely psychological and social needs.

Some sexual pursuits on the internet are non-social - for example, collecting pornographic graphics and stories, without interacting with anyone. For the "normal" person, these pursuits will wax and wane with the natural biological fluctuations in sexual desire. A pathological obsession with such solitary sexual activities indicates anxiety about intimacy. The danger of a compulsive preoccupation also stems from the escalating need for even more variety of sexual material, more daring material, or simply, more material. Underlying psychological pressures to master, control, and "possess" - or to push the envelop of bold, anti-social behavior - intensifies this preoccupation above and beyond the biological drive level. Because the internet offers an almost infinite supply of easily and anonymously available

pornographic material, the fuel for this preoccupation is endless. One can never own it all. There's no end to how daring one can be. Excessive participation in cyberspace groups devoted to sexual stories and graphics (such as the alt.sex and alt.binaries newsgroups) revolves around this endless supply of material. The need to compete and be admired by other participants for the size and diversity of one's collection, and for one's technical know-how in posting to the group, can further reinforce the person's excessive involvement.

Most sexual activity on the internet is social at some level. Even a person's attitude towards fellow newsgroup members, as in the example above, is a social concern that enhances the sexual preoccupation. For sexual encounters that are explicitly interpersonal, the underlying emotional needs that activate the encounter often are more influential than the purely biological drive itself. Even though cybersex can become addictive because it is an easily accessed, anonymous, and very medically safe way to satisfy one's instinctual drive, the psychological dimension cannot be ignored. The fact that cybersex offers, at the very best, only visual and auditory stimulation, suggests that the needs satisfied must be heavily psychological. Cybersex of any type - no matter how anonymous or brief - always revolves around an interpersonal scenario. It's the emotional need satisfied by that scenario that perpetuates the activity. When people identify the activity as purely sexual, and fail to realize the underlying psychological need, the potential for addiction increases.

Cybersex makes up for its lack of physical stimulation by the wide variety of psychosexual stimulation it offers. With the safety that internet anonymity offers, people can experiment with all sorts of behaviors, fantasies, and alterations of their identity and gender. While some enjoy the voyeuristic/exhibitionistic satisfactions of one-way or two-way video, or mutual play with pornographic images and avatars, many prefer the bare bones typed-text style of sexual encounter because it more powerfully activates the imagination (and transference reactions). With the wide variety of people available on the internet - and easy paths to find them - a person can quickly find the partners that matches his or her desires. And thanks to anonymity, one can easily bail out of an encounter and try again later someplace else, with someone else.

Experimenting with one's sexuality may be perfectly healthy when it entails a deeper understanding and actualizing of one's needs and identity. It can be a process of working through psychological difficulties. Others may be driven to excessive involvement with cybersex without fully realizing it is an attempt to overcome loneliness or depression, to express anger or dependency, to dominate and control, or to fill an internal emptiness in self. Cybersex then becomes an addictive acting out of needs that never becomes fully satisfied. For some, diving deeper into the expression of unconscious fantasies gets out of control. Reality testing from the external world disappears. The absence of real world consequences makes it difficult to curb one's behavior.

Most sensual activity in cyberspace doesn't even involve pornography or "talking dirty" interchanges between partners. Perhaps the word "cybersex" doesn't even apply to most of the sexual activity taking place there. The good old fashioned word "flirting" is more appropriate. Many social environments in cyberspace are free-form social gatherings, almost like ongoing parties - and like any good party, there is a hefty dose of playful flirting. It might be normal fun that doesn't progress to anything sexually intimate. For some people, what makes it more attractive than real world flirting are the same features that makes cybersex attractive. It is relatively anonymous and safe, so people can be a bit more open, bold, and experimental than they would at an in-person gathering. It's possible that in some cases this casual quality of cyberflirting only superficially satisfies deeper needs for companionship, dependency, romance or love, which compels the person to come back for more. Ambivalence about intimacy - wanting it but also not wanting it - could lock some people into a seemingly endless string of flirtations that never progresses to true intimacy. Some people perceive cyberflirting and cybersex as imaginary, "pretend" encounters isolated from their real life and therefore not a threat to their in-person relationships. That same "pretend" quality may make it feel like a "pretend" satisfaction, which fails to fully satisfy and begs for more.

The extent to which people deprived of romance, sexuality, and/or companionship in their in-person relationships will determine how persistently they seek out those things in cyberspace. If one of those needs is not met in an intimate in-person involvement, the individual may look for it on the internet. If the person becomes excessively preoccupied with the online partner, obviously it can damage the in-person bond. But in some cases the online affair may serve as a supplementary satisfaction that helps preserve a marriage. What the person learns online may in fact be used to enhance his or her "real world" relationship.

The Need for an Altered State of Consciousness

Human beings have an inherent need to alter their consciousness - to experience reality from different perspectives. We pursue this need through a wide variety of activities - meditation, drugs, athletics, sex, art. Some are more productive

than others. Dreams are a necessary, built-in mechanism for achieving this altered experience of self, other, and world on a nightly basis. It allows the expression of the usually unconscious, primary process styles of thinking that provide a different perspective on reality.

Cyberspace may be a new and important addition to this list. Critics often complain that computers and cyberspace have become a substitute for life. While this indeed may be true for some people, we should also consider the possibility that cyberspace may be an adaptive supplement to "real" life. It may be a viable alternative for altering consciousness by providing new, imaginative ways to interact with others and experience the world. One's sense of time, space, and personal identity can change on the internet. Communicating via typed text for some people feels like a blending of consciousness with the other user. Cyberspace can become a dream-like state of consciousness, particularly in the fantasy worlds of MOOs, MUDs, and multimedia environments where people interact with avatars in imaginative visual scenes. You can shape shift, telepathically "whisper" to other people, and violate the laws of physics by suspending oneself in mid-air, walking through walls, or creating objects out of nothing.

People may be attracted to virtual environments because - like dreams - they satisfy this need for an alternative view of reality by encouraging unconscious, primary process styles of thinking. Like dreams, they also enable the expression of unconscious fantasies and impulses, which may explain some of the sexuality, aggression, and imaginative role playing we see on the internet. Stretching the analogy even further, we can think of an "addiction" to cyberspace as an addiction to an altered state of consciousness, abstinence from computering to withdrawal or REM (dream) deprivation, and a fervid diving back into cyberspace as a cyberspace "rebound," not unlike REM rebound. The experience may be similar to lucid dreaming, which is a dream in which the person knows she is dreaming and is able to direct the outcome. Supposedly, more primitive people in ancient cultures were able to develop and refine this ability. Contemporary dream workers are attempting to revive those skills. Pointing and clicking in cyberspace dream worlds may be the computer user's similar attempt to return to those more primitive times. It's an attempt to create and direct a recurring, lucid dream.

Although it has a significant impact on the user, this control over the cyberdream is limited. After all, we have control over the program, but not over the people who occupy it with us. Virtual worlds are not games where we control all the pieces. They are real worlds complete with all the interpersonal triumphs and struggles that stir us up in the physical world. Some users recognize and accept this fact. They ride the flow of cyberspace, or choose to turn the computer off when the experience becomes an anxiety dream, or even a nightmare. Those who feel driven to somehow master the dream-like game may have a hard time knowing when to sign off.

The Need for Achievement and Mastery

Everyone has a basic need for learning, accomplishment, mastery of the environment, and the self-esteem that arises from one's achievements. Operant theory in psychology adds that learning is most powerful when small units of accomplishment are quickly reinforced. Computers in general are so "addictive" because they do all of this in a highly efficient and rewarding fashion. You confront a problem or an unfamiliar computer function, you investigate, you try solutions, you finally figure it out - and the computer does something specific and concrete for you that it never did before. Challenge, experimentation, mastery, success. It's a very motivating cycle that makes people want to learn and do more.

Many environments in cyberspace - being complex technically, socially, or both - pose few limits on how much a person can experiment and learn. Some new users often take great pleasure in mastering the various technical features of the software. For those people who are not attracted to the technical side of things, there is the challenge of learning the culture - discovering its people, norms, social structure, history and legends, and participating in the shaping of its future. Exploring and mastering the many levels of technically and socially sophisticated environments can be a never-ending satisfier of curiosity, and a never-ending source of self-esteem. In most places on the internet, new technical and social features surface continually. The community changes quickly. To stay on top of things, you must be like a shark: you must keep moving. In many online communities longstanding members can achieve an elevated status among the population. They can become a host, moderator, wizard, god, or "op" who has powers that ordinary users do not. Ambitions to achieve such honored positions fuels the desire to spend more time online. Getting the position reinforces and intensifies the effort.

The need to achieve in the technical and/or social domain can be a very normal, healthy process. However, some people feel driven to compensate for deep-seated feelings of failure, inadequacy, and helplessness, or to overcome desperate needs for acknowledgement, admiration, and love. Obsession with cyberspace accomplishments - technical or social - can become a seemingly endless pursuit that never fully gratifies, especially when the string of possible achievements

has no ceiling and the underlying needs are not realized. Being a sophisticate on the internet means having the whole world and a universe of information at your fingertips. For some it is an addictive, god-like feeling of omnipotence and omniscience. Beneath that feeling, however, lies the realization that you MUST keep moving to stay on top of it all.

The Need to Belong

Everyone needs interpersonal contact, social recognition, and a sense of belonging. As humans, we instinctively want to go to a place where everyone knows your name. The sense of self rests on acknowledgement and affirmation from others. Because cyberspace offers a vast number and variety of groups to join, it can satisfy almost any person's need to belong to a particular group of like-minded people. A person easily can compartmentalize his or her group attachments, joining a variety of groups with each one addressing a particular interest or aspect of personal identity. Simply being a user of a particular program can create an almost instantaneous camaraderie and sense of belonging. The program is a conversation piece - something everyone can relate to. That sense of brotherhood can be especially strong if the users are participating in a brand new environment. They feel like pioneers who, together, are settling new territory, building a new world. It's a very addictive feeling of belonging to a creative process.

A problem may arise when the group starts to flourish. Lots of new users show up. The community starts to change, quickly - more so than in the "real" world. Among the increasing flood of people, if you want to maintain the connection to the community - if you want people to know your name - you HAVE to keep coming back. The more time you spend online, the more people get to know you, the more you are considered a member who is "one of us." If you haven't signed on for a few days or longer, you may feel like you are losing ground, that you will be forgotten. You don't want those relationships you developed to fade out, or your identity in the community to fade. So you feel compelled to go back and reestablish your presence. Unconscious fears about separation and abandonment can haunt some users, driving them to compulsive participation.

The frequently seen joking about being "addicted" among hardcore users can add to the sense of camaraderie and belonging. It may be a healthy identification with a shared commitment, or it may serve to ease anxiety about being excessively involved. Misery loves company.

The JenniCam phenomenon is a unique example of how cyberspace addresses such needs for belonging and the social affirmation of self. There was an overwhelming response to Jennifer Ringley when she set up a live, continuous video broadcast of her dorm room, and then later her apartment. People who idealized, even worshipped, Jenni banned together in groups to talk about her, speculate about her, share screen captured pictures of her. She became the focal point of their camaraderie. Their collective admiration of her - a kind of idealizing transference - served to bolster their sense of self. Even though unable to communicate with her, some admirers set up a second computer monitor next to their own, so they could "be with" Jenni as they went about their work. This contact with her - a kind of twinning transference - created a feeling of companionship. In interviews with journalists, Jenni herself described how she felt she might be helping some lonely males by serving as a kind of substitute "girlfriend" who could be with them whenever they wanted her there.

The Need for Relationships

What must be obvious in this paper so far is that almost all activities in cyberspace - not unlike all activities in life - address the most basic of human needs: the need to interact with other humans. More than just an information superhighway, the internet is a powerful social domain. It is those social opportunities that have the biggest influence on normal vis a vis excessive internet use.

A stereotype in the minds of the uninformed public is that the internet is populated mostly by misfits and socially inadequate people. With little social success in the real world, they resort to safe, superficial contact offered through the cold wires and glass monitor screens of cyberspace. This stereotyped thinking is more a defensive reaction to the internet than an accurate reflection of reality. Nevertheless, some shy, interpersonally anxious, and schizoid people may be drawn to cyberspace relationships. The relative anonymity of cyberspace - especially typed text communication - can indeed help such people feel more expressive, more in control, less vulnerable.

For some people, the cyberspace supplement to in-person relationships becomes enriching and educational. They experiment with new ways to express themselves and new types of relationships. In the imaginary MUD and multimedia worlds, they enjoy playing with creative communication tools that don't exist in the real world, such as telepathic whispering and shape-shifting avatars. For those who rely too heavily on cybercompanions to the exclusion

of in-person socializing, the outcome ultimately can be less than fully satisfying, disappointing, even destructive. Ideally, the person comes to recognize the limitations and pitfalls of online relationships. The person learns to balance them with in-person contacts. Compulsive internet use occurs when the person fails to see these problems. Determined, sometimes almost desperate, the person keeps going back for more.

The excessive preoccupation with cyberspace relationships often is a preoccupation with the dynamics of one's one psyche. The anonymous text-only communication of chat and e-mail can draw out powerful transference reactions. Although the person may feel the emotional drama is with the other person online, a large portion of the perceived relationship is shaped by unconscious remnants of problematic relationships from the person's past. The love, hate, competition, admiration, dependency, fear, is not simply directed towards the online other. It is a struggle within intrapsychic world of internalizations and introjects. The preoccupation with the cyberspace relationship can become an attempt to force the other to conform to one's unconscious expectations and wishes, or to satisfy unconscious needs. Essentially, the person becomes "addicted" to his or her unconscious dynamics that surface in the online encounter.

Transference reactions also can be amplified by a lack of response. As interactive as the internet it, sometimes it isn't. Your private e-mail never receives a reply. The mailing list or newsgroup members fail to respond to your message. Chat partners seem to ignore you. This failure of reactivity becomes the ultimate blank screen that can magnify a person's anxious fantasies about how others perceive him. Many experienced users understand this tendency to read meaning into a non-response. They don't take it personally. Avid but less experienced users sometimes do not understand. In the absence of a reply, they may inappropriately act on their anxious fantasy, sometimes exaggerating their behavior in order to get a reply. In the online group that seems to ignore them, they may dramatically increase their participation in order to draw some attention. Even under good conditions, a participant in an e-mail list or newsgroup may receive only an occasional reply. This once-in-awhile reaction from others can act as an intermittent reinforcer that leads to increased, even excessive participation - participation that resists extinction.

The lack of face-to-face cues in cyberspace relationships cuts both ways. On the one hand, some people appreciate how the relative anonymity allows them to be more honest and open about themselves. They may feel more "real" online, that others know them more deeply. This enticement may contribute to excessive online activity and withdrawal from in-person people who "don't really understand me." At the same time, the lack of face-to-face cues does eliminate much of what is important about human relationships. Physical appearance, body language, voice - are all significant components of who we are and how we express ourselves. Human physical contact - to touch and be touched - is an extremely powerful need. Paradoxically, cyberspace relationships can be deep and intimate while also being superficial and incomplete. This paradoxical satisfying and frustrating of social needs drives some people into coming back for more and more. When an online relationship reaches a certain level of intimacy, many people want to meet in-person in order to remedy that contradictory mixture. But some choose not to. They do not want the real world to disrupt the acting out of their transference fantasy within that online relationship.

The Need for Self-Actualization and the Transcendence of Self

At the top of Maslow's hierarchy lies the need for self-actualization. This need subsumes many of those from the lower levels - the need for fulfilling interpersonal relationships, to express oneself, to satisfy one's intellectual and artistic needs by successfully engaging the world around us. Self-actualization is striving towards the development of oneself as a unique individual. It is the ongoing process of realizing and cultivating one's inner potentials, the flowering of the "true" self.

Are people self-actualizing in cyberspace? Many people feel they are expressing their creative potentials by engaging the technical and social dimensions of the internet. They find themselves realizing inner interests, attitudes, and aspects of their personality that were previously hidden. Many feel they are developing fulfilling relationships with others by experimenting with new ways of being. Some people say they are MORE like their true selves in cyberspace than in real life. It's difficult to say whether this is true self-actualization, or rather self-deception as a defense against understanding unconscious, pathological motives behind internet use. The eight factors at the beginning of this article can help answer this question. But ultimately the answer may be purely subjective - purely in the eyes of the user.

Another important aspect of self-actualization is the development of one's spirituality. This raises a fascinating question. Are people discovering their spiritual life in cyberspace? At first glance, this may seem an absurd idea. But for some users cyberspace does pose some mysteries about the nature of consciousness, reality, and self. As I move through cyberspace, where is my mind? Where am "I"? Am I really just in my body, or is the essence of me somewhere out there mingling with the consciousness of others, merging with that larger consciousness that is the internet. Is this consciousness less real than what I experience in real life - or more so? If you experience the internet as the evolution

of a world-mind and world-self into a universal Whole, then you are part of that Whole. You have succeeded in transcending your small, encapsulated identity in order to participate in something much larger than the self. Consciously, or even unconsciously, some people sense "God" out there in the vast ocean of ideas and encounters that is cyberspace. What could be more captivating and "addictive" than the search for God? No doubt, the quest to achieve self transcendence via the internet can be a pathological defense against all sorts of personal conflicts and anxieties. In some cases, however, the yearning to immerse oneself in cyberspace could be genuinely spiritual.

The Integration Principle

The distinction between healthy and excessive internet use is illusive - as is defining any type of "addiction." If a person is captivated by some activity, feels devoted to it, would like to spend as much time as possible pursuing it - this could be an outlet for learning, creativity, and self-expression. Was Einstein addicted to physics, or Picasso to painting? Even in some excessive, unhealthy preoccupations you can find these positive features embedded within the problem. In truly pathological addictions, the scale has tipped. The bad outweighs the good, resulting in serious disturbances in one's ability to function in life and subjective feelings of distress. The needs that lead a person to fulfilling relationships, work, and sense of self are being frustrated, side-tracked, or superficially satisfied. In a truly pathological addiction, the person's world shrinks to the addictive activity. Rather than moving towards higher levels of integration and completeness - as in self-actualization - the person's life becomes narrow, rigid, isolated. Perhaps the best single method for identifying healthy and pathological internet use involves the last of the eight criteria, what I will call the "integration principle:"

Internet use becomes pathological when it is dissociated from in-person life.
It becomes healthy when it is integrated with in-person living.

People become pathologically involved in the internet when they have dissociated it from their in-person life. Their cyberspace activity becomes an isolated world unto itself. They don't talk about it with friends and family. It becomes a walled-off substitute or escape from their life rather than a supplement to it. Cyberspace becomes a dissociated part of their own mind, a sealed-off intrapsychic zone where conscious and unconscious needs are acted out, but never fully understood or satisfied. Reality testing is lost. Alleviating this dissociation is an implicit or explicit component of many of the techniques for helping people excessively preoccupied with the internet.

In healthy internet use people integrate in-person and cyberspace living. They talk about their online activities and companions with family and friends. They bring their real identity, interests, and skills into their online life. They call on the phone or meet in-person the people they know online. The integration also occurs from the opposite direction. They communicate with people from their in-person life via e-mail or chat. They explore cyberspace with those people. In the ideal scenario, cyberspace and in-person activities overlap and enrich each other. The "thing" that could have eaten up their lives - without their really understanding how or why - instead expands and enhances their lives. They learn the value of cyberspace living, but also use that lesson to appreciate even more the vitality of their in-person lives.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Computer and Cyberspace Addiction (examines the definitions, criteria, and controversy concerning computer and internet addiction)

Why is this Thing Eating My Life (a section in the article about the early history of the Palace community)

Bringing Online and Offline Living Together: The Integration Principle (the rationale and strategies for integrating online and offline living)

Mom, Dad, Computer: Transference Reactions to Computers (one reason why some people become so attached to their computer is that it satisfies intense (and often unconscious) interpersonal needs from their past)

Cyberspace as Dream World: Illusion and Reality at the Palace (some people may be drawn to cyberspace because it fulfills the need for an altered state of consciousness, similar to dreams. This may be especially true of the highly visual and fantasy-based MOO environments like the Palace)

The Internet Regression

Norman N. Holland

"Talking on the Internet, people regress. It's that simple."

That's how Holland begins his 1996 paper. And then he proceeds to back up his statement with an intriguing psychoanalytic (emphasizing drive theory) analysis of what he considers the three major signs of regressive behavior in cyberspace: flaming, sexual harrassment, and (curiously) the extraordinary generosity and openness you sometimes see on the internet. He then traces these regressions to the transference reactions people have to the computer itself - unconscious fantasies about power, dominance, sex, narcissistic gratification and mirroring, oral engulfment, and parental acceptance and love. At the heart of the regression is the individual's tendency to confuse the person and the machine. In cyberspace the user sees the computer as human and other people as something less than human - resulting in a disinhibition of sexual and aggressive acting out.

Holland's arguments are both fascinating and convincing. There is no doubt that people regress on the internet. Anyone who has been consumed by a flame war or visited some of the more outlandish "alt" newsgroups will attest to that. Cyberspace weds the highest intellectual functions and most primitive instincts of the human personality, as Holland suggests. It may also be a space wherein the more sublime aspects of humanity are expressed. Humans, by their very nature, are always looking for new ways to express themselves and connect to others, to find new media for creative activity, to expand their consciousness beyond its usual boundaries - and even to help others through generosity and honesty that transcends unconscious conflicts. Cyberspace can be a place where these things happen.

Between the lines of his analysis, Holland himself seems to be hinting at some of these ideas. He admits that he truly enjoys the internet. "I think it's something new and amazing and quite wonderful in the spectrum of human relations." In fact, he ends by saying that the internet is "fun." Perhaps that fun is not necessarily or always a sign of regression. Perhaps it can be a progression. In a Winnicottian sort of way, we can think of cyberspace as a space for playing - a playing with ideas, relationships, and personal identity in a realm somewhere between self and other, a realm of creativity, self-development, and maybe even self-transcendence.

Talking on the Internet, people regress. It's that simple. It can be one-to-one talk on e-mail or many-to-many talk on one of the LISTs or newsgroups. People regress, expressing sex and aggression as they never would face to face.

Think about it. Current estimates say 23 million people communicate on the Internet from most of the nations on the globe, and that number is increasing at 12% a month. And all this just grew like Topsy, with no one planning or controlling it. Here is one of the extraordinary technological achievements, one of the great *human* achievements, of our century. But *homo sapiens* reverts to primitive, childish behavior. Why?

There are three major signs or, if you will, symptoms of this regression. The one Internet primitivism that everybody talks about is "flaming," flying into a typewritten rage at some perceived slight or blunder. "Everywhere I went in the newsgroups," writes John Seabrook in *The New Yorker*, "I found flames, and fear of flames" (1994, 70). No wonder. Seabrook had written a friendly piece on Bill Gates, the powerful president of Microsoft. In the "profile," he made a point of the way he and Gates conducted their interview on e-mail. This is what appeared on Seabrook's screen (courtesy of a certain computer columnist):

>>Crave THIS, asshole:

Listen, you toadying dipshit scumbag . . . remove your head from your rectum long enough to look around and notice that real reporters don't fawn over their subjects, pretend that their subjects are making some sort of special contact with them, or, worse, curry favor by TELLING their subjects how great the ass-licking profile is going to turn out and then brag in print about doing it.

Forward this to Mom. Copy Tina [the new publisher of *The New Yorker*] and tell her the mag is fast turning to compost. One good worm deserves another.<<

This last was a veiled threat, since a "worm" is a computer virus and the "flame" might have caused damage to Seabrook's data and programs.

A second primitivism on the Internet is sexual harassment, crude invitations to people about whom one knows no more than their online signatures (which may well be "gender-benders" that hide the sex of the speaker). It happens even in professional or intellectual groups, but the "chat" groups are the worst. Women complain that going into chat mode can feel like a walk past a construction site or a wrong turn down a dark street (Span 1994). But males are not the only offenders. Women also proposition men. As one of the subscribers to my list-conference PSYART described it,

>>Once, while in a chat, I changed my nickname to a female moniker. A woman (and I use the noun to refer to what she presented herself as--not that I have any reason to doubt her, but who knows on IRC [Internet Relay Chat]) . . . left the conference, and told some people there was a new woman on the net. She returned to the conference, and many men joined. Several began sending me private messages suggesting various (and graphic) sexual acts. One in an adjacent state wanted to meet me in person. None of these people ever sent me e-mail later, perhaps because I revealed my real gender after a while--at which time the harassment ended. This particular conference was not one of the sexually-oriented ones--just an IRC group we had formed that night. What began as a joke proved to be quite an education.

On another occasion, while using my natural and usual IRC/real identity, someone claiming to be a young woman joined a conference--again, not a sexual interest group--and began sending me private, explicit messages. I hadn't thought about it until now, but it seems as though her advances were less crude, although every bit as direct (Sougstadt 1994)<<

The third symptom of regression--and you may not consider it a regression at all--is the extraordinary generosity you see on the Internet. The one comment you hear over and over again about online communication is the openness, the sense of sharing and, mostly, tolerance. Total strangers will give up hours of their time to send one another research data. Even goods. A lawyer was moving from Boston to Washington. A fire on the van destroyed his books, and he posted a list of what he had lost on the Internet. "Every day for six months I was receiving books in the mail from people I'd never met" (Rubin 1994). "People on the network share information about everything from how to run their computers to how to make cheesecake. Most of the people who post are trying to be helpful, even when they disagree" (Golden 1994). Most dramatically, on the Internet, there are support groups for recovering alchoholics, drug addicts, and smokers. People with suicidal tendencies tenderly share ways in which they ward off the temptation (Wright 1993).

Another side to this openness is what Kristina Ross has called "identity play" (1994). People try out new ways of being, often in very playful ways: different professions, the opposite gender, altered self-descriptions. There is a sense that 'it doesn't matter,' a feeling of invulnerability.

At the same time, this openness involves heightened vulnerability. This is the way *New Yorker* writer John Seabrook describes how it feels to be flamed:

> The flame seemed to put a chill in the center of my chest which I could feel spreading slowly outward. My shoulders began to shake. I got up and walked quickly to the soda machines for no good reason, then hurried back to my desk. There was the flame on my screen, the sound of it not dying away; it was flaming me all over again in the subjective eternity that is time in the on-line world. . . . the technology greased the words . . . with a kind of immediacy that allowed them to slide easily into my brain (1994, 70-71).

In short, communication on the Internet has its plusses and minuses. The plusses are the generosity and openness. The minuses are aggressive flaming, sexual attack, and increased vulnerability. I think they are two sides of the same coin: sex and aggression in positive and negative, active and passive, forms. Both begin because of a lack of inhibition--a regression. But what lures us into this regression?

The simplest answer is, the computer itself. To understand interpersonal behavior on the Internet, we need to look at the fantasies people have about their computers.

It is already a cliche to say that the computer extends and expands the brain. What the car, the boat, the gun, the airplane do for the body, the computer does for the mind. In fact, people use metaphors of body activity to describe the mind working on the computer, like this British user: "It exercises the mental faculties . . . . it keeps my mind alive and sprightly" (Shotton 1989, 207).

In this pseudo-physicality, men easily get into mine-is-bigger- than-yours games. My hard disk, my chip, my screen is bigger or faster or newer or more powerful.(Kantrowitz 1994, Turkle 1984). In psychoanalytic terms, men's fantasies about computers are "phallic." In this context, "flaming" is a bit like giving other drivers the finger from inside a car. Driving is a phallic activity like computing, and the driver identifies *him*self (usually himself) with his machine, feeling secure inside his steel cocoon as the computer "driver" is made safe by distance and anonymity. The context is aggressive and competitive, as men are with their computers (Irvine 1994, Cobb 1993).

Since fantasies about computers tend to the phallic, it should come as no surprise that men and women respond differently to computers. Women, unlike men, generally think the machines are just meant to be used, like the microwave or the vacuum cleaner. "It's a tool, like a screwdriver," one woman writes to the *Washington Post*, not intending (I assume) any symbolism. "I pick it up. I expect it to work. While computers can be more `fun' than most screwdrivers, in general, when I turn my computer on, I expect it to work. Period" (Walker 1994).

It should also come as no suprise that people feel anxious about that phallic computer. `Will the computer go berserk?' `Will it blow up if I press the wrong button?' are common imaginings (Simons 1985, 22). "People are afraid they'll break something," writes one woman. "Computers are like dogs--they know when you're scared of them" (Dowell 1994). Turkle (1984) contrasts people for whom the computer is just an instrument and people for whom it is magic.

Alongside these magical fantasies of power and dominance and size--and castration--are quite different phenomena: computer dependency and addiction. Some people are powerless to resist the pleasure of fooling around with the computer. They see it as an alluring alternative to ordinary life. They will even risk their marriages for the pleasure of hours and hours of "working out" on their computers or "surfing" on the Internet.

Why is it so pleasurable as to be addictive? According to a British study, computer addicts--these are not only people hooked on networking but on programming, gaming, and even work on their computers--saw computers as a soothing alternative to the human. These possibly schizoid types found computers logical, predictable, and non-judgmental, but humans illogical, erratic, and critical. They simply preferred computers (Shotton 1989, 253, 264; see also Weizenbaum 1976). Computer addicts avoid the frustration of dealing with an illogical world of human beings by retreating to a relationship in which they find their own values of logic and dispassion.

Furthermore, not only is the machine human, it is a human just like me. Computer addicts have a narcissistic relationship with their machines. The computer becomes a mirror image of themselves. And indeed, don't most of us prefer magazines, newspapers, television programs--and friends--that confirm our own values? (Shotton 1989, 250-52).

When programming, the computer addicts are working with an ideal partner who understands them fully. They feel toward their machines as toward a true friend. This friend will not withdraw if a mistake is made. This friend will try to be an ever- faithful helpmate (Shotton 1989, 167). And this friend is male.

Most computer users talk to their computers and give them nicknames, as other people do boats, cars, airplanes (for example, Enola Gay), and even guns (Big Bertha). But where the nicknames for cars, boats, airplanes, and guns are usually female, nicknames for computers are invariably male. In an American study, subjects "made a total of 358 pronoun references, variously referring to the computer as `it,' `he,' `you,' `they,' (and even `Fred')--[but] never as `she'" (Scheibe and Erwin 1980). In Shotton's British study of 75 computer dependent people, they all, male and female, gave their computers male nicknames. In fact one woman in that study said right out, "He's the man in my life." In that same study, a male respondent reported that his computer was male ("my mate Micky"), but, he said, "I always refer to my dual disk-drive as female--she's lovely" (Shotton 1989, 194-195). Notice: his active, powerful, intelligent, logical computer was male like him, while his obedient, passive, receptive disk-drive was female.^1 Let's not forget, in this connection, that in 1982 *Time* magazine named the personal computer its *Man* of the Year.

In other ways the computer plays the role of a parent. It rewards its human's good behavior--the program runs--but it does not punish. The machine does not judge its user as inadequate. Rather, faced with poor performance on the part of its human, the computer just ignores it and waits patiently for the next input. The computer is like a parent who has high hopes for you but rewards your achievement, even if it is less than optimum. The machine always holds out more goals to strive for, but these goals are realistic, and it's up to you whether to go for them or not (Shotton 1989, 167). If the computer is a demanding parent, it is also a very permissive one.

It is permissive in yet another way. It is totally anonymous. You can get hurt opening yourself up to real people, but you can say anything to a computer, and it won't judge or criticize you. That is why sociologists are turning to computers to do their interviewing (Kiesler and Sproull 1986). For example, 14% more students admitted to drug use in a survey by computer than by pencil-and-paper (Sproull and Kiesler 1991, 45). In a Scottish survey of alchohol use, people would report greater use to a computer than in a face-to-face interview, and the figures given to the computer matched actual use more closely (Waterton and Duffy 1984).

Now this is odd. We all know that the computer can store anything we say. Yet we nevertheless feel safe in telling it the most intimate details of our lives. For example, there is a computer program for doing sex therapy, Sexpert. Videotaped sessions with the computer showed the couples "clearly engaged" by Sexpert. They "seriously discussed their sex life, relationship, and Sexpert's comments with each other" (Binik et al. 1989). Why this trust? Because we are isolated from social cues and so feel more free from criticism than if speaking to a person. Opening up to the wrong human being can be humiliating or hurtful. Not so a computer.

And of course, there is a lively market for computer pornography. I came across the following advertisement in *PC-Magazine*:

> Now You Can Have Your Own GIRLFRIEND... a sensuous woman living in your computer!
>
> GIRLFRIEND is the first VIRTUAL WOMAN. You can watch her, talk to her, ask her questions and relate with her. Over 100 actual VGA photographs allow you to see your girlfriend as you ask her to wear different outfits, and guide her into different sexual activities. As a true artificial intelligence program, GIRLFRIEND starts with a 3000 word vocabulary [beautiful but dumb? --NNH] and actually GROWS the more you use it. She will remember your name, your birthday, and your likes and dislikes. GIRLFRIEND comes with the base software [sic] and GIRLFRIEND LISA. Additional girls will be added. This program requires 7- 10MB of free space ("Sexy" 1994).

This is, of course, the same male fantasy as *The Stepford Wives*, the woman who is totally satisfying because she is completely docile because she is a machine.

The same fantasy comes in negative forms, however. Once, when I spoke this paper, one of my hearers told me the following story. (I am quoting this man accurately as I can.)

> I write in bed, using a yellow pad and a pen that will write upside down, a 'space pen.' Then, the next morning, I transcribe what I have written onto the computer. I resolved to get a laptop computer to eliminate one step of this two-step process. When I got the laptop, I found I could not take it into bed with me--it felt like a homosexual encounter. I still can't do it. I can sit on the side of the bed with the laptop, but I can't take it into bed with me.

My informant said that he was telling this to people standing around after my talk when a woman chimed in: "I had the same experience. I bought a laptop to write in bed, but I couldn't take it to bed. It's all analytical, logical, dichotomous, and I won't sleep with a man like that."

Odd as it may seem, many, many psychological researchers have come to the same conclusion: *people almost instinctively think of computers as other people* (Forman and Pufall 1988, 247; Frude 1983). "Extremely short exposures to a relatively simple computer program . . . induce powerful delusional thinking in quite normal people," wrote Joseph Weizenbaum, having watched people anthropomorphize and become deeply involved with his programs ELIZA and DOCTOR (Weizenbaum 1976, 6-7, 188-191).

These fantasies of the machine as person, indeed as sexual partner, do not attach just to intelligent machines, where they are somewhat justifiable. The British researcher I've been quoting reported an interview with a racing car driver who spoke of his quasi-human relation with his car. Two sculptors she interviewed showed the same kind of personal involvement with their medium (Shotton 1989, 264). "People form all sorts of emotional bonds to machines, for example, to musical instruments, motorcycles, and cars," notes Weizenbaum (7). Apparently one can have a human relation with *any* medium to which one is passionately committed or, perhaps I should say, any medium into which one can passionately involve oneself. Relevant here would be Marion Milner's 1957 classic study of artists' emotional relations to their medium as both an extension of self and a piece of the world that one works on "out there," a special kind of transitional object. The computer just makes this process faster and more drastic, because it exhibits "intelligent" behavior like another human.

In sum, then, we have some fantasies about the computer as a thing: phallic fantasies of power and oral fantasies of engulfing pleasure. We also have these more remarkable fantasies that the computer is something more than a thing, something between person and thing. We have a quasi-human relationship with the machine as helpmate, as true friend, as permissive parent, as sex object, and as sex partner. And all these fantasies enter into communication on the Internet.

The machineness of the machine, it seems to me, affects Internet communication by subtracting and by adding. The machine takes away some of our ordinary human-to-human cues, but it adds other elements from the fantasies we bring to the computer.

The most obvious way the machine affects Internet talk is to take away most of the ongoing signs we have of another person's feelings in face to face communication. We lose the feedback, the chuckle, the smile, the raised eyebrow, the rolled eyes. Even on the telephone we still have pacing and tone of voice. But on the Internet, all we have are typed words--"plain text." Irony is lost and sarcasm literal. Yet, paradoxically, conversely, without eye contact or body language, it feels as though we have a wire going directly into the other person's brain or our own. Communication feels "greased" (in John Seabrook's phrase above)--because you are relating directly to the "mind" of a computer.

Perhaps that's why people think writing on the Internet is aural. As in the opening phrase of this essay, "Talking on the Internet." All through this essay, I've been calling Internet communication speaking and hearing, and I doubt you even noticed. But people don't *talk* on the Internet, they type. One man left his Caps Lock key on and typed his message all in capitals. He got back a reply, "Why are you shouting at me?" (Filipczak 1994). On the Internet, we blur sensory modes between seeing and hearing, reading and listening, writing and talking, and this is part of a general loss of boundaries.

The Internet is, in the word that all writers fall back on, "vast"--23 million people all chattering away. We see this sense of size in imagery like the "information superhighway," that we are to drive on in our Vice-President's phallic fantasies. Or the vast "sea of information" of oral fantasy, inconceivably bigger than any one human being. Our power fantasies would have us penetrating and mastering this huge thing. But there is also the fear--and wish--to be swept up in it, to lose oneself in it, to be engulfed. This is how a computer columnist phrases his dislike for a windowed interface:

> I like the uncluttered and unplanned void before me. It is the untamed wilderness. The prompt is a beacon, my North Star, my constant reminder that the Internet is a seething, roiling cyber-ocean, changing every second. To view it through the filtering shades of a menu or friendly-izing interface is to forget its savage reality, to dim its digital vastness (Greenberg 1994).

Another boundary we lose on the Internet is status. A famous *New Yorker* cartoon has one dog telling another, in front of a computer, "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog." With precautions, nobody can tell whether you are male or female, young or old, nerd or body beautiful, the company president or the mailroom clerk. The result in intra-company communication is, on the one hand, more participation by women and experts (people who are not normally

listened to in meetings) but *less* consensus. *Less* consensus because pressure to conform from higher in the hierarchy is reduced. Also people begin to flame.

Flaming starts up because there are no rules. "People who are extremely nice individuals get on a PC and suddenly it's as if they're screaming," notes the manager of an e-mail system. "There's no formal etiquette for e-mail" (Cobb 1993). Internet society has no way of disapproving breaches of "Netiquette" except by flaming in return. You could screen out the offender by a "bozo filter," but the bozo doesn't know he's being filtered out--he just doesn't get an answer.

That's another difference between Internetting and really speaking to someone. You type in your usually longish communication. Then you wait for what very often is a shortish reply. You don't get answered until the person you're addressing comes online again. That could take only a few seconds or several days.

In these negatives, these removals, communicating on the Internet resembles some much older forms of communication. I'm thinking of the confessional, where you speak to an invisible priest, often at length, often getting only a brief reply at the end of your long and hopeful statement. I'm thinking also of the psychoanalytic couch, where you speak on and on to the analyst, invisible behind your head and, again, you get (usually) a very brief reply, sometimes many minutes or even days later. Both those modes encourage regression toward dependency and fantasy--like the Internet. Both lead you to say things you would not say face to face--like the Internet.

The machine takes away some aspects of human communication, but it adds others. Notably, the machine adds that peculiar half- humanity we relate to. We mirror to the person we are talking to the ambivalent relationship we have with the computer by which we are talking. On the one hand, the computer does useful things for us. It balances our checkbook, it organizes our Rolodex, or it checks our spelling. On the other hand, the machine frustrates us by that same mindless and tireless obedience, because it has no common sense, no intuition. It can drive us nuts, and we get mad at it. In fact, a police officer, having been presented with 'Do not understand' once too often, stepped back and put two shots into the computer (Simons 1985, 28). I suspect that most of us from time to time have wanted to do the same thing.

We mirror those mixed feelings of helpfulness and rage to the people we talk to on the Internet. The frustration comes out as flaming, when some hapless "newbie" asks yet again a FAQ (frequently asked question). But we are just as likely to do useful things for some needy soul at the other end, like replacing lost books or supplying data for an article. Flaming and giving act out to other people the ambivalent emotions we feel toward the computer.

I think the anonymity and this fusion of machine and other person explain why there is so much sex on the Internet. Columnist John Dvorak notes that the most successful online services, in the U.S. anyway, are those that encourage frank sexual chat. On one network, America Online, he writes, "You can do a search on just about any sexual habit or wacky orientation imaginable, and you'll find a slew of people--men and women--who list themselves as aficionados begging to be chatted with or sent mail" (Dvorak 1994). In other words, the willingness and compliance of the computer carries over--not unreasonnably--into one's sexual fantasies about the people one talks to on the Internet.

In short, when communicating on the Internet, we set up a relationship with other people in which the people get less human and the machine gets more human. That is how the three signs of the Internet regression come into play: flaming, flirting, and giving. Our feelings toward the computer as computer become our feelings toward the people to whom we send e-mail or post messages. We flame to the person as though he or she were an insensitive thing, a machine that can't be hurt. We flirt with the machine as though it were a person and could interact with us, compliantly offering sex. We feel open and giving toward the computer because the computer is open and giving to us.

This confusion of person and machine is what makes the Internet regression so special. The regression starts with a variety of phallic-aggressive fantasies, more men's than women's, but women's, too. Then both men and women have the sense of being lost in a vast, engulfing sea of information, millions of times bigger than the finite human sitting at a computer screen embarking on it. The result is an "oral" loss of boundary between person and machine. The person you are talking to on the Internet is thought of as a machine, and the machine is thought of as a person. Then, at an anal level, if you will, who is living blurs into what is dead. At an oral level, one merges. Time on the Internet--"subjective eternity" Seabrook calls it--is not part of one's real life, but a dependency or addiction to that great power.

The net result is a lack of inhibition. People express love and aggression to a degree they never would face to face. Yet, throughout the regression, the Internetter functions by means of the most advanced of ego skills: language, issuing computer commands, and knowing the mysteries of Unix or Gopher or some other communications interface. The result is a regression, yes, but one that expands the mind from its highest functioning to its earliest.

Let me give you an example of this regression, a young man named Alex who appears in Sherry Turkle's fine book, *The Second Self*. Alex is a computer science student at M.I.T. who spends 15 hours a day on the computer, a true member of

what is called hacker culture. Listen for the symptoms and levels I've been describing: phallic strengths, oral merger, narcissistic mirroring, the blending of person and machine--

> If you look at it from the outside, it looks like I spend most of my time alone. But that is not really true. First of all, there are the other hackers. We eat together a lot, we talk about the system. And then I spend a lot of time, *I mean a lot of time*, on electronic mail. Sometimes I think that electronic mail is more of an addiction for me than the computer is. I talk to people all over the country. When you type mail into the computer you feel you can say anything. A lot of it is just about the system, but sometimes it gets pretty personal. When you type into the machine you can go really fast. The touch is very sensitive. I don't even feel that I am typing. It feels much more like one of those Vulcan mind melds, you know, that Mr. Spock does on *Star Trek*. I am thinking it, and then there it is on the screen. I would say that I have a perfect interface with the machine . . . perfect for me. I feel totally telepathic with the computer. And it sort of generalizes so that I feel telepathic with the people I am sending mail to. I am glad I don't have to see them face to face. I wouldn't be as personal about myself. And the telepathy with the computer--well, I certainly don't think of it as a person there, but that doesn't mean that I don't *feel* it as a person there. Particularly since I have personalized my interface with the system to suit myself. So it's like being with another person, but not a strange person. Someone who knows just how I like things done (Turkle 1984, 211).

That's what makes the Internet regression so distinctive. The machine becomes us, and we become the machine.

Alex's regression starts with his feelings of reaching "all over the country," "you can say anything," "you can go really fast." Alex also feels merged with the machine, "telepathy with the computer," his "Vulcan mind meld." Once the boundary between person and machine is gone, the person he talks to on the Internet is thought of as a machine, and he thinks of the machine as a person. He feels "telepathic" with both person and machine. Once regressed that way, "Sometimes it gets pretty personal."

I like this Internet regression. I find it a fascinating marriage of the most sophisticated human technology with our half-savage, half-animal psyches. I think it's something new and amazing and quite wonderful in the spectrum of human relations.

Those who don't see it that way, however, can take comfort. The Internet regression is also temporary. Today's Internetting will change, maybe even by the time you read this. A huge influx of unskilled users is coming onto the Internet, people who lack the cheery openness that a hacker like Alex expresses. The technology too will change. Real Soon Now (as the computer magazines say), we will be able to replace today's "plain text" with digitized voices. Real Soon Now, we will be able to have pictures of speaker and hearer. Real Soon Now, computer technology will restore to the Internet the physical cues of face to face talk. Too bad, say I. The Internet Regression has been--still is--fun.

Notes

1. There is an exception to every rule. A computer-resistant friend has since told me that he named his first computer Silvia (after Shakespeare's "Who is Silvia? What is she?") and his second after the woman whose influence pervades his scholarly work.

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See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

  The online disinhibition effect
  Transference to one's computer and cyberspace
  The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behavior in Online Multimedia Communities and Strategies for Managing it.

Do Boys (and Girls) Just Wanna Have Fun?

Gender-Switching in Cyberspace

Brad first met Natalie on a MOO. He was a college senior at an eastern university, she a junior on the west coast. They got to know each other better by corresponding through e-mail. Over time, he felt very close to her. Maybe, he thought, he was even falling in love. When he finally suggested, then insisted, that he give her a phone call, the truth came crashing down on his head. Natalie confessed to being a 50 year old man.

The beauty, and sometimes misfortune, of the internet is that it offers the opportunity for people to experiment with their identity. One way to do that is to switch one's gender to see how the other half lives. In a text-only chat room the first step is simply to change one's online name. In the visual "habitats" such as the Palace, there is the added challenge of creating an opposite sex "avatar" or "prop" to visually represent one's new self. The choice of name or avatar can greatly influence the image one wishes to cast - Bambi wearing skimpy lingerie, Rocky with sunglasses, Sheila in leather and chains, Lyle playing guitar, Hera in a long, white robe. After selecting a new name and appearance comes the even more challenging task of trying to play the role of the opposite sex person one has chosen. It's not an easy thing to do.

Gender swapping is probably much more commonplace than we realize. Everyone familiar with cyberspace life has heard of or even experienced the kind of dilemma faced by Brad. I have seen and heard of more males switching gender than females. If this accurately reflects the population of cybercitizens as a whole, an interesting question surfaces. Why are males so interested in experimenting with a woman's identity? The answers go far beyond cyberspace and point to larger social and psychological issues. Here are a few possibilities:

- Due to the pressure of cultural stereotypes, some men find it difficult to explore within themselves what society labels as feminine characteristics. These males may rely on the anonymity of cyberspace to express their "feminine" side that they otherwise hide. Some of these males may strongly identify with women.

- Adopting a feminine role in cyberspace may be a way to draw more attention to themselves. Getting noticed and responded to in cyberspace is not always easy, especially in such distracting, "noisy" environments as the visual chat habitats. Donning a female name and/or avatar, especially a sexy one, will almost instantly draw reactions. The gender-switched male may even like the feeling of power and control over other males that goes along with this switch.

- Some males may adopt a feminine identity to investigate male/female relationships. They may be testing out various ways of interacting with males in order to learn, first hand, what it's like being on the woman's side. Hopefully, they use that knowledge to enhance their relationships with females. Some, however, may be looking for ways to gain power and control.

- In some online games where participants assume imaginary identities (e.g., MUDs), being a female may be advantageous. Sometimes males lend more assistance to females, so they progress faster in the game.

- Disguised as a female, a male looking for intimacy, romance, and/or cybersex from another male may be acting upon conscious or unconscious homosexual feelings.

- Transsexuals (people who feel, psychologically, that they are the opposite sex rather than their given biological gender) and/or transvestites (people who cross-dress for sexual arousal or as an identification with females) may be drawn to virtual gender-switching. In rare cases, gender-switching could be a sign of what would be diagnosed as "gender confusion" - i.e., a psychological disturbance where one's identity as a male or female has not fully developed.

One reader of this article had this comment:

> I think I can sum up a factor about Genderhacking by repeating a line I saw someone type in a chatroom once: **"Won't someone at least pretend to be female?"** Lets face it, the majority of users of the internet are still male, and in such an ambiguous environment as the internet, the ability to lose one's inhibitions is quite strong. With a great many horny computer nerds out there, and no counterpart women on the net, I think some men pretend to be women - not because they have any desire to have sexual experiences with men themselves, but because they wish to perpetuate some form of cyber experience. It is as if they are an actor, manipulating the puppet of a women (just as they might in their own mind, during a sexual fantasy) but in this case, they are sustaining the puppet for some other stranger at the end of another modem to play with. Once this cyberstory then exists, it doesn't really matter who wrote the woman's lines or who wrote the man's. For both can enjoy it from whatever perspective that they chose.

Wanting, and trying, to switch gender is by no means a new social phenomenon. Theories in psychology abound on this topic. But the online version of gender-switching is unique and important for several reasons. First of all, cyberspace makes it so easy. It provides an attractive opportunity to experiment, abandon the experiment if necessary, and safely try again, if one so desires. More and different types of people are going to try it than in "real life." It also provides researchers with a unprecedented opportunity to study how and why people gender switch.

Unfortunately, the wide latitude for online gender-switching makes situations like those of Brad much more common. Even though exploring the anima and animus can be enriching, healthy, or just plain fun - hurting other people is not an acceptable outcome. There is a very thin line between the right to experiment with one's gender and the violation of the rights of others by deliberately deceiving and manipulating them. At some point in an online relationship, in order to protect their feelings and even their "sanity," people sometimes find it necessary to test the companion to see if that person is faking gender. Some savvy internet users question their companions as as a kind of subtle, surreptitious detective work. Others immediately and rather presumptuously test the waters as soon as they meet someone who presents as the opposite sex

But can gender-switching be accurately identified? Out of curiosity, I asked a group of approximately 30 women what questions could be asked to detect a male pretending to be female. The questions they suggested all revolved around female biology and products. The issues that surfaced while they discussed the use of these queries were quite intriguing, and controversial. No doubt, people online would experience many of these questions as embarrassing, or as personal invasions into their privacy - so the need to protect one's own feelings would have to be weighed against the other person's rights. Applying them would probably only be appropriate when the relationship had progressed to the point where a person felt emotionally involved with the "female" companion, but suspected that deception and manipulation was afoot. Even more controversial was the fact that not all the women knew the answer to all the questions, which raised doubts about whether there even is knowledge that specifically identifies a female. For some of the questions, there may not be a "correct" answer at all, or the correct answer may depend on such things as your geographical location and culture. Detecting gender-switching might be a matter of determining how many questions the person seems to get "right," combined with weighing the manner in which the person replies to the questions. Does the person fumble, confabulate, get defensive and angry, etc. But even this strategy can fail. In some cases, it may be impossible to tell whether the person is being deceptive.

Here are some of the questions suggested by the women:

- What is the difference between "junior" and "misses' sizes?
  (junior sizes tend to be smaller and may use a different size-numbering system)
- What sizes do pantyhose typically come in?
  (usually A, B, Queen.... rarely, "small, medium, large" - but this may depend on geographical location)

- What is the difference in how flushable and non-flushable tampons are made?
  (non-flushables have plastic in them - flushables have only paper and fabric)

- What size ring do women usually wear?
  (5, 6, 7)

- When coloring hair, how long is the dye usually left in one's hair?"
  (may vary, but approximately 25 minutes)

- What is the average range of sizes for women's panties?
  (typical range is 2-10; average size is 6-8)

- What negative effect may antibiotics have on a woman?
  (yeast infections)

- On what day is flow the greatest?
  (first or second, typically)

- When during her cycle is a woman most likely to become pregnant?
  (approximately 15 days after the beginning of her period)

Experienced users mentioned another strategy for testing the possible deceptiveness of an online companion: ask the person to make telephone contact, or even to meet in-person. A gender-switcher will most probably decline the offer. Of course, a genuine person might also decline for a variety of reasons. But for most true friendships and romances in cyberspace, there is a natural development towards wanting to meet the person in real life. In this case, if an online companion declines, there is probably some kind of deception taking place.

Do Girls Just Wanna Have Fun Too?

One reader of this article - a "straight, happily married mother" - e-mailed me to say that this article had validated many of her own experiences in cyberspace. She had participated in fantasy role playing, except she was a woman assuming the persona of a man. She only played the roles for a short period of time, she stated, usually one evening a week. "I found the characters tiring to keep up and had to stop. Usually I found myself shifting into a feminine, softer mood and had to quit before I got my character in serious trouble. I got too empathic and too flirtatious with males buddies. I knew my cover was slipping and my true proclivities slipping out and so I had to kill the character." She listed a number of reasons why she played those male roles:

1. To find out how other females act with men. This was partially competitive and sexual on her part, she noted. "What do other women do to entice men? Are the other women better than me at it?" She usually concluded that this wasn't the case. She felt other women were somewhat silly and boring. Also, men seemed to have more pressure on them to be entertaining.

2. To practice "writing" a seductive male character. She was interested in romance novels and how they are constructed with a heavy emphasis on the "hero." Whereas the heroine is the point of view, that character doesn't necessarily have to be well developed. The object of the novel, she explained, is the capture and/or discovery of the hero, who MUST be a well defined personality. In her online gender switching, she experimented with hero personalities to see how they affected women. She felt her character was much more attentive and romantic than the average male. She acted the way she would have liked a male to court her. An important realization for her was that the projection of power and competence can be very seductive. "I hadn't truly appreciated how much a guy has to constantly maintain the facade of strength. One slip of weakness and the women crush you like a walnut."

3. To run a clan. In some game environments, a clan is a group of players who challenge and compete with other clans. While some of the clans were lead by females, she had difficulty gathering followers as a female persona. Once she switched to a male character, she immediately became more successful in building and running her group. She also discovered that being a clan leader draws much female attention and that the girls are very competitive in fighting for the position of the clan master's "wife." It was much easier dealing with the competition from male underlings jockeying for position.

4. To experience "power" that she had not been able to experience in real life. As a very quiet adolescent, she felt dominated by stronger willed boyfriends, which affected her development in ways she was still trying to understand. "Donning a male identity allowed me to freely express certain aggressive and powerful actions that I don't seem able to project when perceived as a female. I say perceived, because this was all about how others saw me. All during the time, I felt like "myself" and female. It was just the male side of me that I was allowed to show, but had always been there."

Wanting to correct the apparent lack of data in this article about female users, another reader offered to share her experiences. When she adopted the username "The Doctor," she originally intended it to be gender neutral. Consistently, however, she was judged to be male, forcing her to correct her companions' perceptions. The perception

was so persistent that she herself came to think of the handle as a male persona. On one occasion, when she attempted what she felt was a very benign overture towards a vulnerable teenage girl, the girl interpreted this as the advances of a "dirty old man." This unexpected reaction suddenly reversed her perception of her own overture. She was as horrified as she would have been if she was witnessing some "dirty old man" acting sleazy towards a young girl. She instantly dropped The Doctor as her primary handle, after using it for only two days. The only times she reverted to it was when she felt hurt or vulnerable in a cyber-relationship. The more intellectual, male persona helped her gain distance, objectivity, and clarity, enabling her to "get my head together when my heart was feeling shattered." Why she adopted a male persona to accomplish this is, as she put it, "a mystery of socialization in a patriarchal society."

> 'He' was much shyer than my normal 'real' or cyber self, if also 'older', and presumably 'wiser', and I could often 'see' 'him' in my mind's eye, 'wiping his glasses', which I also do not wear, as 'he' hovered as observer on the fringes of a chat, before committing 'himself' to considered opinion. This is very unlike my primary (Aries) identity, which tends to jump in first, boots and all, and ask questions, and, if necessary, apologize for tactlessness later! I wonder if I am an oddity, or are there other women out there who use male personae for similar reasons? I see "The Doctor" as not a little like the researcher's 'grey owl' primary avatar! But this could also be interpreted as a wholly feminine image, i.e. the grey owl of the goddess Athene!

After switching chat environments, she felt she didn't need The Doctor at all anymore. She learned that when she felt threatened or vulnerable, she could simply retreat into a lurking or semi-lurking mode to get the same effect. Even with what she regards as a "feminine-enough" handle, many male users still assume she is male - which she attributes to the fact that as a strongly opinionated woman she seems to be expressing her own inner masculine energies. "However, it does serve as a handy weapon, when they think they have me all sewn up, to come back with 'All that may or may not be true, but you at least have got the sex entirely wrong!', usually accompanied by a protruding tongue, as in playground battles!"

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Identity managment in cyberspace

Adolescents in Cyberspace

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Note: This article predates the emergence of what is currently called "social media." Neverthess, the psychological aspects of the online environments described here still apply to current forms of social media.

The newest street corners, arcades, and malls that serve as teen hangouts can be found right within the walls of the homestead. They are electronic mockups of the real thing - accessed easily by the family's online computer. For many adolescents these cyberspace hangouts are no less treasured or real than the "real" thing.

What draws adolescents to the world of the Internet? What are the benefits and dangers of their exploring this new realm that may very well become a cornerstone of the new millennium into which they will grow as adults?

What Makes Adolescents Tick

To answer these questions, let's first consider some of the underlying, interlocking needs and motives of the adolescent. None of this is new or earth-shattering information. Psychologists and parents have known these things for quite a long time. However, these basic and familiar principles can be very comforting tools for understanding why adolescents do what they do in this seemingly exotic and strange land called cyberspace:

> **Identity experimentation and exploration** - Adolescents are grappling with who they are. Actually, we all are - it's a lifelong process - but for adolescents on the verge of leaving home and establishing their own life, it's a particularly intense issue. What kind of person am I? What do I want to do with my life? What kind of relationships do I want? These are heavy-duty questions... and some of the answers can be found in cyberspace.

> **Intimacy and belonging** - During adolescence, humans experiment intensely with new intimate relationships, especially opposite sex relationships. They look for comrades and new groups where they can feel a sense of belonging. All these relationships become a big part of exploring one's own identity. On the Internet, there is an almost limitless array of people and groups to interact with - all kinds of people and groups with all kinds of personalities, backgrounds, values, and interests.

> **Separation from parents and family** - The adolescents' search for their own identity, relationships, and groups goes hand-in-hand with their drive to separate from their parents. They want to be independent, to do their own thing. It's an exciting process, and cyberspace is an exciting place to fulfill those needs of a pioneering, adventurous spirit - especially when your parents know almost nothing about the Internet! On the other hand, adolescents also are a bit anxious about the separation/individuation process. After all, relying on Mom, Dad and the old homestead does have some advantages. The fascinating thing about the Internet - and perhaps one of the reasons why it is so enticing to some adolescents - is that it neatly takes care of this ambivalence. Want to meet new people, do exciting things, explore the world? Want to stay home too? You can do both, simultaneously, when you go online.

> **Venting frustrations** - An old theory about adolescence proclaimed that it is a period of "storm and stress." That theory may be a bit melodramatic, but the teen years certainly can be a difficult and frustrating period of life. Expectations from school, family, and friends can feel overwhelming. What do you do with all those frustrations, including the sexual and aggressive ones? You need to vent it somewhere.... Welcome to the anonymous, easy to click-in-and-out world of cyberspace!

Where Adolescents Hang Out

In case some readers aren't familiar with the Internet, let me briefly explain some of the places where adolescents might frequent. I'll break the rather complex world of cyberspace into four basic categories:

Web sites - These are pages or collections of pages that adolescents can visit and read. It might be a short one-page description of a rock star, other teens' home pages in which they describe themselves, an article about the French revolution, or an entire online book. Web pages may also include pictures, video clips, sounds, and music. Web pages are a vast multimedia online library covering any topic you can imagine. They contain a cornucopia of ideas, insights, and visions for adolescents eager to discover their identity and a direction in life.

Email dyads and groups - Email is one of the most easy to use, flexible, and powerful means to communicate. It's more than just an electronic letter launched through the Internet. Email exchanges are more like an ongoing conversation. Subtle and complex relationships can form through frequent email interactions. The email itself becomes a psychological "space" in which the adolescents live together. Email within a couple can create a very intimate, emotional relationship. Groups of people also can communicate with each other through email "lists," also known as "listservs." For some people, the attractive feature of text-only communication, including email, is that you can't see or hear the other person. This may make the relationship feel somewhat ambiguous and anonymous, which tends to encourage people to say things that they wouldn't ordinary say - what psychologists call the "online disinhibition effect."

Chat rooms, Instant Messaging (IM), and MUDs - These also are a favorite for many teens. In chat rooms and instant messaging, adolescents communicate with each other in "real time." In other words, everyone is sitting at their computer at the same time, typing messages to each other that scroll down the screen. Everyone can see the messages as people "talk" to their friend or to a group of friends. It's also possible to send a private message to another person that the group can't see. In this category of "synchronous" communication, we may also include text messaging via cell phones., although teens also use this type of text communication for delayed, "asynchronous," conversations.

In the multimedia chat environments such as Palace, the text conversations occur in a visual room and the participants use tiny visual icons called "avatars" to represent themselves. Some adolescents like to present themselves in an imaginative way, by changing their name, age, identity, or even their gender. Some chat environments (e.g., MUDs) become a very intricate fantasy world where adolescents create all sorts of imaginative roles and scenarios. It's like a living novel complete with characters and plots, or a very elaborate Halloween party with its own idiosyncratic rules and culture. As with email, not being able to see or hear the other person makes chat a rather ambiguous and anonymous mode of communication - especially because other people may not even know your real name, but just your username, which can be any imaginative name you choose.

Message Boards - Sometimes called by a variety of other names ("forums," "discussion groups," "newsgroups"), a message board is like an electronic bulletin board. People connect to a specific site on the Internet and post messages to each other. Unlike chat, this is not a real-time conversation. Whenever you want, you can go to the site and read the messages that others have written. Each group usually is devoted to a specific topic of discussion - like a rock band. Usenet, the original home of the newsgroup, contains tens of thousands of groups devoted to almost any topic you can imagine. Some of these groups are the homes-away-from-home for many teens. Some web sites also use this "bulletin board" format. Once again, as with email and chat, newsgroup posts can be a very anonymous style of communicating.

Blogs - Another "asynchronous" type of text communication, like email and IM, blogs are a kind of online journal or diary. Adolescents often use them to record what they are thinking and feeling about the events of their day. They can restrict access to their blog so only friends can read and post replies to their entries, but often their online journal is wide open for anyone to see - a fact they sometimes forget as they type out their inner thoughts and emotions. Teens may also use blogs like a message board, to carry on conversations with friends about topics of interest to them. Innovative teenagers might create a blog as the journal for an imaginary person they created, or for a make-believe band or organization. Often that blog is an inside joke for the teens and their friends.

Video-conferencing is another newer feature of cyberspace. Using a video camera and microphone, people can see and hear each other as they talk. However, the expense and variety of technical problems associated with high quality video-conferencing makes it a much less common form of communication for adolescents. Usually, only more hardcore computer techies are up to the challenge. My guess, too, is that it's not as much fun for the adolescent as the more anonymous and/or fantasy-based modes of hanging out in cyberspace.

Now that we are all familiar with the places where adolescents might hang out, let's focus on the pros and cons of what they are doing there. The important thing to remember about cyberspace is that its strengths are its weaknesses. Like many things in life, the bad comes with the good.

Know How: Acquiring New Skills

Whether we like it or not, computers are part of modern life. Learning about them is no longer the bailiwick of geeks with horn-rimmed glasses and pocket pen holders. All adolescents will need to feel comfortable with computers in order to survive in the new millennium. Are there any jobs anymore that don't require at least some knowledge of computers? The fact that cyberspace is so attractive to teens can be a blessing in disguise. The typical adolescent wants to explore and do more. They don't want to simply chat: they want to write scripts that automate their online activities, create their own web page, scan or take pictures with their digital cameras that they can share online. It makes them feel good about themselves. It's another notch in their belt that impresses their cronies and gets them status with the in-crowd. To climb that social ladder on the Internet, the teen needs to learn more and more about computers. Often it's no chore. They love the sense of mastery and accomplishment. They love to teach other kids, which reinforces their own knowledge and builds their self esteem.

The skill-building goes beyond the computer itself. Designing a good web page or blog, for example, requires skills in graphics, page layout, and writing. It's creative as well as technical. Even if an adolescent just wants to talk with friends in chat rooms, blogs, message boards, or email encounters, he or she still has to WRITE. They have to grapple with words, grammar, and creative new ways to express themselves. Some people think that the Internet has revived the art of writing. Text-talk is a fascinating, creative challenge and many adolescents eagerly attack it. Perhaps to the dismay of some English teachers, cyberspace may be motivating adolescents to write more so than any other event in history. On the other hand, some people - most likely those English teachers - may be horrified at the seemingly mutated spelling and grammar of email and especially IM. To the untrained eye, it may in fact be indecipherable. That's because the extremely abbreviated and slang-driven style of IM is a new language that makes conversing efficient, as well as enhances the teen's identity as a member of a unique group with a unique language.

In the Know: Finding Information

One way adolescents establish their own individual identity is by acquiring new facts and philosophies, which includes the skills that may develop from that information. One attractive feature of the Internet for teens is that there are no holds barred on the information out there. Many areas of cyberspace are minimally controlled by the government, school, parents, and adults in general. Other kids are publishing almost whatever they want on the web. Cyberspace is a new frontier of information just waiting to be pioneered. Exploring that information can satisfy that need to feel separate and unique from one's parents.

The Internet is a vast library covering any topic imaginable. In some respects, it's better than most libraries - at least it is from the perspective of the adolescent. How much information can you find at the public library about rock groups or your favorite TV stars? Some people might claim that much of the information on the web is junk. Of course, one person's garbage is another's jewel. Perhaps the positive aspect of this dilemma is that adolescents are placed in the position of deciding for themselves what is good information, and what isn't. Skeptics claim that they lack the ability to make these discriminations, and in some cases they may be right. But many adolescents will rise to the challenge. They - in fact all of us - will have to become savvy consumers of information in this new Information Age of ours. One thing is for sure: they have to learn how to search for the information they want. To use a web search engine, they have to learn about Boolean logic and the nuances of how to phrase a keyword. It makes them THINK about their topic before they even find the information.

Now for the bad news. Some of the information and skills that adolescents might seek is better left alone. Pornography, drugs, methods of inflicting violence. It's all there on the Internet. No parent wants their child to learn how to concoct a sex drug or build a bomb. But other scenarios may be more ambiguous. What if, for personal reasons, an adolescent

wants information about abortion or being gay? Should they have access to it? Freedom of information, the quality control of information, and the values that influence our attitudes about information are all issues that everyone must confront.

Getting Worldly Wise

Students in the U.S. tend not to be experts on global issues. Many would be hard pressed to name just three Mediterranean countries. Cyberspace offers the opportunity for adolescents to meet others of their kind from around the world. Many chat rooms and newsgroups are international in composition. Cross-cultural discussions and debates are common. Hearing an online friend from another country talk about a local natural disaster can have a much bigger impact on you than watching it on the evening news. Hearing foreigners describe their perception of Americans can be a real eye-opener. If they hang out in these online communities long enough, it's inevitable that teenagers will cultivate online penpals from other countries. Comparing school and family life, culture, and national politics with these other kids becomes an intriguing aspect of the relationship. It's also a bit of a status symbol back home. When you mention to the teacher and class in Social Studies that you have a cyberspace friend in France, Australia, and Taiwan, what else can they say except "Wow!"

Is there a downside to the adolescent encountering Internet travelers from other lands? In chat rooms, newsgroups, and email, you usually do not see people's faces or hear their voices. There's a tendency for one's mind to try to fill in that ambiguity. People may project their prejudices and stereotypes onto the somewhat shadowy figure at the other end of the Internet. The anonymity resulting from people not seeing or hearing YOU may encourage you to let loose with those stereotyped and prejudiced comments. Teens - who often thrive on cliques and in-group pride - may be prime targets for this unpleasant rejection of foreigners. But the problem here isn't really with the Internet. It's with those prejudices.

Exploring Social Skills and Personal Identity

If adolescents spend a lot of time conversing on the Internet, it's inevitable that their online social skills will improve. They will be encountering people of various ages and cultural backgrounds, so they have the opportunity to learn how to relate to a wide variety of people. Under optimal conditions, those skills may carry over to their in-person life.

Unfortunately, many kids approach chat rooms as if they are computer games. Without seeing or hearing the real person behind the typed words or avatars, they (probably unconsciously) behave as if the other person is some kind of robot or video game target. And so they start shooting profanities, inappropriate sexual remarks, and other words of abuse. Being able to hide behind their own online anonymity makes the abuse even easier to inflict. It provides an easy, safe way to satisfy that need to vent the frustrations of their real life. In some online communities, the hardcore trouble-making adolescents are given the uncomplimentary title of "SNERT" (snot-nosed-eros-ridden-teenager). They can be a real nuisance. In extreme cases they may be banned from the community, especially when they try to hack the computer system (see The Bad Boys of Cyberspace). Of course, not all adolescents are so extreme in their tendency to misbehave online. The more intensely teens act out, the more likely they are having problems in their real life and are using the Internet to vent and escape from those real life tensions.

Cyberspace offers all sorts of opportunities for adolescents to satisfy that need to express, explore, and experiment with their identity. The good aspect of online anonymity is that it encourages people to discuss things about themselves that they would hesitate revealing in real life. Kids can learn a lot about themselves from that. Building a blog or personal web page also is a great exercise in figuring out who you are by what you want to reveal about yourself. In online fantasy worlds and games, teens experiment with all sorts of imaginative identities that express their hidden wishes, needs, and fears. The character they create for themselves may give them the opportunity to act like the type of person they admire. Under ideal conditions, they can learn something about themselves from the characters they create. Maybe they can even develop, in their real life, the traits they admire in their characters. Under less than ideal conditions, the online personae simply become another way to ventilate the frustrations and conflicts of their real lives, without any personal insight or change. It's the difference between using their online characters to work through their problems, as opposed to simply acting them out.

One significant difference between online and offline conversations is that some of the awkwardness of interacting face-to-face and in-the-moment with their peers, especially for younger teens, is a bit tempered, which results in them opening up a bit more when online. Again, it's that online disinhibition effect. Expressing affection to that potential sweetheart is a lot easier via IM than it eyeball to eyeball at school. Unfortunately, so is dumping someone. Even

though, at that moment, the adolescent may be trying to avoid dealing with these tricky emotional situations in-person, navigating these situations online can be a good way to practice skills that later will generalize to their face-to-face encounters.

Where Everyone Knows Your Name

More so than anything else, adolescents are drawn to cyberspace because they make friends there. They find new groups to join - a place where they feel like they belong, where everyone knows their name. Just being an onliner automatically makes you part of the in-crowd, and from there you can choose or even create almost any other specific type of group you want. Cyberspace technology excels in all sorts of methods for forming groups - and adolescents take advantage of it because joining and shaping a new group is so important to their evolving identity. What do they do once they're in the group? They joke and play games, complain about their parents and teachers, talk about their lives, support and give advice to each other... the same things they do in "real" life.

Once again, there's a down side. Teens may join online groups that are not in their best interests. Radical political groups, Satanic cults, online "orgies." Of course, these groups exist in the real world too. It's just a lot easier to participate in them when you're sitting at the computer in your bedroom.

The more common pitfall of online friendships and cliques is that they can be somewhat artificial, shallow, and transient. Cyberspace may seem so surreal, so much like a fantasy inside your head, that some people don't take it seriously even though emotions and commitment SEEM to run high. It's like a great interactive TV program that really gets you emotionally involved, but it's just a TV program. To the adolescent craving for a group of good friends, it can be heartbreaking when those pals unexpectedly and unexplainably change their "tune," withdraw, or disappear completely. With just a mouse click, you're gone, almost without leaving any traces behind. It's too easy to say good bye, especially when you can easily exit without even having to say "good bye."

This sometimes shallow and transient quality of online relationships doesn't apply in all cases. People DO find and keep good friends in cyberspace. But artificial best buddies do appear often enough to be a very problematic disappointment, especially to adolescents who are so sensitized to issues about intimacy, trust, and loyalty.

Cybersex

Since we're on the topic of intimacy, let's delve into the other magnet that lures some teens into cyberspace - cybersex. It's certainly isn't shocking news that adolescents are keenly interested in sex. It's an adventure, it calls out to their rising hormone levels, it's a way to separate from - as well as worry, aggravate, and outrage - their parents. It means, to them, that they're developing an adult identity.

What exactly is cybersex? Mostly, it involves "talking dirty" to each other via typed text - describing in detail who is doing what to whom, and how they feel doing it. People may masturbate while they type (which isn't an easy maneuver). Sometimes pictures are exchanged, but that can become an unnecessary technical complication that may ruin the free play of imagination.

Whether or not parents consider this a bad thing for adolescents is largely determined by their values, how explicit the cybersex is, and what those online trysts might lead to. Some may think that the anonymity of cybersex is wrong - that it is superficial, artificial, unnatural - or that sex in any form is inappropriate for adolescents. Others may think that adolescents are going to experiment with sex no matter what adults do, so why not permit them to satisfy their sexual interests and learn about sex via cyberspace encounters? "Personally," one person told me, " I see this as a much safer way to explore their sexual curiosity than in the back seat of a car or behind the bleachers at a game. Wouldn't you rather know your kid is HOME and SAFE than in the streets? The danger only comes if they choose to try and meet someone offline."

Adult Predators

One dilemma of online life is that you can never be sure that other people indeed are who they say they are. That 17 year old flirtatious girl could be a 47 year old man. Some chat rooms are supervised in order to protect children from predatory adults, but many are not. Even in those communities that are well supervised, there is little that can be done to prevent predatory adults from pretending to be teens in order to win the favors of young people. If a predator

doesn't use an adolescent disguise, he (and usually they are males) may present himself as a supportive, sympathetic confidant who encourages the adolescent to discuss personal problems and become emotionally attached to him. Troubled adolescents who feel alienated from their parents and lonely in general are especially vulnerable. These are the same strategies used by predators in the in-person world. The Internet is just another avenue to launch their abuse against children. Children need to be taught the same sorts of rules that apply to real world encounters with questionable adults:

> - Don't divulge personal information to strangers. Don't give out your phone number or address.

> - Log off if someone makes you uncomfortable or asks you to do something that is wrong. Write down the username of that person, and inform your parents about it so they can contact the people who operate the chat room.

> - Don't accept gifts from strangers or call someone, even if they invite you to call collect.

> - NEVER meet anyone offline without adult family supervision.

Parents should make it a point to learn whom their children are chatting with online. Actually, many kids do show considerable savvy in dealing with unpleasant advances and those strategies should be encouraged by parents. One parent told me:

> My daughter did have one instance of having an "inappropriate" comment made to her. (She was on a webpage-based text chat specifically for teens) Her response? She just typed "ewwwwwwwwww" and ignored the person after that! Kids these days seem to be generally more streetwise. Issues of abuse and sexuality are discussed in schools from an early age.

When I discussed this issue about predators with experienced online adults, some of them wanted to emphasize the REVERSE scenario: adolescents who pretend to be older in order to flirt with unsuspecting adults. Some of the people I spoke to felt that this was an even more common situation than teens being approached by an adult predator. Sometimes the sexual advances of these teens in disguise can be quite explicit.

Adult Confidants

The unfortunate dilemma with the predator scenario is that some online adults are indeed understanding, caring people who are happy to look after adolescents. While attempting to separate from their parents and distance themselves from everything about them, some adolescents miss out on the opportunity to use their folks as role models. In troubled families, teens may need a benign adult figure to fill in where the parents have been deficient, or to support them and advise them on their real world troubles. I have spoken with many online adults - some of them parents themselves - who were happy to take young people under their wings and help them out as best they could. Sometimes they see themselves as a kind of "surrogate parent." In those cases where adolescents feel especially distant from parents who know nothing about or are hostile towards the Internet, the online "parent" may become a sympathetic, emotionally powerful figure in their lives.

One person told me a story that presented an interesting twist on this issue of parenting on and offline. A father confessed that he and his daughter had a horrid relationship. They fought constantly, often about the daughter's preoccupation with cyberspace. He feared the worse for her. Then, in what turned out to be a stroke of parental genius, he used his computer at work to get on the net and attempted to connect with his daughter online. It worked, better than he had imagined it would. Whenever they had difficult matters to go over, somehow it was easier to chat online - quietly in a room somewhere. Important feelings surfaced and they worked out a lot of problems that way. Later, he confessed that these online encounters were the best thing that ever happened in their relationship.

Caught in the Net: Addiction

Because cyberspace can satisfy so many of the adolescent's needs, there is the possibility of becoming "addicted" to it. Are all teens susceptible to this danger?... No. Some will always be casual users, some may just go through phases of intense Internet use. The ones who do fall prey to the net most likely are experiencing problems in their real lives.

Cyberspace becomes an escape, a place to vent, a place to act out or even cry out for help. As Dr. Kimberly Young - a psychologist who studies Internet addiction - points out in her book "Caught in the Net," Internet-obsessed adolescents may become the "identified patient" in the family. Fingers are pointed at them and at the "evils" of the Internet, when the real problems probably lie in the family.

What are some of the danger signals of excessive Internet use? In her book, Dr. Young identifies several warning signs:

- Denial and lying about the amount of time spent on the computer or about what they are doing on the computer.

- Excessive fatigue and changes in sleeping habits, such as getting up early or staying up late (in order to spend more time online).

- Academic problems, usually grades slipping. Sometimes parents might overlook the fact that the computer is the culprit since they assume their children are doing school work at the keyboard.

- Withdrawal from friends and declining interest in hobbies (online friends and activities are taking the place of the "real" world).

- Loss of appetite; irritability when cut-off from computer use; a decline in their appearance or hygiene.

- Disobedience and acting out. Teens may become very hostile when parents confront them. They may deliberately break the computer-use rules that are set. Their reactions may be so intense because they feel that they are being cut off from their attachments to cyberfriends.

How Should Parents Be Involved?

Although the Internet may be one way adolescents attempt to establish themselves as separate, unique individuals who have a social world of their own, that doesn't mean parents shouldn't be involved. Exactly the opposite is true. As is true of all adolescent activities, they need at least some supervision to stay on track and avoid trouble. Some parents fall into the trap of benign neglect. "My kids have to learn about computers. They have to keep up with the other kids. If they're sitting there typing away, it must be a good thing... so I'll just leave them alone."

But getting involved doesn't just mean supervising in order to avert trouble. The world of computers also can become an excellent way for parents and adolescents to have fun together, to get to know each other better. There will be a part of the adolescent - maybe even a part that they try to hide - that will love this.

- **Get knowledgeable and join in**: To be most effective in supervising the adolescent's cyberspace activities, the parent needs to know something about the topic. You don't have to become a hacker yourself, but read up on the topic. Discuss it with other parents. Better yet, explore cyberspace yourself. Talk to your kids about cyberspace and join them in some of their online activities. Cruise web sites together. Use a search engine to find people with your same last name. Build a web page for your family. Even hang out with your child and their friends in a chat room (for a short period of time, if they can tolerate your presence!). There are numerous possibilities.

- **Talk to them**: The old warning "Do you know where your children are?" applies to cyberspace as well as to the real world. Ask them about their Internet use. What web sites and blogs are they visiting? Who's online tonight? Avoiding an accusatory tone, ask them what they like online and why. Sit down with them at the computer and let them take you to their Internet hangouts. Be curious, in a parental but congenial sort of way. Casually ask them about their cyberfriends, what they talk about, what they do on the Internet. Avoid interrogation. Instead, show them that you are interested in knowing more about their cyberfriends.

- **Acknowledge the good and the bad**: Don't vilify cyberspace - that will only alienate the adolescent. Talk about both the pros and cons. Show an acceptance of their cyberlife, but discuss some of the dangers and what steps they should take if they encounter unsavory situations or people.

- **Make the computer visible**: Privacy is a tricky balancing act with the adolescent. They want and need some, but the parent must weigh that demand against the necessity of supervising their activities.

Generally speaking, it's probably a good idea to avoid placing the computer in the adolescent's bedroom. Put it in a family area. That makes supervision a lot easier, and it also encourages computering as a family activity. At the very least, avoid the scenario where the adolescent explores cyberspace in his/her bedroom with the door closed. Keep the door open, with the screen visible from the hallway. Stop in every once in a while to inquire about what's happening in this intriguing little world of theirs. If they suddenly close a window as you walk in, you know something is up. It may not be anything serious, they may just want a little privacy... but it's worth talking about.

- **Set reasonable rules**: Parents don't let their kids stay out all night, watch any movie they want, or drive anywhere they want. Adolescents need rules. In fact, believe it or not, they secretly want rules so they don't feel out of control and unprotected by a seemingly uncaring parent. Set limits on when (e.g., after homework) and how much time they can spend socializing and entertaining themselves in cyberspace. Create rules about what exactly they can and can't do on the Internet.

- **Encourage a balance**: Cyberspace is great, but there's more to life than that. Encourage the adolescent to stay involved in "real world" activities too. If there's something they really enjoy on the Internet, find a way to expand that activity into their in-person life. Use the Internet for school projects. Talk on the phone or do something together in-person with your good (trustworthy) cyberfriends. If they enjoy role-playing in MUDs, encourage them to get involved in theater. The goal is to avoid letting the adolescent isolate cyberspace from the rest of their life. Instead, integrate cyberspace into the rest of their life, and encourage them to develop non-Internet activities too.

- **Software controls**: There are a variety of commercial programs that can be used to monitor and control the adolescents activities in cyberspace. These programs can keep a record of web sites they visit, block access to particular web sites or programs, prevent files from being downloaded, set limits on when and for how much time the Internet is being used, and even record everything they type. Of course, if parents wants to install such programs they have to be fairly knowledgeable about computers. The programs aren't perfect either. There are loopholes, and a technically sophisticated adolescent will be able to defeat them. Probably the last thing a parent wants is an ongoing technical battle of wits with their child. If that happens, something has gone awry. Software controls are a tool in the supervision of the adolescent. They are not a substitute for talking and being more personally involved. In other words, they are not a substitute for a caring relationship.

- **Intervening with addiction**: In her book, Dr. Kimberly Young describes some strategies for parents who need to help their children who have fallen into excessive Internet use. Don't try to take the computer away or ban them from using it. This strategy can backfire. Show your caring for the teenager's predicament. Assign an Internet time log. Don't enable adolescents by making excuses for them when they miss school or their grades start falling. Tolerate their emotional outbursts when you try to intervene. If all else fails, seek the help of a professional counselor - ideally, someone who knows something about the Internet.

- **Discipline misbehavior/encourage humaneness**: Most parents apply punishment when a child misbehaves in the real world. The same should be true of their cyberspace misconduct. If a parent discovers that an adolescent is harassing others online or attempting to hack online systems (a phone call from the administrators of the system or online community can be an eye-opener!), discipline is in order. Parents should try not to fall into the attitude of "Oh, it's just a cyberspace game. It doesn't really matter." It does matter. It's not a good idea to let adolescents treat other people online as if they are not really people. If an adolescent can apply compassion for others even in the anonymous world of cyberspace, they can apply it anywhere in life.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Integrating online and offline living
Addiction to computers and cyberspace
Transference to one's computer and cyberspace
Online gender-switching
Cyberspace romances

<h1 style="text-align:center;color:darkred">Knowledge, Power, Wisdom</h1>

<p style="text-align:center">and your very own asterisk</p>

<h1 style="text-align:center;color:darkred">Wizards at the "Palace"</h1>

The multimedia chat software called "Palace" has spawned a complex online community. There are many Palace sites located on servers across the internet, each being a unique visual/auditory environment where members use small graphics called "avatars" to represent themselves. The Main Mansion (aka, "Main") may hold more than 200 people on any given night. Other sites are very small, with as few as two people.... or sometimes only one lonely soul waiting for someone to come visit. The sites also vary widely in their mission and graphical themes. Some are commercial ventures. Some are the artistic, personal expression of an individual user.

But all Palace sites have something important in common. They all have WIZARDS. What exactly is a wizard? What purpose does the wizard serve? And, most importantly (to some people), how do you get to be a wizard?

The specific answers to these questions will vary from one Palace site to another. In this article, I'll focus mostly on the wizards who dwell at the sites maintained by TPI (The Palace Incorporated, which later merged with Electric Communities) sites - especially the main "Mansion," the oldest Palace site (some also call it "Main"), and "Welcome," the site where new users arrive. In the Palace universe, being a TPI/EC wizard is considered a high achievement. The membership at Mansion and Welcome is much larger than most other sites, so the "competition" for wizardship is considerably steep. Company officials also participate in the selection of these TPI/EC wizards, so approval is coming from the top, from the creators of the Palace universe.

Echoes of Merlin

First, let's take a quick look at the word "wizard." It's a term carried over from the world of fantasy-based multi-user games, such as Dungeons and Dragons. Although Jim Bumgardner steered Palace away from becoming a traditional virtual game and more towards an open social environment (see The History of Palace), his thinking nevertheless was influenced by the imaginative role-playing worlds of MOOs and MUDs. In many ways Palace indeed is a magical, dream-like realm.... Hence "wizards" fit right in.

According to legend, a wizard is someone who possesses magical powers - a sorcerer. In a more watered down fashion, the word also may be defined as someone who is exceptionally skilled or clever at some task. A more archaic definition is "sage" (from the Middle English "wisard," meaning "wise").

As we'll see, all of the above apply to Palace wizards and the three main jobs they perform: (1) hosting, advising, and socializing new users; (2) acting as consultants to TPI/EC, and; (3) controlling deviant behavior in the community (see "The Bad Boys of Cyberspace").

Powers, Privileges, Perks

Wizards possess powers and privileges - and often knowledge - that separate them from ordinary members. As we all know, with powers and privileges comes responsibility. So there are price tags along with some of the perks.

Night Sticks

To members, the most visible powers of the wizards are their abilities to "pin" (lock a user's avatar into the corner of the screen), "propgag" (lock a user's avatar into the standard smiley), "kill" (disconnect a user from the server for a specified amount of time), and "ban" (exile user/s from a specific internet address). The self-imposed wizard code of honor states that these powers should only be used to control deviant users. So if you persist in spouting off obscenities, flashing nude props, attempting to crash other users, or indulging in any other of a variety of antisocial or downright mean behaviors, a wizard is going to discipline you. "Wizard," in this context, means "police." In fact, an important responsibility of wizards is to oversee - or perhaps even "patrol" - the site in order to locate, educate, control, and, if necessary, disconnect misbehaving users.

The downside to possessing superuser powers? Because these powers are so visible to members, they may stimulate strong emotional reactions. Users often perceive wizards (sometimes unconsciously) as authority figures, even as surrogate parents. While some members may obsequiously try to suck up to the seemingly powerful wizard ("Can I become a wizard too?"), others will envy and/or hate them because of their powers. Pinning or killing someone reminds them of teachers and parents issuing time-outs (go sit in the corner!) or principals suspending them from school... or, even worse, parents kicking them out of the house. Defiance, hostility, and rebellion may fill their minds when they are targeted for such discipline, or even when they simply witness wizards doling out punishment to other users. In a long thread on the PUG (Palace User Group) mailing list, users debated whether people were being killed "for no reason" by unfeeling wizards - and even whether this was a kind of "murder."

In a less extreme attitude, some users may simply feel alienated from wizards who, "like all authority figures," appear to be cold, distant, and preoccupied with punishing people. Other users, to the contrary, may attempt to befriend wizards not as a genuine gesture of friendship, but rather as an ingratiating attempt to associate themselves with the wizards' authority and prestige - what one wizard called "the Celebrity Factor" which causes some wizards to be a bit skeptical of any inappropriately friendly users. Any of these emotional responses to wizards may be "transference" reactions that reveal more about the personality of the user than about the wizards. They may be reactions specifically to the wizard's disciplinary powers, or more generally to the wizard's perceived popularity, fame, and status as an elder.

Throughout their history, wizards have debated exactly when and how they should use their night sticks. For what crimes does one use which mode of discipline? When is it best to talk deviants down from their misbehavior, and when should they be killed on sight? At times the debates get heated. The differences in opinion reflect basic differences in personality style and attitudes about discipline, parenting, and what constitutes socially unacceptable behavior. Jim Bumgardner once jokingly drew the distinction between wizards who were "Bleeding Hearts" versus "Nazis." It's often

hard for one personality type to fully understand the other. What complicates consensus even more is the fact that the complex social nature of deviant behavior at the Palace (as in real life) cannot be remedied by any one strategy. Sometimes a compassionate talk is needed. Sometimes a quick kick in the ass.*

Members do have access to their own night sticks. For example, they can block communications from any other user ("mute"). It's a powerful tool. After all, if you can't see anything a person is saying, what can they possibly do to harass you. Sit on you or display offensive props. Usually that's about all. While many members effectively use their nightsticks, some don't. They may not know they have this power, so they page a wizard for help. In some cases, even when users are familiar with the mute command, they would rather page a wizard to come discipline the offender. Perhaps they feel "mute" is not powerful enough to deal with the person. Some users, though, gain satisfaction out of seeing the offender punished by a wizard. It reflects a bit of an authoritarian personality style. For these types of users it is like "screaming for Mommy." It's yet another manifestation of the perception of the wizard as a parental figure - another type of transference reaction.* Unfortunately, frequent paging means wizards spend all of their time running around the Palace site trying to verify crimes and disciplining the offenders.

In the world of MUDs, commands like kill and pin can be enjoyed as just part of the game. Using "allscray" to turn everyone's avatar into the generic, "naked" smiley could be a hoot. But Palace wizards usually have to hold back on their powers. Some members won't experience these antics as fun at all. They will see it as an demeaning display of powers that they don't possess - a rubbing of their noses into a class/power distinction. For wizards, the playful feeling of pinning and allscraying must be repressed, resulting in a frustration that finally gets relieved when wizards hang out together in private and indulge in "pinning parties" Pinning is a tradition for the newbie wizards at their induction ceremony (at some non-TPI/EC sites, "wizard wars" are a main attraction). When Mansion wizards gleefully pin each other in their private gatherings, this also may be a displayed frustration. While on patrol, how many annoying users did they really WANT to pin or kill, but didn't?

Wizards experience mixed emotions about their powers. It's potential fun. It's status, and a bit of a headtrip. It's a great way to redirect the frustrations from your own personal life onto snert targets. It means you can engage in a battle of wits as much as you want with a snert, and in the end you always get the last word. But the wizard is also an authority figure, a role model, a professional, who is expected to be fair and responsible. Nightsticks, in this context, are the tools of the trade to be used with discretion and maturity. They are a bit of a... burden.

Unfortunately, other important wizard activities are not nearly as visible as their night sticks. Because they are perceived as knowledgeable authority figures, users frequently approach them with technical questions. That perception of authority even leads some users to seek them out as counselors who can help them with personal problems - sometimes severe problems like depression and suicidal tendencies. True to the Middle English definition of "wisard," the wizards are expected to be "wise" in many different respects. Also a manifestation of transference, the perceptions of the wizard as a therapist or ultimate rescuer can become unrealistic demands on their time, energy, and abilities. The "police" functions of the wizards are more obvious to the public, but they are not any more important than the wizards' various roles as technical and social advisors.*

X-Ray Vision

Many users assume that they can play with their name, avatar, and identity at the Palace while keeping their true identity hidden. For the most part, that's true. Palace is a highly anonymous environment. Whispers, for example, can't be seen by anyone except the person you're whispering to - not even by wizards and gods. However, wizards have at their disposal a command that enables them to see a user's IP address, DNS hookup, and registration key signature (which is assigned by TPI/EC to each registered member). In other words, as Dr. Xenu has described it, they possess "x-ray vision." They also can tell if you're a guest, member, wizard, or god - as well as call on the server to track you whenever you sign on.

Why were they given this power to override the anonymity that lures so many users to cyberspace in general and environments like the Palace in particular? Mostly, to control the snerts. As Sun Tzu suggested, the more you know about your enemies, the better your chances of contending with them. At the Palace it would be mighty hard to keep track of and discipline name-and-shape-shifting deviants without this x-ray vision. Just letting trouble-makers know that you "have their number" can sometimes shock them out of their anonymous antics and into compliance. If that fails, and a wizard uses a night stick to discipline the snert, all wizards automatically are notified via the paging system of the deviant's identifying stats. For those wizards who sign on later, the system keeps a record of who has been killed and banned. In some extreme cases, wizards have contacted the administrators of ISPs to let them know just how bad a boy (or girl) one of their users has been.

Respecting the privacy of users, most wizards will only use this power when they must contend with a trouble-maker.

However, I heard one story about a wizard who routinely summoned up the identifying stats of everyone in the room. If true, it's a bit voyeuristic. It's a flexing of muscles, of power. After all, knowledge - especially knowledge that others don't have - is power.

Collective Consciousness

Whereas any user can send a message into the paging system, only wizards can see those messages - which appear in a text balloon in the upper corner of the screen. The messages usually consist of members asking for help with a snert or a technical question, chat among the wizards, and automated information from the server (what wizards have signed on and off; how many wizards are on the site; who has attempted the wizard password but failed; what deviants have been disciplined, by which wizard, and with what method).

What's unique about the paging system is that it is the only method for a group of users (the wizards) to communicate regardless of their being in different rooms. It's a Group ESP experience. As indicated by the automated messages, a primary purpose of the paging system is to assist wizards in their policing the site. Wizards on the job often page the group to discuss the problematic members they are encountering and how to deal with them. They call for second opinions on whether an avatar is inappropriate and for assistance in talking to a troubled user. Or they discuss any technical problems with the site that they have discovered. But they don't just use the paging system for business. Wizards also rely on the system as a channel for socializing. As a group, they chat and joke with each other. It's a Group ESP Hangout.

Newbie wizards who plug in the password for the first time often marvel at this hidden layer of wizard communication that goes on behind the scenes of Palace activity. It's as if there is a layer of "collective wizard consciousness" that sits on top of all activity at the Palace site. As a result, the paging system helps unify the wizards as a group. It may also help integrate the entire site itself since the wizards can relay information to each other about what is happening in the various rooms. On the other hand, when wizards get very caught up in their paging system chat, they sometimes become a bit removed from the activity around them. It's like Mystery Science Theater 2000. The wizards lay back in the paging system and comment on the Palace dramas and antics that are unfolding before their eyes.

When a member pages for help with a snert, it's not unusual for several wizards to appear simultaneously - or in rapid sequence - at the scene of the crime. What does this say about the wizards? Feeling responsible, they all may be eager to help. Feeling feisty, they all may be looking for a kill. Feeling bored, they may want something interesting to do. The mass response could be a sign that they're supporting and/or competing with each other (usually one defers to the first wizard on the scene, or the more senior wizard). One thing is for sure. The wizards - in their collective consciousness - pay attention to pages.

Parting the Waters.... Maybe

Wizards have considerably more power than members over the Palace environment. They can run and alter scripts in any room, which gives them the power to program all sorts of activities involving prop and text balloon behaviors. They can enter rooms where occupancy is "full" (i.e., more members can't get in). They can send "global messages" that everyone at the site will see. With their "clone" command, they can copy an avatar right off anyone's back. They can turn scripts and painting abilities on or off, change background room graphics, and add links to rooms.

They use most of these powers sparingly. Major changes to room appearance, scripts, and links usually requires TPI/EC approval. Cloning someone's prop without their permission - which is tantamount to stealing their identity - is considered very bad etiquette. A global message that isn't conveying some important announcement would be perceived as a very tacky or unnecessary exhibitionist display. Excessive runs of script will result in lag, which everyone hates. As such, wizards are a bit like Moses with his hands (or rather staff) tied behind his back. All decked out in superuser powers, but limited opportunities to apply them. It wouldn't be surprising if some wizards, especially the technically sophisticated ones, are a bit frustrated by this. A solution would be to create your own Palace site. But would anyone come to witness the marvels you created? *

Tin Star

In the early days of Palace, when the number of users and wizards at Mansion were relatively small, people who hung around long enough learned who the wizards were. Things were more intimate back then. Wizards were just one of the gang. As the population grew and the intimate atmosphere began to fade, it wasn't as easy for members to identity the wizards. As the group of wizards itself grew to over 50, some of the wizards themselves weren't even familiar with some

of their cronies. Yet the need to identify a bonafide wizard was becoming more necessary within the community. With the growing population, users needed more help in dealing with snerts. Even worse, some deviants dared to call themselves "wizard" when in reality they just wished they were. The real wizards couldn't let impostors run around misrepresenting them. They couldn't let average users wander around not knowing how to find a real wizard.

Something had to be done to make the wizards more visible and identifiable. The Palace program was modified so that only wizards could place an asterisk before their names. The asterisk became their "badge." If you had any doubts about whether someone was really a wizard, just ask him or her to put on the star.

However, wizards only rarely wear their badges. Why? There were a variety of reasons. In part, it was modesty. Some wizards may feel that the badge is a bit exhibitionist or ostentatious as a display of power and status. A basic philosophical tenet of the internet is that cyberspace is the great equalizer. "In cyberspace, we all have equal status." That attitude may influence the wizards and lead them to avoid open displays of class distinctions. They would rather feel like one of gang. Hiding their badges also may be an attempt to protect themselves. With their tin stars flashing, they make a much more obvious target for a barrage of newbie questions, brown-nosing, and anti-authority acting out from the snerts. Wearing a badge means you have clearly identified yourself as "working" - and wizards sometimes just want to hang out and socialize. They implicitly assume that if someone needs help, they can use the paging system to ask for it. In the meanwhile, the wizards often prefer a little bit of anonymity so they can relax and play.

Despite their tendency to underplay their status by not wearing their asterisk, most wizards get annoyed with anyone who pretends to be a wizard. Playing with identity and self-presentation is the Palace way of life. Yet masquerading as a wizard will get you in trouble. Letting wiz impostors run around may lead to an abuse of status, damage to wizards' group reputation, and general confusion among the members. But that may not be the only reason why wizards come down hard on charlatans. Even though most wizards underplay their status, they do not like it violated.* It is an important part of their identity at the Palace. They were singled out and individually chosen for that role. They may feel they worked hard to earn it, or are special because they were selected. So any cavalier pretender may be treading on thin ice.

The asterisk creates three distinct alternatives for the wizard's online presence: (1) A wizard can sign onto Palace without "wizzing up" (entering the wizard password), thereby remaining an ordinary member without all those wizard powers. Advantage? You don't have to worry about wizard responsibilities. Disadvantage? Well, no nightstick or special scripting powers, but it would only take a few seconds to wiz up and get them. More important is the fact that you wouldn't be able to use the paging system, which would cut you off from the wizard collective consciousness. Wizards who haven't wizzed up are missing out on that connection to their colleagues and news about what's happening across the whole site. This may be an important reason why many wizards do not hang out as ordinary members; (2) A wizard can wiz up and don the asterisk, thereby making a clear public statement that "I'm a wizard-on-the-job." TPI encouraged working wizards to wear the asterisk. (3) A wizard can wiz up and NOT wear an asterisk. In some cases, the wizard may be working "under cover" in order to locate misbehaving users who might otherwise behave if they knew a wizard was in the room. Or the badgeless wizard might be trying to blend the advantages of alternatives 1 and 2 - i.e., have those powers and access to the collective wizard consciousness, but NOT have to deal with the hassles of wearing the badge.

In the Know (the wizard mailing list)

All wizards are invited to join the wizard e-mail list. Much like an ongoing meeting, the list is the single most important "place" where wizards gather as a whole group to discuss Palace. In fact, it is the only psychological space that all wizards share at the same time. A message sent to the list is like standing up in a meeting hall and speaking to the whole gathering. Outside the list, there are, no doubt, a flurry of private e-mails in which dyads secretly talk about their reactions to the list discussions. Sometimes those reactions are brought to the list. Sometimes not. The degree of unity among the wizards as a group is largely reflected in and influenced by what happens on the list. Typical activity on the list includes (roughly, in descending order of frequency):

- discussions of technical issues concerning the Palace software
- discussions of Palace rules, problematic users, and how to handle them
- suggestions for improving the technical and social features of Palace
- ribbing each other, and general joking around
- announcements of upcoming events
- intellectual philosophizing about Palace
- electing new wizards
- personal disagreements and flaming

To belong to the wizard list is to be "in the know." The wizards are some of the most knowledgeable and experienced users of Palace. No other group spends more time online and knows more about Palace technology, history, and culture than the wizards. Their collective wisdom resides in the mailing list. The posts to the list are the Cliff Notes of everything important happening in the Palace universe. The list is a central organizing "mind" or "consciousness" of the community. According to Finchy, who helped create the list, "It was a major breakthrough, as it really helped to solidify our community and to serve as a record of our trials and tribulations, which there have been a few."

For these reasons, TPI/EC officials also subscribe to the list and use the wizard group as consultants. Many TPI/EC workers and officials ARE wizards (since they know the wizard password), although some of the volunteer ("working") wizards spend more time at the Palace than some company officials. The wizards are very much in tune with the day-to-day events in the community. Company officials are the masters of Palace technology and business, while the working wizards are "in the trenches." Discussions on the list often reflect this hands-on attitude towards coping with technical and social problems.

Occasionally there have been requests to limit the types of messages posted to the wizard list. No personal bantering. No one-liner jokes. No flames or spam. In the long run the list has remained mostly "free." Bumgardner, who was instrumental in its creation, prefers that the wizards use the list in any way they deem fit. Jokes, flames, and spam are all part of the group process and all potentially solidify the group when openly expressed and discussed. Conflicts are inevitable, as they are in any group. It is far better to discuss them than it is to suppress their expression, which forces them underground and then to resurface in a much more insidious manner.

The problem facing the list is the increasing number of subscribing wizards. Lists with more members tends to result in more schisms, arguments, lurking, less intimacy and openness, and a pressure to institute more rules about acceptable and unacceptable posts.

To Make Palace a Better Place

"Wizards exist for one principle reason," Bumgardner stated in the manual he wrote for them. "To help make the Palace a better place." On the surface, that statement seems pretty straightforward. Upon closer examination, the issues get more complex. What is a "better" place? It implies Palace is in a state of transition, that things need improving. But what?

In part, "better" means "more pleasant." To make Palace a more pleasant place often means curbing the unpleasant users. This is why wizards have been given their night sticks. Sweep, identify, eliminate... i.e., find then tame or boot people who violate other people's rights. But here again the issues get sticky for the working wizard. What ARE people's rights and when do they get violated? Some cases are clear. If you deliberately crash other users, spout language that would make sailors cringe, or spew forth props depicting fornicating bodies... you are begging for a wizardly intervention. In other cases, the line between "deviance" and "play" gets mighty fuzzy.

Palace was intended to be a bit of a naughty place (see The History of Palace). It was designed primarily as an adult environment. But HOW naughty and HOW adult? For example, how does one define an "indecent" avatar. Supreme court justices have a hard time splitting these hairs. Over time the wizards have debated and established more and more refined (and usually restrictive) guidelines about what props are acceptable, in what rooms they are acceptable, and when to propgag or kill. Other debates arose over "hate props" such as Nazi symbols. Should they be banned, or would that be a violation of freedom of speech? Even more slippery is the issue of foul language. When is language colorful and expressive? When is it offensive? Will users - especially the adults - be annoyed at wizards who threatened to wash their mouths with soap?

The answer to these questions is "It depends." It depends on the perpetrator and the other people present in the room. It depends on the situation. It depends on whether children are present in the room, which isn't always clear because everyone is wearing little icons that may have very little to do with their actual demographics. Although the final word for setting rules about acceptable and unacceptable behavior comes from TPI/EC, the wizards are instrumental in testing, interpreting, modifying, and administering those rules. They sometimes may play the role of police "enforcer," but they also act as legislators and lawyers.

To make Palace a "better" place means that wizards have to grapple with many complex social and political questions. It means they indeed have to be "wise." It also means they have to be good role models. Ph's horse mentions in his guidelines for wizards:

> As TPI Wizards, most of the world sees us as representing the company in almost everything we do while
> online. As such, we should endeavor to be as well tempered, balanced and most importantly, fair in our

dealings with users. Not that we need to act like angels all the time, but certainly we can be careful as to our use of language and props.

Being a role model can be a bit stifling. Making Palace Better sometimes means wizards have to sacrifice a bit of their own playful self-expression and experimentation. It wouldn't be surprising if some wizards felt they could only be themselves when around other wizards. However, "letting their hair down" may be exactly what they need to do in some situations. Some members cherish those memorable moments when wizards let loose and have fun just like one of the gang. "It lets them relax and feel special to witness this and to be a part of it," one user noted. "And it makes the wizards more human and not so out of reach." Being a good wizard and Making Palace a Better Place may involve the ability to switch effectively between the "role model" and being "one of the gang."

Making Palace "Better" has other meanings too. It means improving the software and social friendliness of the environment. Wizards are constantly on the lookout for ways to improve the software so people can more easily interact within and between sites, play with their props and scripts, and communicate. Wizards also try to improve the social environment by acting as "helpers" and "hosts." They answer questions, chat, and try to make people feel at home.

Acting as mentor to newbies can be rewarding to a wizard. It bolsters the wizard's self-esteem as a knowledgeable and experienced oldtimer. That, in itself, can be very satisfying. Unfortunately, with large numbers of people coming to Palace, being a helper and host also can be very tiring. Sometimes wizards would like to hang out with their own friends rather than have to attend to newbies. After all, they're volunteers. In order to motivate wizards to accommodate the mass of newcomers who were showing up at Palace, TPI instituted an incentive plan. Whenever a wizard successfully encouraged a guest to register as a member, a monetary credit would be awarded. Previously, almost all wizards were pure volunteers, receiving only occasional (and cherished) perks like free Palace t-shirts and software. For the most part, wizards gladly accepted their role as volunteers. Just having those superuser powers, privileges and perks - and the implicit "special" recognition of being elected wizard - made them more than happy. Now, with the incentive plan, those wizards who accepted the challenge became a bit like commissioned recruiters or salespeople.

Another meaning becomes attached to the idea of "making Palace a better place." It means increasing the size of the Palace population - maybe even encouraging Palace sites to expand across the internet. Better is bigger. Better is more sales. "Making Palace Better" means more explicitly supporting Palace as a business.

The history of the wizards is essentially the history of a balancing or juggling act. It's a self-correcting process of steering a middle course between the original Palace philosophy and the necessities of accommodating a growing community and the business behind it. "Let users be naughty" and "Let them feel like they are getting away with something" were two basic premises of Bumgardner's original vision for Palace. The wizards try to remain true to that vision while also attempting to adhere to some basic dictums for a "better" community - dictums like "Stop people from abusing each other!" and "Maintain standards of public decency!" and "Increase Registrations." By no means is it an easy juggling act. Some wizards have expressed a concern that Mansion - in its attempts to appeal to a growing and more general population - may become a "plain vanilla" flavor or a good, solid "white bread" that will be agreeable to most everyone. If this is the case, the wizards may find themselves in the position of bakers.[*]

In their efforts to make Palace a better place, the wizards must grapple with a variety of roles as well as other users' PERCEPTIONS of their roles. On the wizard list, Nitehunter succintly summarized this dilemma in a "poem":

Wizards are not:

RAF pilots strafing a a nazi convoy.
Guests at a cocktail party.
The upholders of bygone puritanism.
Creators of a new world order

They are Andy Frane Ushers who pleasantly:

Seat the patrons
Keep the noise down
Stop the children from throwing popcorn
and clean up the spilled Coke in the aisle.

Peg responded to Nitehunter's message by suggesting that the following qualities be added to list of what wizards ARE (or perhaps "should" be?):

> amateur psychotherapists
> good listeners
> objective
> non-judgemental
> humorous as needed (or even when not)
> attentive

Dynamics of the Expanding Wizard Clan

We Are Family

When Palace first opened in November of 1995, the wizard group consisted of a handful of people. Over the coming year, as the community grew larger, the size of wizard group had to be increased. It expanded to over 60 by the spring of 1997. As is true of any working group that increases in size, a whole new set of changes faced the wizards. Factions developed in their group. Some arguments ensued, which sometimes led to the resolution of important problems, and sometimes simply created hard feelings. Many of these changes were manifested in the mailing list. Debates and flaming became more frequent - which is a common developmental feature of any mailing list. Unlike other lists, however, the wizards don't simply use the list to shoot the breeze. It is a forum for WORKING together. The wizards have a job to do: To make Palace a better place. That common bond and necessity of performing a task together helps the group endure. When at their best, the wizards learn from the conflicts that surface.

Even without its rapid growth, the wizard group would have experienced similar trials and tribulations - similar cycles of misunderstandings, conflicts, and reconciliations. In other words, the wizards are a lot like a family. Many of them talk about the group as if it WERE a family.

To Bot or Not to Bot

Wizards experimented with automating their tasks in order to lighten their work with the growing community. An automated help center was created, as well as an automated tour of Palace. Wizards created scripts that could display pre-written signs containing instructions or warnings for members with questions or attitude problems. Some wizards tinkered with scripts that could kill upon detecting an obscene word, or that would nudge blockers off their victims. A bot was created that would sit at the Members site, wait for someone to page a wizard, and then report the page to the wizards at Mansion (where most of them hung out). Some of these changes were necessary and helpful. All of them placed automation in front of the user rather than personal contact with a wizard.*

To counteract the "institutional" feel that was evolving, efforts were also made to rekindle the personal touch. A technical support room, staffed by real-live wizards, was opened (for the first time in wizard history, work schedules were established to staff the room). A few dedicated wizards also took it upon themselves to personally nurture the newbies who popped up at the Gate at the Mansion and Welcome Palaces. TPI's recruitment incentive plan attempted to reinforce such efforts. Ideally, personal contact would recruit new members more effectively than automated information or simply letting newcomers wander around on their own. But there was a small price to pay for the new policy. While some wizards assisted and socialized with newbies simply because they wanted to, now there was a financial reward for doing so. In the eyes of some suspicious guests, a friendly wizard represented not simply a benign helper or a potential friend, but rather a business strategy.*

Wizard Colors

As the wizards grew in numbers, the group started to differentiate (mostly unofficially) into various wizard roles, levels, and types. Some of the categories that I list below overlap. Other categories may be considered different FACETS of a wizard personality. For example, some multi-talented people may combine the features of a "philosophical," "technical" and "task" wizard.

NEWBIE WIZARDS - The new kids on the block. Newbie wizards usually act humble about their elevated station in

Palace life. They routinely defer to and accept the guidance from the oldtimers. Perhaps overly eager about their newly acquired powers and the accompanying mission to clean up deviant behavior, a few newbies have been known to get a bit trigger-happy while patrolling the site. Oldtimers tried to reign them in. Activity on the wizard list usually intensifies immediately after the election of new wizards, probably due to the enthusiasm the newcomers bring to the list. It's hard to say how long a wizard retains the label "newbie." It's a state of mind as much as anything else. I've seen wizards whom I considered experienced refer to themselves as newbies. At the very least, one is a newbie wizard until the next round of elections, which is every two or three months.

TRAINERS - Sometimes newbie wizards are assigned sponsors or trainers who show them the ropes. The "buddy system" is a well-known and effective strategy in group development. It offers the newbie a role model and the oldtimer a chance to bolster his or her knowledge, self-esteem, and commitment to the group.

OLDTIMERS - A handful of wizards have been onboard since the very early days of Palace. At the writing of this article, that means a little over a year - which is a fairly long time in the history of a cyberspace community. It's as long as these multimedia chat communities have existed. These oldtimers lived through the many trials, tribulations, and transformations involved in the early childhood development of the Palace software and community. That perspective gives them a definitive edge in understanding Palace. They seem to experience some ambivalence about the rapid growth of Palace. On the one had, they long for the simplicity and intimate atmosphere of the early, SMALL community. On the other hand, they are proud and excited about playing a role in the expansion of the Palace universe.

TECHNICAL WIZARDS - Some wizards are highly knowledgeable about Palace technology. They might have been chosen for wizardship because of their skills. Other wizards respect, admire, envy, or are in downright awe, of these skills. No doubt, their talent and the admiration they receive is a source of self-esteem for the technical wizard. They often are quite generous in sharing their knowledge. For example, they write and share scripts that help other wizards perform their day-to-day chores.

TASK WIZARDS - Some wizards are (using a social-psychological term) "task leaders." They are skilled at organizing and facilitating other users in the accomplishment of a specific project or agenda. As in any group, such people often are identified by others as a clearly visible "leader." People tend to rally around them. In the history of Palace, task leaders became especially important when large technical and/or social events were undertaken, such as the creation of new Palace sites or the highly publicized online concerts.

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL WIZARDS - Some wizards are (again using a social-psychological term) "socio-emotional leaders." They are skilled at handling the social and emotional dynamics of a group - for example, easing tension in the group, encouraging and supporting people, resolving conflicts and building trust among people. At the Palace, socio-emotional wizards are most noticeable in their skill at handling snerts by TALKING to them, rather than using a night stick. Some members stand out as potential wizard material because they are snert-savvy. Socio-emotional wizards will most likely be the ones who find themselves acting as helpers to the members and as counselors to troubled users. Unlike the task leader, socio-emotional leaders usually are NOT identified as group "leaders" even though their role in helping a group carry out it's task is just as important. The skills of a socio-emotional leader usually work subtly beneath the surface of group activity. Only rarely can one person act as both task and socio-emotional leader, since these roles often conflict (i.e., the boss can't always be "nice"). Socio-emotional wizards tend not to dwell on the "policing" functions and do not like to emphasize this aspect of wizard responsibilities.

PHILOSOPHICAL WIZARDS - These are the intellectuals of the group who like abstract discussions about Palace, such as it's purpose as a virtual community, or what constitutes "anonymity" and "deviance."

HIRED WIZARDS - Most wizards are volunteers. Some have been paid employees of the company. With a very few exceptions, most TPI-employed wizards were not hired from the wizard ranks. They were original members of the Palace team at Time-Warner or were later hired by TPI (when it incorporated) and given the wizard password. In many important respects, the TPI/EC officials are the innermost circle of the Palace world. That's where the most important decisions about Palace software - and by consequence, the Palace community - are made. To rise within the ranks from Palace member to Hired Wizard is the ultimate achievement for those ambitious users who have their eye on upwardly mobility in the social hierarchy. Because one has attained a "higher" status, the "promotion" might result in respect, admiration, envy, or alienation from the other wizards. Wizards hired from within the ranks are given specific responsibilities above and beyond those of the volunteer wizard - for example, doing tech support work or managing special events.

THE WIZARD "MANAGER" - In the Fall of 1996 the wizard clan decided to elect a "chairperson." Ph's horse - a widely respected and liked oldtimer - was selected for the job, although he thinks the term "wizard manager" might be more accurate. His original mission was twofold. Because the wizard clan had grown to over 50, the group discussions and decision-making on the mailing list had became more complex - and at times chaotic and hostile. As the list facilitator

(some might say "mother"), Ph helped organize and temper the list activities. He also acted as liaison between the wizards and the TPI officials. With their hands full trying to run the business end of Palace, the TPI folks (especially the highly respected Jim Bumgardner) had become less active on the mailing list, leaving the wizards wondering whether they were abandoned and home alone without the feedback and guidance they were used to. The TPI officials needed someone to keep them informed of the wizard activity and to keep the wizards informed of TPI activity. Over time, Ph's role shifted in emphasis. "True, I was originally portrayed as a sort of chairperson by Jim," Ph stated after reading this section of this article, "but 'officially', I have become more involved with TPI's interests and making sure the Wizard group is tuned to that." Despite being the "alpha male" (as one wizard described him), Ph's leadership style usually leans in the democratic, laissez-faire direction - a style similar to that of Bumgardner, the alpha male of the Palace universe and prior leader of the list. As the wizard group and the community get larger, more complex, and sometimes more chaotic, Ph's style may become more authoritative.

HONORARY WIZARDS - Members invited to become wizards usually have been spending a great deal time at the Palace. Once elected, they are expected to maintain their attendance and help out. An exception to this rule are Honorary Wizards. They are invited to the group out of respect for their accomplishments and/or for some contribution they can make to the wizard group (other than working the sites). A good example is Randy Farmer, one of the pioneers of graphical chat environments. AsKi (me) is also an Honorary Wizard.

WELCOME WIZARDS - In the Winter of 1997, TPI encouraged the selection of wizards to work specifically at the Welcome site. Because newbies signing on for the first time defaulted to this site, TPI wanted to insure that there were enough wizards to help them, recruit them, and control any offensive snerts whose behavior might drive people away from registering. To encourage the Welcome wizards to remain at Welcome (rather than move to Mansion where most wizards hang out), they were given the wizard password only for that site. On the wizard list, debates arose as to whether the Welcome wizards might feel one-down since they could not wiz at Mansion, and whether different "classes" of wizards were evolving. In the past, the wizards tended to be critical of anything that might lead to a class distinction. Shortly after the Welcome wizards came onboard, they were given the password to Mansion and welcomed as "regular" TPI wizards, like all the rest.

WIZARD HELPERS - At Welcome, some members are selected as "Helpers" who assisted wizards in greeting, educating, and recruiting new arrivals. These Helpers, as well as members of the Magus, fall somewhere between members and wizards in the social hierarchy. It wouldn't be surprising if Helpers had their eye on an eventual promotion to wizardship. They probably will be considered as candidates. As the Tao Te Ching states, the one becomes two and the two becomes the many. As soon as a social dichotomy appears in a community, it inevitably leads to further differentiations.

FADING AND DROPOUT WIZARDS - Some wizards become less active at the Palace or disappear completely. They may have grown tired of Palacing, or just of TPI/EC sites. So they move on to other Palace sites, or other cyberspace worlds, or "real" world challenges. They may be disillusioned by the politics and interpersonal conflicts. Some might have had their feelings hurt. Some simply need a temporary break from their "addiction" - which tends to be intensified as a result of becoming a wizard. A universal rule might be that dropouts are not getting what they want or thought they wanted from Palace, whatever that need might be. So they move on. On occasion, active wizards discuss what to do about their fading and dropout comrades. Should they be enticed back? Is it important to find out why they are withdrawing from Palace? (a question that might raise some insecurities and self-doubts in the active wizard's mind) Because it's the wizard' s job to supervise the community, and these dropouts are not pulling their weight, should they be expelled? This hasn't happened yet. The door is left open. You don't eject family. There seems to be an implicit rule that "once a wizard, always a wizard."

Don't Fence Us In

As the community grows, there has been a force among the wizards that resists the inevitable movement towards social differentiation and legislation. Traditionally, the wizard group has been very free-form. They didn't like the idea of class distinctions. They didn't like too many rules or regulations. They didn't particularly like the idea of having "leaders" and probably only accepted TPI officials as authority figures because TPI had been very anti-autocratic and respectful of wizard self-regulation. These egalitarian and independent-minded attitudes are inherent in basic internet ideology as well in the original Palace philosophy.

The self-regulatory and free-form quality of the wizard group is both its strength and weakness. It makes the group flexible and adaptable. It gives the wizards a feeling of ownership for their group. The big question is whether these qualities can adapt to the strains of an expanding, increasingly more complex community. For a large and integrated community to survive, rules, regulations, class distinctions, and hierarchies of authority may be both unavoidable and necessary.

Making Wiz

The Carrot

Most members would like to become a wizard. The more you hang out at Palace, the more noticeable and attractive wizardship becomes. A few members say that they're not concerned about it. Some of those users may be rationalizing their disinterest. There's no sense in longing for something that probably won't happen. Wanting wizardship is an understandable desire. Wizards seem to have a special status. They seem to know everyone and everything in the Palace universe, and everyone seems to know and want to talk to them. Sort of like a hybrid between a Zen Master and a rock star, except wizards can't easily sing a tune (at least, not at the Palace). Most impressively, they have those unique powers to pin and kill, which enables them to triumph over evil almost EVERY time.

Being asked to become a wizard often is a powerful experience for a user. It is an acceptance into an inner circle of the Palace community. It fulfills that need for status, power, identity, and the feeling that one belongs. Making wizard means that you were special and stood out. It meant that your skills and knowledge were both valued and needed in the service of the community. Here's how one oldtimer described it:

> My most memorable early Palace moment was when jbum asked me if I wanted to be a wizard. I was overwhelmed. I remember my heart beating faster, and getting flushed. Wow! Of course I said yes, and he told me that I would be initiated, and when. I was amazed.... I'll never forget my initiation. I was so terribly excited that day, as I waited for the appointed hour to meet jbum on Main. I went to the cafe as instructed, and was totally confused. Where was everyone? Then Spingo came in and whispered to me to utter an incantation and I was magically transported to a room I didn't know existed! It was a hidden room, Murmoorerer, a copy of the Moor. My whole family crowded around the monitor to watch, and I was so excited I could barely type!... As I remember, Coyote, jbum, Digital, Spingo, Sleepy and dChurch were the only ones there that night. Because of the top secret nature of the Wizard Induction Ceremony, I cannot divulge what occurred after that to the general Palace public. Needless to say, it was thrilling, enchanting and hysterically funny!

As the Palace population grew, making TPI wizard became an even more distinctive achievement because one was being selected out of the masses. Wizardship became an important motivating factor for some users. It encouraged them to spend more time Palacing, befriending wizards, and making some contribution to the community that would distinguish them from everyone else.

Coming into the Fold (stages in wizard elections)

Every three months or so, new wizards are chosen. The formal election process takes place mostly on the wizard mailing list. Undoubtedly, there also is hidden lobbying and campaigning taking place at the Palace sites and via e-mail. The election process on the list is rather free-form, which on occasion has led to some confusion and complaints about whether the right choices were made. Usually the process is fast paced, taking no more than a few days. The election usually happens in 7 stages:

STAGE 1: DETERMINING THE NEED - Either a volunteer wizard or TPI/EC official mentions on the mailing list that more coverage is needed on the company's sites. The slack in wizard presence might be at specific times of the day or at specific locations (usually Welcome). The impetus for choosing new wizards is therefore need-driven. At times the process is a bit pressured because of that need. If the call for more wizards is coming from the volunteers (rather than the company), the list might discuss the problem with coverage and then attempt to convince the company to give the go-ahead for nominations. The most critical issue is to determine exactly HOW MANY new wizards are needed. Not making that specific determination has lead to confusions and controversy in the election process.

STAGE 2: NOMINATIONS - With the company's approval, an announcement is made to the list to "start nominating." Names are tossed out. The merits of each nominee are discussed. List activity reaches an all-time peak (wizards take the election of new wizards very seriously). The most commonly mentioned merits of a nominee include: (a) the person is friendly, mature, helpful or generically "great," (b) the person is good at handling snerts and/or helping new users, (c) the person is knowledgeable about Palace technology and culture, and, most importantly, (c) the person is online a lot (especially important if they are online at the time and place that coverage is needed).

STAGE 3: VOTING - A list of nominees grows and is continually circulated to the list. The Chairperson keeps track of who endorses which nominees and usually includes the tallies on the list. This stage is intertwined with the nomination stage. In other words, campaigning, nominations, debates, and elections are all occurring simultaneously - which can

lead to confusion and controversy. The exact criteria for who "wins" the election varies from one election to another. Generally speaking, the nominees with the most votes win.

STAGE 4: COMPANY APPROVAL - When stage 3 seems to be tapering off, the results of the voting are sent to the company for their approval. Rarely (if at all) has the company overturned the results of the elections. They trust the judgment of the wizards. To overturn the elections would be a serious blow to the confidence and pride of the wizard group. Electing new wizards is the only group decision made by the wizards that occurs on a regular basis and leads to a very specific and important outcome. Most other important decisions are made within the company. Electing new wizards is essential to the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the wizard group.

STAGE 5: NOTIFICATION - Company officials notify the members that they have been chosen for wizardship. To avoid crashed hopes, a rule of thumb is that members are NOT informed of their having being nominated. The election process is secretive, although leaks probably occur (most likely from wizards who are nominating their friends). Unlike real world elections, those chosen for wizardship may have no idea that they have been elected until after the elections. To my knowledge, no one has ever turned down the appointment.

STAGE 6: THE INDUCTION - At a formal gathering, the new wizards are initiated into the fold. A few traditions have evolved for the ceremony. The initiates line up at the bottom of the screen and take their oath - usually a humorous pledge that highlights the woes and/or grandiosity of being a wizard, and the questionable sanity of anyone who would agree to becoming one. Then they are all ceremoniously pinned, which usually triggers a round of LOLs, feigned cries for help, and screeches of delight (if they haven't learned yet how to unpin themselves, some older wizard must take pity and do it for them). Sometimes the pinning party spreads to consume everyone in the room. Scripts are played to demonstrate wizardly magic - like transforming everyone's avatar into the three stooges. It's all a cathartic release of wizardly frustrations and a bonding in the experience of what it means to be a wizard. Finally, when the company official in charge eventually quiets the rambunctious group, some serious topics of discussion are introduced. The topics reflect the technical and social issues of the day - usually some problem that is facing the community.

STAGE 7: STARTING WORK - The new wizards jump head first into their work. Training sessions, on-site sponsors, and written documentation (e.g., the Wizard Manual written by Bumgardner) may help ease them into the technical and social aspects of the job. They also join the mailing list, where they are greeted with rounds of warm welcomes, friendly insults, and more jokes about the woes, grandiosity, and questionable sanity of being a wizard.

Guidelines for the WannaBe

Exactly how does one go about achieving wizardship? Below are some generally accepted, "unofficial" guidelines at Mansion. The rules may be different at non-company sites, but a lot of these ideas are good common sense anywhere.

DON'T ASK TO BE WIZARD - This rule of thumb, originally proposed by Bumgardner, is a bit paradoxical. It's like really wanting a particular job, but in order to get it you can't apply. Or like Enlightenment, according to the great mystics. If you say you want it, you've already blown your chances. The logic behind this guideline is mostly practical. It's designed to prevent people from campaigning for wizardship and bugging wizards about being inducted. If you're wizard material, and don't ask to be wizard, you're also more likely to be humble and less power hungry. Of course, there's a vast difference between a newbie teenager who hounds and begs to be wizard and a 40 year old, long-standing Palace citizen who in earnest expresses an interest in the position. Some people may simply be curious about the mysterious process of wizard selection. In at least one case, a younger member did actively campaign for the position, got it, and eventually turned out to be a valuable wizard.* So there are flaws in the "don't ask" rule.

In one fascinating (but not entirely verified) story, a member who asked to be a wizard and was not considered "wizard material" switched personae in order to develop a character who WOULD be considered good wizard material. The strategy worked, resulting in heated arguments between wizards who knew about the personae and those who didn't. I wouldn't recommend "deception" as a tactic in attaining wizardship. Although identity play is part of Palace life, doing so to maneuver your way into the wizard clan will not sit well with some members of the establishment.

BE HELPFUL AND KNOWLEDGEABLE - If you're making some kind of useful contribution to the community, you're more likely to be asked to be wizard. Maybe you have valuable technical skills. Maybe you have good social skills, as in making people feel welcome at Palace or handling snerts (converting a snert into a respectful citizen is a HIGHLY admired skill). Or just offer to help out with activities. You don't have to be a genius at Palace technology and social structure, but you must have a good working knowledge of this world. If you have a UNIQUE skill to offer the community, put it to use. If you're a wizard at another site, that might be "job experience" to help you attain another wizard position - although the establishment may worry about your "divided loyalty."

ACT MATURE AND FRIENDLY - People don't like to work with anyone who lies, manipulates, loses their temper, boasts excessively, or puts others down. Wizards are people too. Another rule of thumb among the wizards (which HAS been broken on occasion) is "No males under 25."

BE THERE - Bumgardner stated that wizardship is not a "reward" for people who have been on Palace a long time. In other words, it's not a certificate for longstanding attendance. However, if you're not around a lot, or not very social when you're at the Palace, people just aren't going to know who you are. A big part of most wizardwork *IS* to spend as much time as possible on Palace in order to help people and control the snerts. So, generally speaking, if you don't look like the kind of person who will be online often, you won't be asked to be a wizard. During the election process on the wizard list, the most frequently mentioned merit of a nominee is "he/she is around a lot."

BEFRIEND THE WIZARDS - If the wizards don't know you, you won't be asked to be a wizard. Duh. So talk to them, help them. If you're around a lot, this will happen naturally. DON'T be an opportunistic sycophant. Nobody likes an avatar with a brown nose.

Putting aside all these guidelines, it's important once again to remember that being asked to become a wizard is NOT a reward for good behavior or attendance. As if you're still in high school and accumulating points for being a good do-be. Some people get angry when they feel they've "met" the above criteria and still haven't been invited into wizdom. They get bitter when they see themselves being passed over for the big promotion. It's NOT A REWARD, they may be told.... But it sure often feels like that to people who ARE invited to wizardship.

The following are comments by wizards and TPI officials who have read this article.

Drover: "Geez the more I looked at your piece the more it reminded me of how similar being a police officer and being a wizard is........strange how the two kind of meld together."

Randi: "[This] is really harsh I think. Makes us sound like Miami Vice or something. Whether it's true or not is a different story. ;-) I also recall someone telling us that we are NOT to think of ourselves as the 'police'".

Janet: "I never 'patrol'. But again I can only speak for myself. I hate the thought of any wizs 'patrolling' however and hope that none have this mindset. It's not that we do not have a policing function, I just thought that it shouldn't be presented as the main/primary function.

Glide: (summarizing Chrissy) "We dont sign on... with intent to kill, pin, mute, whatever. Wizzing should be secondary to Palace experiences. I deal with the room I am in... if a situation arises, I take care of business, if I get a page for help, I respond to it accordingly. Please dont hunt and peck these folks out, don't hold grudges.... Treat each as an individual, like YOU would want to be treated."

jbum: "I'm not so sure if wizards are any more offended by being impersonated than anyone else... it's just that they have more power to do something about it. The major concern here, I think, is the potential "general confusion among the members" as you put it... As palace spokespeople, the wizards clearly do have a concern that the message is clear or at least as close to clear as they can make it."

(The interesting thing about impersonating a wiz is that it's different than impersonating another member by using that person's name and avatar. Impersonating a wiz may simply involve impersonating the "status" of wiz and not the identity of a particular wiz. It's like "impersonating an officer." - J.S.)

jbum: "Wow. As someone with an intense dislike of things "white bready", this one scares me. I think the onus for this one should be put on TPI, rather than the wizards. I think one of the big challenges for TPI over the next couple years is going to be to preserve the Palace's inherent sillyness while attempting to turn it into a roaring success. A few notes here..."

"First of all, we don't have to be lewd to be lunatics. Lunacy is, and should continue to be a highly valued Palace commodity. Although the rules are getting stricter regarding "indecent" avatars, I see this more a result of communication issues that arise from population expansion more than a change in attitudes. The original "small" palace community wasn't overly fond of scanned lingerie models either, but this community had better communication

and a higher level of conciousness."

"Secondly, one of the best things we have going for us are the "self-expression" features in the palace software. I think most of us at TPI realize this and we aren't about to put the curb on it. The ability for the Palace community to mold itself into it's own image will ultimately prevent it from becoming a homogenous lump of dough."

"Finally, I do think we can (and should) expect the quality of life at Main and other TPI servers to be less than the quality of life at smaller servers, due to its larger population. We shouldn't forget that Main does not equal Palace space. No doubt the most interesting things are happening at the fringes, as in the rest of society."

Randi: "Like sit for over an hour with a 12 year old at 5 a.m. trying to walk them through downloading the new client version so they can play with the trial membership. Or about the kids that come and confide about the terrors of the world just looking for an adult figure. We are much more than 'room sweepers' and killers."

Boo Boo Kitty: "I think that one point you're missing in the whole development of other palace sites is the fact that non-TPI sites don't have what I call the "electron gun" pointed at them. Main and Welcome have had the benefit/bane of being the primary server pointed to by the Palace's clients. The constant stream of people is akin to funnelling ants (a jbum metaphor) towards a certain point -- inevitably communities will rise and develop. How can they not?"

"Main and welcome also have the added benefit of having almost constant monitoring (i.e. wizzes online) -- i.e. there's almost always someone home to keep the light on for you (cf. Motel 6 franchises)."

(see the article on the History of Palace for a discussion of the Main Mansion community and the colonization of off-main sites - JS)

Randi: "I tried to ask people to mention my name when I first started wizzing thinking the extra cash was nice, but damn if I didn't feel like an amway salesman. I don't want people thinking that that is the only reason I'm helping them. It's not the reason I help."

Peg: "I try to be a kinder, gentler wiz to cause the least amount of disruption as possible. There are some who attempt to "egg on" a power trip by saying "smoke him, Peg" and other wonderful things.... I let them know I'm just a palace bouncer, cyber rent-a-cop, virtual mom etc... I've had alot of teens tell me I sound "just like mom" when talking to them about their behaviors online. ROFL I figure I must be doing something right then."

markj: "Originally, he campaigned for Wiz very heavily. He made little signs and left them all over the place. He began his illustrious career with us by hanging out on Rainbow (the experimental server we put up and gave out the wiz password to) and used his newfound powers to unceremoniously boot people out as they arrived. Ping! You were in Rainbow and then Ping! You've been kicked out. He would just stay at the gate and do this, deriving all kinds of adolescent pleasure from it.... Of course, we were not about to hand over the keys to the kingdom to this guy!... But then, he changed. He became much more interested in the community as a whole and in being a positive contributor. In time *I* started to push on everyone -- even jbum -- to let him in. Others started speaking up for him also, and eventually he was let in and made a pretty good wiz for a long time. He also continued from time to time to exhibit "young" judgement, but overall I think he did pretty well."

Janet: "I have never felt that frustration you mention about having powers and being unable to use them. Once again, only speaking for myself. And I'm not a scripting type wiz."

Janet: "Just today, I had a guest who under different circumstances might have gotten himself killed. I believe that he was merely acting hostile in response to obnoxious treatment by a member. But when I came in the room, he was being abusive. After speaking with him briefly and explaining what the consequences of his actions would be, he made a comment along the lines of 'I'm not gonna cry for mommy, I can handle myself.' This seems to be the other extreme of what you are explaining here."

On Being a God

**An Interview with
Jim Bumgardner**

Jim Bumgardner is the creator of the Palace, the graphical chat environment that is one of the most unique community-building software on the internet. I first met Jim up at Nrutas, the room at the Mansion site that looks like the surface of a moon orbiting Saturn. I was hovering up among the stars, while jbum was down on the surface of the moon, apparently whispering to one of the wizards.

"Jbum, the Palace is great. Nice work!" I said.

"Thanks, AsKi."

"So jbum, what's it like walking around inside your own creation?"

"Like being God, only worse. I don't get to visit any nuns."

I LOLed. Well, I thought, this jbum certainly has wit and a sense of humor. Later I discovered that Bumgardner is renown for these attributes. He's the kind of guy who shows up at Harry's Bar wearing the name and avatar of the Pope; who is partial to his prop of a 1950s female model wearing a white dress and playing accordion; who, when asked if Palace is a cult, switches his username to "Jbum Jones" and says "Does anyone want some cool-aid?"; who puts on an impressively mystical display of scripts at the Valentines Party, and then tops off this demonstration by turning everyone's avatar into the Three Stooges; who enumerates to the Palace listserv the various possible reasons for lag, ending his list of serious explanations with these items:

> your modem sucks
> your computer sucks
> Tachyon fields
> Too much caffeine

Ask anyone and they also will tell you that Jbum is bright and creative. One member, who apparently met him in person, said he is "gorgeous" too. Not a bad combination of attributes. Hoping to find out more, I would scan the list of usernames when I signed on to see if he was around. More often than not, he wasn't there (gods are busy people). A few times, when the userlist did show me that he was present in one of the rooms, I'd pop over to that room only to discover that he was no longer there. I'd check the userlist again, find out what room he had moved to, and then popped over to that room. Again, he was gone. I'd check the list once more, locate his new position, and follow him. Again, gone. Only now the userlist indicated that he had disconnected from the site... A very mercurial guy. Perhaps he was just strolling through and surveying the territory.

I finally decided to e-mail Jim. I told him about my research on the Palace and invited him to participate in an interview to be conducted over the course of a series of e-mail messages. He replied right away, and agreed. I was glad, for I now had the opportunity to find out about the man behind the Palace... to find out what it's like to be a "god."

What follows are excerpts from that e-mail correspondence. I began the interview with what seemed to be a logical place to start:

Jim, could you tell me a little about yourself and what led you to designing the Palace?

I studied music composition at California Institute of the Arts from 1980-84. As far as computers go I'm self taught. I've always been a creative individual and this has occasionally been a problem since in the multimedia community there is often a clear demarcation between "creative" and "technical" people.

I'm going to quote here from a document I wrote about the origins of the Palace. No one else has seen this yet, I've been saving it for such a time when someone asks for an in-depth explanation of the origins of the Palace.

--- begin quote --- <u>Palace Origins</u>

A number of people have asked how the Palace came to be, and I thought I would write about some of the ideas that went into it. There were basically three main influences - text based MUDs, 3D VR systems, and multimedia authoring systems.

<u>Text Based MUDs</u>

In the mid-80s I worked on a personal project called "Mansion". At this timeI had used Compuserve CB, a text-based chatting system, and wanted to create an object-oriented environment for chatting. The mansion would be a collection of rooms that users could wander around in. Each room had different kinds of objects in it - tables, pictures, etc. There was also a provision for creating computer-controlled agents - butlers, bartenders, prostitutes, etc. Here's the beginning of a sample session:

> You are standing in front of an ornately carved heavy oak door.
> >> knock on the door
> The door is opened by the Butler. He says "How may I help you?"
> >> say "I would like to come in"
> The Butler lets you inside.
> You are in a the lobby of the mansion. There are 2 other people waiting here. A cocktail waitress appears and asks if you would like a drink.
> >> say "May I have a bourbon on the rocks"

I never completed Mansion, in fact, I barely started it. What happened was that I found that I had to make a fairly sophisticated natural language parser in order for it to work. The system had to be able to understand that a vase could go ON the table, that a picture could go ON the wall, but that a vase couldn't go ON the wall. I found myself spending much more time learning about the intricacies of English grammar, then making a fun multi-user environment. I found that many people in the AI community were banging there heads on the natural language problem, and that it was not an easy nut to crack.

A few years later, when I first came across MUDs and MOOs on the Internet, I realized that others had had the same idea, and had gotten much further along in realizing it. And looking at the command sets for a few different such systems, I realized that much of the engineering still takes the form of processing grammar. Although MUD parsers aren't as sophisticated as I wanted Mansion to be, they still do a great job of creating virtual environments for people to have fun in.

<u>3D VR Systems</u>

In the late 80s, I first read about virtual reality systems in an issue of Scientific American. By the early 90's virtual reality was a buzzword that was heard everywhere, and was already turning up in video arcades, TV and movies.

The few virtual reality systems I tried left me feeling strange and frustrated, however. First of all, the stereo-video headsets don't work very well for me. I have always had a problem fusing stereo images - for example, when I look through a child's Viewmaster toy, I see double images, and it takes a certain amount of effort for me to fuse the images into one. The VR headsets had the added problem of having a too narrow field of view - so it was as if I were looking at a viewmaster through two mailing tubes.

Then there's the movement problem. In most virtual reality systems, you don't actual move your legs and feet to walk (although you may be standing on a treadmill), instead you use a joystick or trigger to move. This is not so much like walking as it is like using a motorized wheelchair. Also, there's often a delay between head movements and image scrolling, due to poor response time which can even induce nausea. So the virtual reality you are experiencing is the reality of a myopic, drunk quadriplegic.

It seemed to me that the designers of virtual reality systems are spending too much effort trying to mimic our reality. These systems require considerable horsepower, not to mention programmer power, in order to work. Yet the most interesting thing about virtual worlds, from my perspective, is not that they are 3D, but that they provide an alternate experience - a different way of interacting with the world, and most importantly - with other people.

It occurred to me that a "2D Virtual Reality" system would allow me to combine some of the best features of a text-based MUD and a 3D VR system. I could concentrate on what, to me, were the interesting facets of a virtual world - interpersonal communication, creation of new spaces & scripting, while still having an environment which was interesting to look at, and easy to use.

I started working on such a system, "The Palace" in September of 94. A basic version was up and running on our macintosh network by early October, and it was immediately clear that other people found it fun and addictive.

In addition to 3D, there were many other aspects of "real reality" that I dispensed with. From the beginning, people didn't have bodies, but were simply heads. The heads weren't realistic representations of human faces, but were abstract "smiley" heads. Around this time I was reading "Understanding Comics" by Scott McCloud, and was influenced by McClouds notion of "masking". I felt that by using a more abstract representation, we would create a higher level of anonymity that would allow people to be more uninhibited and would require them to express themselves via ideas, rather than appearance. The Palace was to be a "great equalizer". The later addition of custom faces basically obliterated this idea, but it was clear that the users were having a good time making new faces and showing them off, so it seemed too good to omit.

In other ways, the Palace borrows heavily from the world of Comics, which are also simplified 2D worlds. For example, most people immediately recognize the difference between a "talk" and a "thought" balloon.

There is no attempt to mimic real world physics in the Palace. As far as I am concerned, Physics basically present obstacles, and I wanted to create a world with few obstacles. There is no gravity, nor is there a real sense of location. You can get from one place to another simply by clicking on the destination - you don't have to "walk" to get from place to another. Early attempts by myself to create "real world constraints", such as limiting a person's movement to the "floor" area of the room, were quickly removed, because they were perceived by myself and the other users as unnecessary obstacles.

There is also no conservation of matter or energy. For example, I can create a Martini out of thin air, and just as easily make 10 or 20 copies of it. There is no penalty for doing this. There is no money either, or any attempt to create a monetary system of checks and balances. If such a system develops, it will have to be at the users own initiative, and not due to any attempt to engineer it into the software.

Multimedia Authoring Systems

There is one other important influence on the Palace, and that's "Idaho". Idaho was a multimedia authoring system I designed for my employer, Time Warner Interactive (then Warner New Media) in 1991. Idaho was superficially similar to Apple's HyperCard (it was originally called Hyper-Spud), but was geared towards churning out the multimedia CD-ROMS we were making at the time (Desert Storm, 7 Days in August, How Computers Work and others).

From the beginning, the Palace had an authoring component built in to it. I wanted the users to be able to extend it - to create entirely new environments using the Palace software for the basic architecture. The easiest way to accomplish this was to include much of the code and ideas from "Idaho". The basic notion of the world being a collection of screens (now "rooms") with buttons (now "doors") comes from Idaho, and indirectly from Hypercard. Another feature borrowed from Idaho is the iptScrae scripting language, a relatively recent addition to Idaho that is still being used to author Interactive Television applications.

One of the most novel things about the Palace, from a software architecture point of view is how the scripts are executed. The Palace, like a MUD or MOO, is based on client/server technology. Unlike a MUD or MOO all the scripts are executed by the clients, not the server. The server actually does very little work, other than directing traffic. The division of labor is heavily weighted towards the clients, allowing the servers to run on relatively low-powered PCs.

The servers are designed to be linked together, creating a large distributed web of connected spaces, similar to the world wide web. Unlike the web, all these spaces can support direct interactivity with the other people who are in the same space. The Palace isn't meant to replace the web, however, but to compliment it. You can put web links into your Palace world, and you can create links to palaces on the web.

--- end quote ---

As a budding computer and internet geek, I was fascinated to hear this technical explanation of the origins of Palace. As an interminable psychologist, I also wanted to hear about the underlying psychological forces that had shaped its development. Jbum addressed this in his reply to my next question:

When you first started designing the Palace environment, what vision was guiding you? In other words, what impact did you want the environment to have on the individual user, on how people would interact with each other, and on the kind of "community" that would evolve there?

I wanted the Palace to be extremely easy to use, and mildly subversive in content. It is my belief that people like the feeling that they are "getting away" with something. Initially I thought the Palace would be used in office networks (not on the Internet) and I thought we could distribute it to offices by sending disks to the lowest level employees that had computers - secretaries, for example. I wanted to create the feeling that here was something to do that was extremely simple and fun, and perhaps a little bit naughty. It was my hope that the Palace would get banned at one or more large corporations, thus putting the stamp of approval on its "fun-ness" and generating some press.

I assumed from the beginning that people would play games on it, and that a large part of the activity would be sexual in nature. Although it was apparent that kids liked using it, the original Palace was definitely intended as a product for adults, with perhaps a kids-only spinoff down the road.

I believed that a cultish Palace community would arise - that since the software is highly addictive - a lot of people would spend a lot of time there and develop their own grammars - their own slang - both text based and visual (and this has happened more or less - as time goes by it gets more complex).

Do you think social norms have evolved about what behavior is TOO naughty or subversive? Has it been necessary to develop restrictions on inappropriate behavior? (and how do you think the telecommunications bill will affect behavior at the Palace?).

Well, this is semantic in nature - but I don't think you can be too naughty. You can be too obnoxious and/or hateful. There are clearcut cases where we kick people off the server. Saying "suck my dick" to a crowded room 5 or 6 times will certainly get you kicked. So will sitting on top of someone's face and refusing to get off. As far as SANCTIONS go - yeah, the security features (`ban `gag and `pin) have evolved since the palace opened.

Where it gets interesting are the borderline situations and there are many of those. We tend to ask people to remove naked breasts and other nude props, but at the moment we're seeing a lot of partially clad props which are probably sexier for what is not shown... I can't pretend that society's ideas of what is proper and improper make any sense at all, but when a prop is clearly inappropriate for the palace, I usually know it.... (in a more recent e-mail Jim said) I would add at this later date that I've since learned (relearned?) that *everyone* feels certain they know what constitutes inappropriate behavior, and they all disagree. This has been one of the main sources of disputes among wizards.

Personally I tend to err on the side of leniency.

I think it'll be some time before anyone gets around to prosecuting us using the telecommuncations bill as a weapon - there are bigger fish out there - and since the bill is largely unenforceable, I'm hoping those early cases will make it even harder to prosecute us. We'll see.

> **Let's suppose that you heard through the grapevine that a group of skinheads were meeting in private at the Palace, and there were some vague reports about them discussing explosives. Would you investigate or intervene somehow?**

I'd probably kick 'em off, but I probably wouldn't report them. Although I'm a big believer in federally protected free speech, the principle simply doesn't apply in "my house". I'm assuming you mean that the skinheads were using the main server, and this is the equivalent of folks coming into my restaurant and peeing on the carpet. If they used their own server, I wouldn't intervene (and probably wouldn't know any).

I was reading an article in the LA Times yesterday about the differences between German and American views of censorship (in regard to the recent Compuserve controversy regarding censored Usenet newsgroups).

The article basically stated that both the Germans and the Americans feel that theirs is the more open society, the German's pointing to the fundamental Christian groups in the US (and freer sexual expression in Germany), and the American's pointing to the German Govt. Censorship of hate speech in Germany, which the German's willingly submit to.

I can understand both sides, however, as far as the main Palace server goes, I'm tending to side with the Germans. All the abstract notion of "free speech" for everybody is a nice ideal, but I can understand the motivation of the German government for censoring hate speech. Civil Rights activists have a tendency to say "today you censor hate speech, tomorrow you censor homosexuals and atheists" - well I think this is a bit absurd. I think one can probably draw a line between the expression of ideas which are violent and harmful to others, and ones which aren't, and the ideas in the first category are destructive and harmful to society - that is they ultimately lead to physical harm and murder. You can't make a case for religion or sexual orientation leading to the same.

> **One of the subcultures at the Palace is a D&S lesbian group. What if a rumor started to spread around the net that the Palace was mostly a hangout for these people. Would you intervene, and what are your thoughts about this subgroup?**

More power to 'em. Yes, I am aware that there are a lot of lesbians on the Palace. If rumors spread would it bother me? Hell no. I'd take it as a badge of honor (just as the current influx of lesbians pleases me). I'd advertise it. Interestingly Microsoft's competing "V-Chat" has, in their press releases promoted a 3rd party Gay/Lesbian server (Planet Out), and since then a few Gay/Lesbian palace servers have appeared, and I've taken to joking around the office "More gay than Microsoft".

> **You seem to have a very patient, almost "hands off" approach to letting Palace move in the direction it will inevitably move. But do you ever feel you need to intervene and structure it's development?**

I was talking about this to someone the other day - we were comparing Compuserve's Worlds Away to the Palace. Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar, who worked on Habitat/Worlds Away took a much more hands on approach to the economic and social structures of their world. In my opinion they went too far (see their white papers which describe the results at www.communities.com) and that has influenced my decision to not build those kinds of features in (a monetary system for example, is not built in to the Palace). Randy discovered that the unit of money they created quickly became worthless, and a "true" monetary system evolved in it's place. None of us are qualified to be Alan Greenspan (not even Alan Greenspan!).

Randy is now an honarary wizard at the Palace. Some of the other wizards, including Randy, are more structure-oriented than I am. They tend to push for new features and procedures like:

1) Established voting procedures
2) Rules of Order
3) Specific punishments for crimes
4) Jails

Most of the folks I've talked to are happy that the Palace doesn't have this kind of stuff. I *do* agree with Randy that as the Palace evolves, it will eventually need more of this kind of stuff, but I'm not as anxious to add it and am trying hard to resist it.

As I said the other day, "You include just enough reality (but no more) to give People a handle so they can understand what's going on, after that let them take it from there." A lot of the physics and social modeling (e.g. "ownership" of stuff) that people are building into other virtual worlds are unnecessary. Just because I must travel thru Point B to get from Point A to Point C in real life doesn't mean I should have to do so in a virtual world. After all, I'm going there to *escape* reality, not to reexperience it.

> **Do you think the decision NOT to structure/direct the evolution of Palace is still an act of omission that affects its evolution?**

Probably - but I feel I have no choice. I think the efforts of those who are more "hands on" is ultimately futile, and therefore, by taking that approach, they are much more likely to fuck things up, or at least introduce a hell of a lot red tape. I'm reminded of a comment by P.J. O'Roarke about how the Government should just "stick a fork in it - it's done", rather than keep adding new laws, in an attempt to fix the old ones.

> **How are decisions made about changes in the software and social policy?**

There are different answers for software vs. social policy.

Decisions about changes in the software are made by myself and other members of the Palace group (Me, Mark Jeffrey and Eddie Rohwedder - the windows programmer). Most changes are made by Eddie and I, with Eddie concentrating on the Windows client while I concentrate on the Mac Client and the Unix Server. There is a body of code shared by all three platforms (Mac, Unix and Windows) which was written and is maintained by myself.

Many socially-related features (e.g. security stuff & wizard stuff) is implemented on the server, which I control. Often changes are made which are instigated by user requests, although more often I tend to view user requests as "symptoms" of an underlying problem which needs to be fixed - I very rarely take them at face value. This is something a good software engineer learns to do with time.

As far as social policy goes, things are more murky. Unlike the software features, there isn't really any established social policy. The closest thing we have is the Wizards Manual - a document I wrote a couple months ago when the number of wizards grew large enough that disagreements about how to deal with specific situations became more common.

> **Where do you think the Palace is heading as a community?**

This is one of those questions that requires a novel in response. I guess that's my way of saying I don't have an immediate answer I can tick off, I have to spend some time thinking about it :). Let's see... (deep think).

I can't give you a specific answer, but can give you some specific trends I've noticed. For one thing, I've noticed a new clique forming in the chess room, of a group of women, and a few men who seem to hang out together. The wizards form another clique of course, and I'm sure there are more in existence that I'm not aware of. I assume the number of cliques is a proportional to the average number of concurrent users, which is rising. Most of these cliques seem to be centered around 1-3 key individuals. So some trends I'm seeing:

> --> More cliques
> --> More politics
> --> More complexity (features)
> --> More complexity (rules of etiquette)
> --> More stratification of castes (guests-members-wizards-gods). For example, there are some users who I would place somewhere between a member and a wizard on the social scale.

At this point in our correspondence, we talked about whether the Palace was a true "community," (we agreed it was), what kind of community it is, and the role of wizards. The discussion became quite intellectual at times, which I enjoyed. At one point Bumgardner even took out a dictionary to look up the meanings of "community." I'll save these ideas for other articles rather than describe them here. As a result of these discussions, I was very impressed with the thoughtfulness and insight Bumgardner applies to both the technical and social aspects of Palace.

I think it's great that you're thinking about all these issues. Does it sometimes feel like a big responsibility?

The social issues don't feel like a big responsibility to me as compared to the software engineering issues which do. Part of this I think is that I expect myself to perform my programming tasks with a certain degree of perfection and in a timely manner, whereas the social stuff, I assume right up front that I'm as clueless as anybody else in this manner and that to a certain degree, we're all gonna be buffeted like a canoe by the currents of social forces at work which are to some degree beyond our control. So on the social side, I'm just enjoying the ride, and doing what I can here and there to direct the canoe, but I don't feel the degree of responsibility that I do on the engineering side. At the end of the paragraph that ends "I don't feel the degree of responsibility that I do on the engineering side." (trying to correct a possible miscommunication here) This doesn't mean that I feel that the social issues are less important. They are paramount! I just don't kick myself so hard if I screw up in the social arena because these people issues are tough! The tougher it gets - the more likely I am to take a hands off approach. I suppose that's one possible explanation for why God doesn't interfere as much as he did in the Old Testament: "Damn these humans are gnarley little things! I'm gonna do some crossword puzzles for a while..."

In a later message he had this to say about working with the wizards, which seems to be one of the more challenging social tasks he faces within the world of Palace:

I recently had a phone conversation with one of the gods at another fairly active site, and it was interesting. It turns out we both had some of the same experiences and we spent some time commiserating with each other (about the bickering amongst our respective wizards), which was a novelty. It made me realize that my problems are not necessarily unique.

We both seem to be experiencing divisiveness amongst our wizards in which they are splitting into two polar camps, which I call the "bleeding hearts" and the "Nazis". The "Nazis" are in favor of tighter controls on abusive members (and favor outright permanent bans on one or two of them) and the "bleeding hearts" are in favor of being less controlling. Mirroring this is the feedback from the members, some of whom say the wizards don't do enough, and others who say the wizards do too much.

Towards the end of our correspondence, I wanted to return to one of the issues that initially sparked my interest in doing this interview. What is it like being a "god" who creates a virtual world? How does it feel to walk around in that world? How do the other inhabitants react to your incarnation there? As a psychologist, I knew that people often have "transference" reactions to authority figures. They may idealize and worship them, attempt to get their acceptance and praise, try to emulate them, fear them, or feel jealous, competitive, and rebellious - all reactions that may make the authority figure feel a bit misunderstood or "set apart." Would these kinds of reactions also exist in a virtual reality where your mind can mingle with the presence of the "creator?" And what's it like being on the receiving end of those reactions?

I once asked you up at Nrutas, "Jbum, what's it like walking around in your own creation," and you said, "Like being God, only worse. I don't get to visit any nuns." It was a funny comment. It MUST feel something like being a god, which must be a very strange and fascinating experience. And I guess it must be a little bit……(what word should I use?)……. frustrating or LONELY for you? I'm sure members and guests are projecting all sorts of feelings and thoughts onto you - admiring you, testing you, asking things of you. Do you feel like you are able to just "be yourself" at the Palace?

Well, I think it's probably similar to what celebrities experience (in a much smaller way, since my level of celebrity is proportionally smaller). As of late, I've been noticing that people tend to always laugh at my jokes, even when they're not all that funny. I'd like to think of myself as a funny person, but I can't help but think that people are filtering what I'm saying thru a "jim" filter and therefore reacting more positively to it than they might from others. I've said some things which are quite rude, that folks laugh at, which coming from a Guest might get a rebuke.

All the things you describe the members doing towards me I've noticed to some degree or another, and again, I think it's similar to the phenomenon of celebrity.

Often folks are very genuflective when seeking my advice. "Jim I know you're terribly busy, but I've been waiting for days to ask you this teensy weensy question". Another phenomenon is folks getting angry because they think I'm ignoring them (I'm not, I'm just not noticing them because my attentions are elsewhere).

I also feel I can't trust strangers. I get a lot of praise all the time, which is good for my ego of course, but I've always been a very self-confident person, so it's not like I need a lot of that. Often, compliments and praise from a stranger are a prelude to asking for a favor, typically "Can I be a wizard?".

So, "FRUSTRATING" yes.

"LONELY", I'd have to say no. The reason is that in real life I'm pretty much a very insular person with few (no?) close friends, so comparatively, my social life on the Palace has a lot more going on. So, in general, the Palace has made me feel less lonely, my wife has said similar things - as a couple we don't have many friends in real life, so to a certain extant, our social life *is* the Palace these days.

I think in some ways I can be *more* myself on the palace than in real life. I think I tend to come off as a bit more intelligent and witty on the Palace, and in reality I *am* indeed more intelligent and witty, but my physical appearance (long hair, beard, sloppily dressed) tends to put some people off. I often use props as a form of visual free association on the Palace which is kind of cool. So if the intent of the question is to say "do you feel you can't relax and just let your hair down and be yourself?" I'd have to say no, I can definitely do that (consider "accordion lady").

However, there are times when the needs and politics of the members prevent me from just being another palace citizen and having fun. Last weekend on a Saturday Night at 3:00 AM one person started asking tech support questions, and then the other folks in the room figured out that I had some answers and suddenly I had 3 pending questions in the air at the same time. I finally said "Look - these pc technical issues are *real* interesting, but it's 3:30 AM my time and I'm wondering if we could perhaps talk about something non palace-related, like pork rinds?" Everyone laughed and was glad to oblige.

I do get tired of folks always wanting to talk about the Palace itself. I'd rather use the Palace as a medium for talking about other stuff. I'm probably being a bit hypocritical here because I *do* spend an awful lot of time (on and off the Palace) talking about the Palace, but sometimes I need a break.

One other thing - you seem to be fascinated by the God & his creation concept, and certainly its a fun one to kick around, and people do tend to play with it on the Palace as well. But what if I hadn't called the system operator "God" - what if it were called the "Sysop"? The net-celeb issues would still be there, but the role wouldn't carry as much symbolic weight, I suspect.

I also wanted to mention a bit about my personal feelings about my small-scale palace celebrityhood. When I was a child and a teenager, my main goal in life was to achieve celebrity. At that time, I wanted to be a rock star. I played piano (still do) and wrote songs, and spent a lot of time fantasizing about performing my songs in Madison Square Garden or Television.

After high school, I went to California Institute of the Arts to study music. I was there 4 years. When I left CalArts, my desire to do music was much diminished, and I was already a budding programmer. I had found that my creative and intellectual impulses were more greatly satisfied by computers than music. As I used to tell people, "I can write a program to write a song. I can also write a program to design a building. But I can't write a song that will design a building". So I considered computer programming to be a *superset* of music composition. And as far as my desire for fame went,I had grown up a bit, and realized that my personal happiness and satisfaction (to be achieved thru creative activity) were the most important things, and if any fame or celebrity were to eventually come, that would be icing on the cake.

Musically, I had also discovered that even the remotest attempt to make a living musically (I had played piano bar a few times) resulted in attempts by others to significantly modify your creative output. Even my own father, when I played some of my music for him once, suggested that I play more stuff that "people want to hear". In other words, musically, I've always felt more strongly that it's bad to "prostitute" myself, so by staying out of the music business, and I've been able to write for myself without diluting or modifying my songs for anybody else.

On the computer side, this has not been a problem for me. I came to programming as a young adult (I started playing music as a child), and have invested less emotional weight in it, so I'm more willing to write programs on request if need be, and I've found the varied kinds of things I've written programs for to be an education in itself.

Anyway, now this thing has come full circle in a way, because, in the Palace, the fruits of my labors are beginning to pay off. As someone who delights in the act of creation - in programming as a creative activity, I have created this world, and there are lot of interesting resonances with my emotional needs to create and have my creations appreciated by others. This is, needless to say, very pleasing for me.

Everyone who operates their own server has the opportunity to be God of a world of their own creation - and that's a great gift I can give to others. But for me personally, it will always be extra meaningful, carry extra weight because I designed and programmed the whole system. To use the God analogy, not only did I indirectly create the trees and the rocks, but I also created physics and determined the digits of the number PI. And similarly, I suppose,the *real* God, if there is one, is getting even deeper satisfaction at having allowed for the creation of all these lesser gods.

That should give you something to chew on, eh?

Y2K

Apocalyptic Thinking and the Tragic Flaw

What will happen when the clock strikes 01.01.01.01.01.00? Will elevators stop dead between floors, power plants shut down, and airplanes fall out of the sky? Will the internet and communication infrastructures crash? Will the world's economy collapse as the vast network of banking computers spin out of control, throwing the whole world itself into chaos?

Some people think so. As you read this, they are stockpiling food and supplies in anticipation of a society so crippled by the Y2K bug that it will crumble into anarchy. They truly believe The End is near. Others are not so extreme in their fears, but still expect some major mishaps once the clock strikes the new millennium. Make sure you have good hardcopy records of all your finances. And don't fly on January 1.

In some cases apocalyptic thinking is part of a social movement. History is filled with examples of small cults and larger religious and quasi-religious groups that predicted the end of the world. In many cases they borrowed the apocalyptic mind set from the world of Christianity, where some fundamentalists devoutly point to the end of the world as prophetized in the Book of Revelations. The belief system of many modern cults and spiritual groups is a hodgepodge conglomeration of ideas from religion, philosophy, psychology, the occult, and science. It's the injection of those "scientific" ideas into their ideology that justifies it, that makes it seem rational, logical, indisputable. The Y2K dilemma is the perfect technological spice to throw into that ideological soup in order to make it palatable to those who have doubts, and raise the fever of those who already believe. If computer people are worried about the Millennium Bug, then it must be scientifically valid to panic about it, right? Fundamentalist and survivalist groups that promote apocalyptic visions also benefit from the scientism of Y2K fright. It's a very handy tool in proselytizing. "Join us now, before it's too late." Even if there was no Y2K problem, we would still see these End of the World predictions popping up here and there across the world. A new millennium is approaching. It's a big milestone. Some think the LAST milestone. Y2K simply amplifies the trepidation.

For individuals who are wrought with anxiety about Y2K, it's not so much a social movement that sweeps them up, but rather an internal dynamic. Some unfortunate people grew up in a family or an environment marked by extreme unpredictability or unexpected trauma. Worry, suspicion, or even outright paranoia about what lies around the next bend has been burned into their psyche. Often in their lives they become preoccupied with anxious anticipation of cataclysm. For some, Y2K looms before them as a seemingly real omen of upcoming disaster. Exactly what calamity it will bring, no one knows for sure. But it will be calamity. It's well know that one component of depression is the tendency to engage in the style of faulty thinking called "catastrophizing" - i.e., predicting and anticipating crisis, often based on little or no evidence. In some cases, Y2K anxiety may be an expression of this cognitive distortion associated with depression.

There are a variety of facets to catastrophic thinking and its close relative, apocalyptic thinking. We see these same facets in Y2K anxiety, with a technological spin. For example:

A fear of helplessness and loss of control- Computers are supposed to help us manage our lives and society, but if the Y2K bug prevails, computers will bring about the end of our control over civilization. It's a bit of a paradox.

A fear of The End - Y2K is all about time, and time is supposed to march inevitably forward. But when we reach major temporal milestones, the fear that time may end wells up. Our biological nature demands that we humans expire. Awareness of death is existentially wired into us. A FEAR of death is wired into us, and Y2K stirs it up. It is a symbolic death, at the hands of our machines. Will our machines die with us? Who will outlast whom? Apple's HAL 9000 commercial that aired during the Superbowl played up on this fear of the Y2K bug as the omen of The End. It raised the question, "who will survive it?"

A fear of change and the unknown - If it isn't the end, then it's a change to something new, something radically different. It's a step into the unknown, which is threatening, dangerous. The New Millennium moves towards us at a time in human history when computers are rapidly altering our lives. Where will they take us? The Y2K bug is a shocking reminder that we don't know. Perhaps only the most fit will survive the change.

A fear of interdependence - The survivalist's apocalyptic thinking has its roots in a fear of dependence. Other people and society cannot be trusted to protect and take care of you. You have to rely on yourself, even isolate yourself. Computer networks are the antithesis of this concept because they are intrinsically interdependent. As such, the Y2K Bug is the survivalist's worst nightmare. Even if you take care of your own machine, you cannot account for other machines that may interact with yours. The Millennium Bug confirms the survivalist's belief that trusting and relying on others will lead to your own downfall.

A fear of retribution - The apocalypse is not simply the end. It's payback time, the moment of judgment and retribution. The Millennium Bug warns us not to take too much pride in this massive computerized world that we have built. We think we are in control, that technology has brought us closer to perfection, mastery, and a divine-like state of knowledge. But like the Titanic, our glorious achievement can fail miserably. It can turn on us. The Tower of Babel can collapse. We will be punished for our hubris. In what becomes a Revenge of the Machines, our own creation can retaliate against its creator.

The Y2K bug reminds me of the concept of the tragic flaw in classic Greek literature. The hero has a weakness - a secret, hidden vulnerability that he himself may not realize, an Achilles heel. At the peak of his triumph, it comes back to haunt him. It triggers his downfall. In their quest for speed and efficiency, computer programmers of the 60s and 70s failed to predict the possibility that their simplified technique for encoding time could eventually lead to a total breakdown, the collapse of all speed and efficiency. Time would come back to punish them for the flawed representation of time that they built into their machines. Those machines are but an extension, a reflection of their creators - flawed, imperfect, and often unaware of their imperfection. And Y2K is the wake-up call. It's the reminder that the computers we created - that we ourselves - are not invulnerable. By our very nature, we make mistakes. Y2K anxiety is the anxious realization that despite our best, heroic efforts, we can screw up big time.

In this article I've been tossing around terms like "phobia" and "paranoia" in order to emphasize the problematic side of Y2K thinking. A phobia is an unrealistic, irrational, exaggerated fear. But is the anxiety about the Millennium bug totally unjustified? Some say that just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean that people aren't out to get you. Speaking for myself, I seriously doubt that civilization is going to collapse after New Years Eve 1999.... but I don't plan to be on any planes on January 1 either.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

  Transference to one's computer and cyberspace

Bringing Online and Offline Living Together

The Integration Principle

If there are any universally valid principles in psychology, one of them must be the importance of integration: the fitting together and balancing of the various elements of the psyche to make a complete, harmonious whole. A faulty or pathological psychic system is almost always described with terms that connote division and fragmentation, such as "repression," "dissociation," and "splitting." Health, on the other hand, is usually specified with terms that imply integration and union, such as "insight," "assimilation," and "self actualization." Many religious philosophies also emphasize the attainment of connectedness and unity as the major theme of spiritual development. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That greatness can only be realized when the parts are joined together.

So what does this have to do with the psychology of cyberspace? There are two basic ways the internet tends to create division in one's life and identity. First, people tend to separate their online lives from their offline lives. You may have online companions, groups, and activities that are quite distinct from those you have in the face-to-face world. For some people, the two worlds are worlds apart. Second, among the thousands of different groups and activities online, with each specializing in a particular topic or activity, people easily can join a handful of them. A movie group here, a parent group there. It's fairly easy to compartmentalize our various interests and activities. In this complex, modern society of ours, we juggle dozens of different tasks, hobbies, and social roles: mother, wife, daughter, professional, cook, reader, bicyclist, investor...... Cyberspace provides places for you to perch all of your identifications - places all separate from each other, each containing people who may know little or nothing about your other perches. How different than the societies of centuries past, when people lived in small towns and villages. Many of your neighbors knew about all your interests and activities. Your daily tasks, the people you engaged, the groups you belonged to, were all overlapped and connected.

This split between online and offline living and the compartmentalizing of one's identifications are not necessarily bad things. Hanging out online can be a healthy means of setting aside the stresses of one's face-to-face day. Online groups with specialized interests offer you the opportunity to focus on that particular aspect of your identity, with information and support from people that may not be available elsewhere. Dissociation can be an efficient way to manage the complexities of one's lifestyle and identity, especially when social roles are not easily compatible with each other. The president of the corporation may need to keep his participation in the "I Dream of Jeannie" newsgroup separate from his business life. In more precarious situations, an aspect of one's identity is sensitive, vulnerable, or possibly harmful to oneself or others. It may be necessary to keep it guarded within a specific online or offline location until helpful conditions allow it to be emerge safely. I'll say more about this later.

As a general rule, the integrating of online and offline living and of the various sectors of one's internet activities is a good idea. Why? Integration - like commerce - creates synergy. It leads to development and prosperity. Both sides of the trade are enriched by the exchange. If the goal of life is to know thyself, as Socrates suggested, then it must entail knowing how the various elements of thyself fit together to make that Big Self that is you. Reaching that goal also means understanding and taking down the barriers between the sectors of self. Barriers are erected out of the need to protect, out of fear. Those anxieties too are a component of one's identity. They need to be reclaimed, tamed. Maybe it would do that corporation president some good to bring his fondness for Jeannie into his office. Maybe bringing something of one's online lifestyle into the face-to-face world would make that in-person lifestyle less stressful. It's interesting to note that "internet addiction" - or, for that matter, any kind of addiction - entails an isolating and guarding of the compulsive activity against all other aspects of one's life. Overcoming the addiction means releasing and mastering the needs and anxieties that have been locked into the habit. It means reclaiming the isolated self back into the mainstream of one's identity.

So how does one achieve integration? Below I'll outline some possibilities. I'll focus on connecting one's online and offline living. But it's very easy to adapt these strategies to integrating the various compartments within one's online world, as well as within one's offline world.

1. Telling online companions about one's offline life.
Lurking, imaginative role playing, and anonymous exchanges with people online can be perfectly fine activities. But if a person wants to deepen and enrich his relationship with online companions, he might consider letting them know about his in-person life: work, family, friends, home, hobbies. Those companions will have a much better sense of who he is. They may even be able to give him some new insights into how his offline identity compares to how he presents himself online. Without even knowing it, he may have dissociated some aspect of his cyberspace self from his in-person self. Online companions can help him see that.

2. Telling offline companions about one's online life.
If a person lets family and friends know about her online activities, she may be allowing them to see parts of her identity that she otherwise did not fully express in-person. They can give her insightful feedback about her online lifestyle and companions. When communicating only with typed text in cyberspace, it's easy to misread, even distort, the personality and intentions of the people she meets. Offline friends and family - who know her well - can give her some perspective about those distortions.

3. Meeting online companions in-person.
As friendships and romances evolve on the internet, people eventually want to talk on the phone and meet in-person. That's usually a very natural, healthy progression. The relationship can deepen when people get to see and hear each other, when they get a chance to visit each others environment. They also get a chance to realize the misconceptions they may have developed online about each other. That, in turn, will help them understand themselves.

4. Meeting offline companions online.
If a person encourages family, friends, and colleagues to connect with him in cyberspace, he is opening a different channel of communication with them. Almost everyone does e-mail nowadays, but there's also chat, message boards, interacting with web sites, online games, even imaginative role playing. He may discover something new about his companion's personality and interests. And his companion may discover something new about him.

5. Bringing online behavior offline.
River, an online friend of mine, once described cyberspace living as "training wheels." On the internet a person may be experimenting with new ways to express herself. She may be developing new behaviors and aspects of her identity. If she introduces them into her f2f lifestyle and relationships, she may better understand those behaviors and why previously she was unable to develop them in the f2f world.

6. Bringing offline behavior online.
Translating an aspect of one's identity from one realm to another often strengthens it. You are testing it, refining it, in a new environment. So if it's beneficial to bring online behaviors offline, then it's also beneficial to bring offline behaviors online. Cyberspace gives a person the opportunity to try out his usual f2f behaviors and methods of self expression in new situations, with new people.

As I suggested earlier, there is a caveat about this integration process. Some aspects of a person's identity may feel shameful to the person. They may be rejected by or hurtful to other people. If acted upon, they may even be illegal. In that complex universe of cyberspace, there are many places where people can go to give expression to these problematic aspects of their identity. Should they tell people about it? Should they express these things in-person? Should they carry into cyberspace a problematic behavior from their f2f life?

There is no simple answer to these questions. Under optimal conditions, translating troublesome issues from one realm to the other can be helpful, even therapeutic. A person who learns to accept his homosexuality in an online support group may benefit by coming out in the f2f world. But a pedophile who goes online to carry out his intentions creates only harm. Offline/online "integration" that results in a blind acting out of impulses that hurts other people is not healthy. In fact, it's not psychological integration at all. Integration involves self-understanding and personal growth, which involves working through - and not simply acting out - the problematic aspects of one's identity.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Addiction to computers and cyberspace
In-person versus cyberspace relationships
Transference among people online
Transference to one's computer and cyberspace
The online disinhibition effect

eQuest

A Comprehensive Online Program
for Self-study and Personal Growth

As a result of the research I've been doing in cyberspace, I've become fascinated by all the different kinds of personal growth experiences that are possible on the internet. And so, about a year ago, an idea hit me. If I were to create a comprehensive program of online activities - activities designed to be therapeutic, to enhance personal growth - what would that program look like? I've been working on a preliminary version of that program and would like to briefly describe how it's turning out so far.

I call the program eQuest. I'm trying to design it to be both comprehensive and flexible. In a nutshell, it works like this: A person enters the program with some specific personal issue or question in mind, something they want to understand better about themselves or their lives. Maybe it involves a problem of some kind, something they want to change or resolve. It might have to do with divorce, drug use, friendships, stress, choosing a career, almost any issue will work. eQuest then guides them through a collection of online activities and exercises in order to help them explore and maybe resolve that issue.

eQuest could be used in 4 different ways. People could use it as a kind of self-help program in which they would undertake it by themselves. That might work just fine; however, I believe the program is more effective when someone works with the person, like an eQuest consultant. Or a psychotherapist could help clients use the program as a supplement to their therapy work together. Right now, as I'm developing eQuest, I supervise my students who use it as a kind of experiential or participant-observation research method.

The eQuest Philosophy

Every therapeutic system has an implicit or explicit ideology, a belief system or philosophy that clarifies what its adherents believe to be true, what's important regarding the issue at hand, how to learn and change. Here are the basic elements of the eQuest philosophy:

- Feel empowered to become a knowledgeable user of online resources
- Experiment with new behaviors and expressions of self while online
- Experiment with different modalities of online communication
- Integrate online resources and activities with each other
- Integrate online activities with in-person lifestyle
- Develop a healthy online lifestyle
- Explore a personal issue... Know thyself

Whatever the personal issue is that someone brings to the program, they can explore and perhaps resolve it by becoming a knowledgeable user of online resources, by empowering themselves in that respect. The philosophy is all about developing a lifestyle in cyberspace so you can work on that issue and also other ANY issue that may come up in your life. By experimenting with different types of online communication, by integrating online and offline living, we can learn a lot about ourselves. We can come to Know Thyself as Socrates suggested. And that's how eQuest works: on a specific level, the person uses online activities to address a specific personal issue; but on a broader level, the person comes to know thyself by exploring an online lifestyle. Those two levels work hand in hand.

In the sections that follow, I'll describe some of the basic components of how eQuest works. As I mentioned, it's a comprehensive program, so I'll just highlight a few key ideas about each of these components. In order to help this all hang together and make sense to you, I'll also briefly describe the experiences of one eQuest user, who I'll call Brian. Brian was 35 years old, married with three children, and had returned to college to get a masters degree. He also was in face-to-face psychotherapy when he started the eQuest program and was in the program for about three months.

Assessment and Goal Setting

The first stage in eQuest involves assessing the person's psychological condition and computer skills, in order to determine if they can benefit from the program, and also helping the person set goals. The goal, the personal issue that Brian brought to the program, was wanting to learn more about alcoholism. His wife was a longtime alcoholic and their marriage was headed for divorce. In addition to his in-person psychotherapy, he also attended in-person Al-Anon meetings. He wanted to explore online resources to see how they might supplement his understanding of how alcoholism was affecting his life and his family. He was a bright, mature, very responsible person who showed no signs of any significant psychopathology that might preclude him from using eQuest. He was somewhat new to cyberspace, but had the necessary e-mail and web browsing skills to make use of the program.

Using Online Information

As we all know, there's a great deal of information on the internet. eQuest guides people in learning how to search for information related to their issue, but more importantly, in learning how evaluate whether that information is good or bad in an objective sort of way - i.e., what are the credentials of the person who wrote that web article, is it a reputable organization that runs the web site, etc. - and also if it's good or bad in a subjective sort of way. Is it valid to you personally? How can you can make sense out of that information and apply it to your issue? Given all the information that an eQuest user might browse through, it's helpful to understand why a particular piece of information catches a person's eye. Brian looked over many web sites devoted to alcoholism, but one article in particular caught his attention - an article about confronting the alcoholic spouse. This issue was especially important to him.

Using Different Modalities

The next step is getting the person involved in online social and other interactive activities. There are lots of possibilities and eQuest encourages people to explore them. As I mentioned before, the eQuest philosophy is that we learn about ourselves by experimenting with different communication modalities, by trying out new ways of expressing ourselves using text, visuals, audio, synchronous and asynchronous communication, imaginary versus real environments, and varying degrees of invisibility and presence.

The problem is that it takes time, effort, sometimes money, maybe even some courage to experiment with new communication modalities. Which ones people choose and how much they're willing to experiment, may tell us something about the person. It might even be related to the issue that they bring to eQuest. Brian had once tried chat software, but it crashed his system. Because other family members used the computer, he didn't want to risk problems resulting from new software. In eQuest he preferred not to venture beyond email and web browsing.

Participating in Online Groups

Participating in online groups is an important social activity that eQuest encourages. There are thousands of groups out there, devoted to almost any psychological or social issue you can imagine. However, there is a learning curve in understanding the culture of online groups and knowing how to participate in them effectively. Some groups are something less than benign, even hurtful and pathological. So eQuest contains a set of guidelines about how to find and participate in groups related to your personal issue, and how to evaluate whether the group is helpful or not. Throughout the program there are suggested readings - many of them from my book The Psychology of Cyberspace - that describe the pros and cons of online living. Many of these articles pertain to online groups and relationships.

Brian joined an Al-anon email group where he felt much less inhibited as compared to his in-person Al-Anon group, which supports that idea of an "online disinhibition effect." He wasn't as worried about confrontation and being rejected. He also really enjoyed talking with people from around the world, which made him appreciate how many of the issues in dealing with an alcoholic spouse were universal, regardless of culture.

One-on-One Relationships

eQuest also encourages people to establish one-on-one relationships. It helps you find others with interests or experiences that are uniquely relevant to you, someone you might never be able to find in-person. It encourages you understand the transference reactions that tend to surface in the ambiguity of text relationships. Because people are bringing a specific personal issue to eQuest, it's good to connect with someone who has some knowledge of that issue. The relationship that forms may involve mentoring or peer help and support, in some cases evolving into a friendship.

Brian made contacts with a few people from his online Al-Anon groups, which were brief but supportive for him. He also began emailing two people that he knew from his in-person Al-Anon group. That turned out to be very powerful for him. Being able to touch base with them at any time during the week was a great comfort, especially at those times when he was upset with his spouse, or just felt isolated and alone.

Exercises in Online Living

In addition to the suggested readings that I mentioned, eQuest contains a collection of exercises to help people learn about online living. One of them is to write an email to an imaginary person using as many of what I call "creative keyboarding techniques." Here is an excerpt from the email that Brian composed:

> Jennifer!
>
> The party went well, thankx for asking. Of course, I wish you were there :-(A lot of my {{{{friends}}}} and {{{{family}}}} came. *WOW* I was so happy. My favorite gift was a pillow from one of my sisters. It said, "A Brother is a Lifelong Friend" (Aaaah!) My 4 year old {{{{nephew}}}} got into trouble (uhoh) when it was time to leave and he was still hiding.
>
> BTW, Remember the "chocolate pudding pie" dream I told you about (inside joke)? Well, the "chocolate pudding pie" showed up at my party!!! It was quite good ;-)
>
> On a more serious note, we did not serve alcohol at this party. One reason is that some family members have a serious drinking problem. Another reason is that it helps to weaken the association between alcohol and having a good time, in the eyes of children (and adults) :-)
>
> TTYL,
> Brian

What's interesting about it is that Brian, in-person, can be rather quiet and reserved. But in this email we see him being very open and expressive (more evidence of the disinhibition effect). He's using emoticons, parenthetical self-disclosures, lots of virtual hugs. It speaks to a side of him that's not always visible in face-to-face contact.

Online Tests and Interactive Programs

Participating in online groups and one-on-one relationships are the social meat and potatoes of eQuest, but there are some good side dishes too. One of those involves encouraging people to try out the online personality tests, aptitude tests, interest inventories, and many other types of interactive programs that are available at sites like queendom.com. No matter what the issue a person brings to eQuest, there's almost always some test or program that's somehow related to it. eQuest advises people that most of these tests are not valid psychometric instruments, that the results should be taken with a big grain of salt. Nevertheless, it can be a valuable learning experience in Knowing Thyself to simply experiment with these tests and determine for oneself whether they're accurate or not. eQuest uses them as springboards for thinking about oneself and the personal issue being explored. It's also very valuable to see which particular tests or programs people choose, to understand why the person wanted to experiment with it. Brian was intrigued by a test that assessed emotional intelligence. He scored quite high, which he felt good about.

Freeform Browsing

Often when we're online we're hunting down specific information. That mental set tends to narrow our field of view. It prevents us from discovering other things things we didn't even know existed in cyberspace. The freeform browsing component of eQuest attempts to reverse that mental set, to get people to explore more freely. There are several types of freeform browsing exercises, but basically they all encourage the person to devote a few online sessions to just wandering around cyberspace with no specific agenda. They might use a random link generator that throws them onto a web page somewhere as a random starting point to begin their wandering. Freeform browsing then becomes a fascinating kind of projective test. How the person experiences the process of freeform browsing, as well as what the person discovers, are both revealing. Brian said that these exercises were hard for him. He realized just how goal-oriented he is. It was easier for him if he thought of wandering as his specific task to accomplish. During his browsing, two web sites in particular caught his eye. One was devoted to Dorothea Lange, a photographer who wanted to draw

attention to the suffering of the the poor and the oppressed. He also was fascinated by a site about the history of dance in America. His attraction to these sites revealed important dimensions of his personality.

Creating a Personal Web Page

I think it's a valuable self-reflective exercise to create a personal web page. What do you think is important about you and your life? What do you want others to know about you? How do you think they'll react? eQuest contains some guidelines and exercises that help people construct a personal web page and to think about the creation of that page in a self-reflective, therapeutic way. This was a real eye-opening experience for Brian. He had never created anything like this where he was focusing on himself rather than other people. It helped him feel like an individual, and he liked that.

Putting It All Together: Integration

eQuest involves a variety of different activities and exercises. In order to prevent it from just becoming just a hodgepodge collection of things to do online, the program also emphasizes integration - integration on various levels. It encourages eQuest users to integrate their various online activities with each other. For example, talk to your online companions about your online groups. Show them your web page. If you've found something interesting on the web, discuss it with your online companions and groups. In your personal web page talk about your online lifestyle. I think it's important to overlap these various online activities with each other, to combine them, to encourage them to interact with, enhance, and balance each other.

As we sit there in our chairs and stare at the monitor, we tend to forget about our bodies. We tend to experience cyberspace as a disembodied activity, which I think is a mistake. Using such things as felt-sense exercises, eQuest encourages people to integrate bodily experience into understanding what they're doing online. It also helps people understand dreams about being online, as a way to integrate conscious and subconscious reactions.

Most importantly, eQuest encourages people to integrate online and offline experience. That's a potential problem for some people - separating, isolating online activities from offline living. It's one of the features of so-called internet addiction. Therefore, eQuest contains guidelines to help people bring their online and offline lives together. These seem like such simple things - like contacting online companions on the phone or in-person, or telling family and friends about one's online experiences - but I think these activities are essential in reality testing what we're doing online, in preventing harmful transference reactions, and discovering different dimensions of our personalities.

Brian composed an email to his online Al-anon group in which he revealed quite a bit about his situation with his wife. He felt good about how well he expressed himself. Later, when he read that same message to his in-person Al-Anon group, he cried. The emotion embedded in that emotion surprised him. Moving from one communication modality to another (including face-to-face meetings as a modality), combining modalities, integrating modalities, can reveal dimensions of the self that may not be obvious in one modality alone.

On another level of integration, Brian also found it very helpful when he talked about eQuest with his psychotherapist. I would recommend this strategy to any clinician. If you have clients with active online lifestyles, talk with them about it. You may gain a new perspective on their personalities.

The eQuest Consultant

A consultant comes in very handy for facilitating this integration process. Although people could pursue eQuest on their own, I think the program is much more effective when a consultant guides them through it, helps them sort out and interpret their experiences, helps them put it all together. All these exercises and online activities are like bits of a puzzle, pieces of a mosaic. The consultant can help the person compare, contrast, assemble those pieces to get a bigger picture of that person and the issue being explored. Across these different activities you can see patterns that you might not see in any one activity alone. In the bits and pieces I described of Brian's eQuest experience, you may have notices such interesting patterns.

New Therapeutic Models

There's a trend nowadays to think of the internet as a place where we can take individual psychotherapy and translate it into an online mode, like in chat therapy and email therapy. That's an important and effective strategy. I think also it's time that we start thinking about ways to shape the wide variety of growth-promoting experiences out there in cyberspace into therapeutic models that are different than those we're used to in the face-to-face world. It means clinicians may not play the same kind of central role in the transformative process as they have in the past. It may mean

empowering the client more, but that's what I find intriguing about such programs as eQuest.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The Online Disinhibition Effect
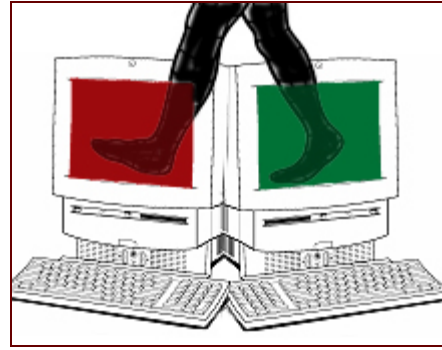Bringing Online and Offline Living Together: The Integration Principle
The Final Showdown between In-person and Cyberspace Relationships
E-mail Communication and Relationships
Psychotherapy and clinical work in cyberspace

Media Transitions

How and why people change their cyberspace environment

Cyberspace changes quickly. New computers, software, and Internet resources surface almost every day. What is new and exciting now may very well be humdrum or outdated in a year. As a result, we are forced to keep up. Sooner or later we must make what I will call "media transitions."

Here I use the term "media" in a broad sense. It is any computer-generated environment: a program, operating system, or online setting of any kind. Therefore, a media transition is the changeover from one such environment to another. Sometimes the change might be small, as in updating from one version of a program to a slightly newer one. Sometimes the shift is large, as in installing an entirely new operating system or venturing into some area of cyberspace where you have never been before.

In this article I would like to explore the psychology of media transitions. What thoughts, emotions, and behaviors come to play as one moves from an old and familiar environment to a new one? What determines success or failure in making the change? What motivates a person to try something different in the first place?

Living in the Land of Errors

A piano teacher I know once summarized what it was like taking piano lessons as a child: "It was like I was living in the land of mistakes." I'd like to offer a variation on that expression - one that applies to computering. It is like living in the land of errors. After all, do you ever go one day without something - big or small - going wrong with your computer? Sometimes the error is a failure to communicate between you and the machine. Something goes wrong because you haven't figured out how the program works. Perhaps the program is not making itself clear about how it works. Or you're just not paying attention. In other cases, the responsibility for the problem rests definitively on the shoulders of the machine. The program code or design is inadequate. Things don't work right or the program totally crashes - and it isn't your fault, unless we accept the expectation that we all should be computer experts who can prevent any problem before it occurs. But even the experts will tell you this is impossible. Computers are just too complex and intrinsically fallible.

So how do we react to living in the land of errors? Here are some possibilities:

- We get annoyed with and blame the computer, like it's some kind of stupid person or unruly child

- We get annoyed with and blame ourselves, perhaps thinking that we are inadequate to the challenge

- We devote some time to trying to solve the problem, then give up if we can't

- To avoid more errors, we don't try something new

- We work around the problem, perhaps in a way that's less efficient, maybe even forgetting that there was a problem (a kind of denial)

- We call tech support

- We refuse to accept errors and compulsively try to make our machine "perfect"

In this list, we see some of the psychological factors that motivate us to avoid or make a media transition. On the one hand, you may choose the path of work-around solutions, which sometimes gives "character" to the machine as your quirky but familiar companion. You're the only one who knows its unique pattern of flaws and how to navigate around them. On the other hand, living in the land of errors can become too frustrating. It may even threaten your ability to communicate with others and the safety of your files. A change is necessary, sometimes a big change.

MTM: Media Transition Motivation

"Motivation" comes from the Latin "motus," meaning "to move." Something moves us from our old cyberspace environments into new ones. Something internal pushes us into trying out new software despite any trepidations that might stand in the way. What creates that motivation? As we just discovered, malfunctions incite that desire to move on, but there are other possibilities as well. Let's take a closer look at some of these reasons why we undertake media transitions:

Necessity: It's the mother of invention as well as media transitions. Our familiar programs, workspaces, and social environments seem a bit tired and outdated. They don't work as well as they used to, or we become painfully aware of how we could be doing a lot more than what the status quo allows us. In this age of information and enhanced communication, if others are gathering resources and sharing in ways that we can't, we may find ourselves woefully behind the curve and out of the loop. I was forced to upgrade to OSX when Eudora for OS 9 could no longer send emails. Sometimes you just have to move on.

Pride: Being behind the curve is not exactly a prestigious position, especially for those who consider themselves sophisticated users or even hackers. Maintaining one's self-esteem requires that push into the next new thing that everyone is talking about, or perhaps even beyond them and into the leading edge of the curve. I'm not a professional digital photographer or website designer, but Photoshops CS2 and Studio MX make me feel like one.

Competition: Not far from pride is the need to be at least one step ahead of the others. Bigger, faster, more powerful, unique. The shine of those winning medals can be irresistable, especially in a culture that idealizes both technology and competition.

Mastery: Even setting aside the pride that might accompany one's accomplishments, people sometimes push forward into a new cyberspace challenge simply because it's a challenge. The competitive perks may be irrelevant. It's the sense of mastering the thing that motivates you.

Perfectionism: Some of us might expect or hope that our machines will be flawless, that because we have control over it we can create a place where everything is just right. But as we all know, nothing is perfect. Perhaps our computer companions are doing us a favor by reminding us that we always will be living in a land of errors, no matter how many media transitions we make. The alternative is a kind of compulsive perfectionism in which a person never feels satisfied. In a restless pursuit of the utopian workstation, the person continually upgrades to new programs because in their minds "new" means "better." The grass always seems greener in that other software.

Adventure: Some people shy away from the unknown, while others seek it out. There are sensation-seekers who repel down cliffs and jump from airplanes, and they have their counterparts in the early adopters of cyberspace - the people who want to go where no one has gone before. It's an online rush or a pioneering spirit. That was my impression of many people at the Palace, back in its early days.

The Carrot: At the end of the struggle, there's a specific reward. Your own blog. A burned disk of your favorite mp3s. Talking with people who love pugs, like you. Psychologists call it a "reinforcement." People will work long and hard for a big reinforcement, though usually there are small ones along the way, including those step-by-step moments of mastery.

Magic and delight: You can spot computer geeks by their wide-eyed wonder when they see something they haven't seen before. Humans have a primeval fascination for anything that looks like magic. When we see computers doing something marvelously new, or that we hadn't believed possible, we can't help but feel delight. We want to participate in and understand that magic. We want to go there.

This list of motivations might be organized according to Maslow's famous hierarchy. At the bottom, we have those basic needs to resolve the practical problems of everyday living, which means we have to communicate in order to acquire resources. At intermediate levels, we establish social bonds, share experiences, and feel like we belong. At the highest levels, as we pass through stages of mastery and self-esteem, we enter new cyberspace environments as a way to self-actualize, to creatively express ourselves... and figure out who we are.

MTA: Media Transition Anxiety

Given all these factors that contribute to media transition motivation, we would expect that people are continually and without hesitation moving from one computer program and cyberspace environment to another. This, however, is not the case. Another force counterbalances that motivation to change, a force that slows down or even halts any transitions.

I'll call that force "media transition anxiety." It is any fear, big or small, about making any change, big or small, to a new computer-generated environment. The magnitude of that anxiety will vary depending on one's personality and the magnitude of the change required. Some people might even cover it up with rationalizations to convince themselves that their digital lifestyle is fine as is. Here are some factors that might contribute to MTA:

Burn out: When making a media transition, we must devote time and energy to adapting to the new environment. If the learning curve is optimum, we experience the change as interesting and exciting. Beyond a certain point the experience becomes stressful. Although many people in western culture pride themselves on their busy lifestyle and multitasking abilities, technology changes so fast that it is impossible to keep up with every new invention – impossible even to keep up with the things you want to keep up with. There are a limited number of changes one can make. Trying to tackle too many media transitions creates cognitive overload and burnout. It's like trying to catch several rabbits at the same time. Sensing this impending multitasking overload, people avoid making a change. Just the thought of adding yet another computer task can stimulate media transition anxiety.

 Fear of incompetence and failure: Media transitions are challenges at which we may not succeed. No one likes to feel like a failure. No one likes to feel foolish or stupid. When moving to new media, we become a rather incompetent novice again, a newbie, which is hard for some people, especially if it is a social environment and the person is concerned about his/her image and reputation. People may wish to remain in an old environment that they have mastered rather than transition to a new one where they lose those feelings of prestige and mastery. Some computer-savvy people, who take pride in their skills, might find the newbie role especially difficult to handle emotionally.

Fear of the unknown: A big transition requires entering an environment that is totally new and unfamiliar to the person. Humans often respond with anxiety to the unknown. You don't know where you are. You don't know what to do. You can't figure things out. The resulting anxiety might be especially intense in new online social environments where you will interact with others. In addition to the anxiety of figuring out how the software works, one must also figure out how the social system works and how to behave appropriately within it. Culture shock is not uncommon. In your old and familiar social milieu, you are used to a certain type and level of self-presentation. Moving to a new environment requires reestablishing your social identity and renegotiating how you wish to express yourself. What do you want to reveal or not reveal? Those decisions and that process can be anxiety-inducing, especially when others don't react to you the way you wish or the way to which you are accustomed.

Fear of rejection: One response from others in a new social environment could be rejection. Or they ignore you, which is a particularly insidious type of rejection. Sensing this possibility – especially for people who are sensitive to rejection – a person may avoid moving into new social realms.

Ignorance: That's a strong term, but in some cases simple ignorance does prevent us from trying something new. We just don't understand what we're missing out on. We don't get it. That may be a lack of imagination and curiosity on our part, or we just don't want to understand, in which case we're probably suffering from unconscious MTA and one or more of the issues listed above. No matter how simple or useful the new program might be, we avoid it simply because we don't understand, don't think we'll understand it, or don't want to understand it. Some people harbor irrational anxiety about the computer simply because it's a "computer" – that complex machine which only smart people use. They are happy with what they can do on their machine and avoid doing or even trying to comprehend anything else.

Fear of problems: Unfortunately, media transitions do not always proceed smoothly. If you upgrade in order to solve a problem in your previous environment, sometimes that problem is solved, sometimes not, and sometimes new, even bigger problems surface. Trying to make things a little better can make what you already had a lot worse. The philosophy "If it ain't broke don't fix it" has some validity. If you're working on a deadline, you may not want to take the risk of sabotaging your progress by trying out a new program. There also is the fear – sometimes irrational, but not always – that if you try new software, a catastrophe might ensue. Your computer will crash and burn. You could lose files. You could lose everything.

Our trepidations about the machine going awry boils down to two fundamental anxieties. First, there is separation anxiety: the anxiety about being disconnected from online relationships and one's online lifestyle. Then there is anxiety about loss: on a concrete level, the loss of important, even pecious files; and on a more psychological level, the loss of one's identity that is associated with those files as well as the potential loss of self-esteem and self-confidence. Actually, these two anxieties might boil down to just one, because anxiety about separation is anxiety about losing the connection to others.

So there you have it. It's all about loss. Cultivate a healthy Buddhist attitude about how all things must pass, and you'll never get anxious about your computer again. I can imagine a modern Zen master instructing us on how every program and every file on your machine is a little piece of your identity that you don't have to cling to. Just let go.

MMS: Media Mental Set

Traditionally, in psychology, "mental set" refers to a fixed pattern of thinking that fails to take into consideration new information or perspectives. For example, the early astronomers tried to calculate the movement of planets based on their assumption that all heavenly bodies revolved around the earth. They were caught in a mental set that led to strange conclusions about the shape of planetary orbits because they failed to see a different perspective: all the planets revolve around the sun.

So, extending that concept, I'm proposing the idea of Media Mental Set - i.e., how people's thinking and perspective can get stuck within a certain computer-generated environment. They approach issues and problems, including psychological and social ones, strictly in terms of that particular environment, while failing to see alternative solutions and experiences offered by other types of environments. Their thinking gets mentally stuck within that media. For example, some people figure out how to use Hotmail, but won't try another webmail service with a similar but significantly better interface simply because it's not Hotmail.

Sometimes the "ignorance" factor I mentioned earlier contributes to MMS. It's not that people are unable to understand a new technology. Instead, they may be suffering from the mental set that it's too different or difficult for them to understand, even if they are already doing something at least as complex in another program or environment. When they face that new media, their minds go blank.

MMS is determined by personality and attitudinal factors, and not simply limitations in intellectual and critical thinking abilities. It's interesting how even some intelligent people who are quite knowledgeable about online lifestyles can still get locked into a mental set about the type of media they prefer. They tend to idealize it. Their self-esteem and identity is invested in it. They harbor nostalgic feelings and memories about being there. They may feel the need to protect those feelings, memories, and identity, which can lead to an intellectual defense of their media that looks like territorial behavior. They might also be experiencing some media transition anxiety.

Media mental set can become a norm for a whole group of people. The group may shape it's identity around that media and their collective media mental set. A few times, when offering some consultation for professional groups operating via an email list, I've recommended that the group experiment with a discussion board format. Even when the group considers itself sophisticated about online communication and specifically wants to develop itself as an online organization, the resistance among some people to trying a new modality can be surprisingly intense. Every time I mention a benefit of discussion boards over email lists, there is a flurry of retorts about how "you can do that in email too." Or the points about the benefits are ignored, as if they flew right past people's heads. If I could see their faces, I imagine their eyes momentarily glaze over before their thinking snaps back into the same old same arguments about why they prefer email lists.

You see the same sort of debates - the same sort of arguing from one's media mental set - between some PC and Mac users about their particular platform. In fact, I had to shake loose some of my own stiff thinking before I realized that creating my own blog might be a worthwhile pursuit. I caught myself saying things like, "A blog is really just a web site".... "Chronological formats for posting aren't really useful".... "Blogs are just a fad anyway."

Sometimes we convince ourselves that we are happy where we are. We believe we don't really need to try anything new. It's not worth the time and effort. We think our computer lifestyle is going fine right now, so why change. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Blogs are things other people do. I'm not a blog-type person (feel free to substitute in any other word for "blog"... like RSS, podcasts, social networks).

Psychologists would point to such thinking as examples of rationalizations, or as attempts to manage cognitive dissonance. Many people might find it contradictory and illogical to say, "This new thing is wonderful and I'm not doing it." Instead, in order to maintain what appears to be a reasonable concordance in their beliefs, they find fault with the new thing they are unable to do, for whatever reason.

However, it's important to avoid pathologizing Media Mental Set. As Piaget clearly demonstrated, there is a natural human tendency to see things in terms of what we already know - according to the familiar cognitive templates that make our lives predictable and manageable - and to overlook or minimize things that are novel. Ideally, we learn how to balance our familiar and useful mental maps with the ability to challenge and modify them according to alternative ways of thinking.

Suggestions for Making Media Transitions

Everyone goes through an adaptation period when entering new media. That adaptation period will be longer and more challenging when making a transition to a very different environment. New social environments may pose special challenges. Here are some suggestions to keep In mind.

Investigate: Keep an open mind about new media. Read and talk about it with experienced users before trying it out yourself. If a friend or coworker lets you, try out the media on their machine first.

Minimize cost, maximize benefit: Small changes are less risky than big changes, especially in times of crisis. If there's no particular crisis at hand, a big transition might be worth a try.

Expect a learning curve: Even when making small changes, there will be new things to learn. Read the FAQs and manual. Talk to people. You may need to develop new perceptual and motor skills in order to use the media effectively. If it's a new social environment, you may even need to develop different interpersonal skills. Usually in a new social environment, you will need to learn the software first before you can tune in to the people there and understand the culture of the group.

Accept confusion: In the period of adapting to the new media, it's quite normal to feel confused and frustrated. Don't assume you will be able to figure everything out quickly. Investigate menus. Click on some buttons. Take baby-steps. Something may confuse you today, but you very well may figure it out tomorrow. If you understand quickly everything about the new environment, then it's probably not a very comprehensive environment. Also accept the fact that no program is perfect. Even excellent media have some design flaws. Sometimes your confusion and frustration is justified.

Be aware of mental sets: Your mental set from using previous software may prevent you from clearly seeing the resources in the new software. Don't automatically assume that the software can't do what you want it to. Avoid thinking "This is different and that makes it no good!"

Observe, then participate: In a new social environment, observe how people behave. Try to understand the norms of the group – what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior – before you start to participate.

Embrace the newbie role: It's OK to be a newbie. Ask for help. Don't pretend to possess knowledge that you don't have. Listen to people who are familiar with the environment. If it's a social setting where old-timers aren't interested in helping a newbie – or especially if they are unwelcoming to newbies - then it might not be a place where you want to stay.

Decide if it's for you, or not: Cyberspace is filled with all sorts of media. Some are perfect for you, some aren't. Everyone has his or her own unique set of cognitive, perceptual, and social skills. Everyone has unique interests. Decide when it's a good idea to stretch your skills and interests into new territory, and when a certain environment simply does not match your skills or interests.

Understanding the Behaviors of Tech Support

Dealing with tech support is an unavoidable part of life in cyberspace, especially when making media transitions. In the list of suggestions above, we should include: "Accept the fact that you won't be able to solve some problems on your own. You may have to call tech support." To minimize the unpleasant aspects of doing so, it helps to understand some of the ways tech support people behave. As helpers, tech support people face challenges similar in many respects to the psychotherapist. Here are some of the challenges I have noticed:

Dealing with emotional people: People who call tech support often are frustrated, confused, overwhelmed, and sometimes desperate and angry. They might even show transference reactions to the tech support person - emotional reactions that come from other relationships in their lives and really have nothing to do with the tech support person. Some tech supporters are patient in the face of these emotions. Others lose their composure, and respond with impatience and poorly suppressed anger. They might be struggling with their own transference reactions.

Assessing the client's knowledge: If you're going to help a person with a problem, it's a good idea to get a sense of how much the person knows about it. Some tech support people catch on quickly to the fact that the client is computer savvy. They are willing to work together in solving the problem. Others seem oblivious to the client's knowledge. They continue talking in a rather pedantic way, even when the client tries to prove that he/she is not a total newbie.

The tech talk ratio: Once the client's knowledge level is assessed, the tech supporter should, ideally, talk at a level of technical sophistication that matches the knowledge level of the client, or maybe slightly surpasses it, which gives the client an opportunity to learn something new. So a 1:1 or slightly higher ratio of expert-to-client technical discourse is good. A low ratio means talking to clients in overly simplistic terms, as if they are stupid or children, which no one likes. A high ratio means talking over the person's head, which may impress some people, but few people like that either. They may feel overwhelmed and inadequate, or that they should just give up in tackling a problem or a media transition that seems too complex. Talking over someone's head rarely is an effective strategy.

Rote responding: I'm sure tech support people deal with many of the same issues over and over again, so there's a tendency to fall into rote patterns of solving a problem. Their instructions and speech patterns become robotic. Unfortunately, there's a danger that they might be thinking in a mental set and not actually hearing what the client is saying, Instead they hear and respond to what they expect the person to be saying. Sometimes doctors make the same mistake.

Showing optimism and enthusiasm: People with problems like to know that there's a light at the end of the tunnel. A good tech supporter shows some optimism. It doesn't happen often, but once in a while the tech support person gets excited talking about computers, usually in response to a question they find interesting, or in reaction to a client who seems to understand something about computers. People who are frustrated and disappointed with their machines usually want to regain that enthusiasm that they might have lost.

Speculation: One tech support person told me that "I'm not supposed to speculate." I guess they don't want to mislead people. And yet, they often seem to speculate about the cause of a problem. That could be a good thing, as long as the client doesn't get confused or makes bad decisions based on the speculation.

Acknowledging one's limitations: We may want to idealize the tech support staff, hoping and praying that they have the solution to our problem. But let's face it: no one knows everything about computers. Perhaps in some cases the tech supporter needs to appear like the omniscience healer of the machine, but most of the time it's probably better to admit when they don't know something - that when they have to put you on hold it's because they're consulting their supervisor or some documentation. When I asked one worker at Apple exactly what "file permissions" were, he replied honestly, "You're asking something that goes over my head"... and then he proceeded to describe to me what he did know about the topic, which went over my head. I appreciated and respected him for that.

Part 3

The Psychology of

Cyberspace Relationships

The Final Showdown Between
In-Person and Cyberspace Relationships

The new social frontier
The word
Listen carefully (hearing)
Seeing is believing
Can I hold you in cyberspace? (touching)
Getting real close! (smelling and tasting)
Putting it all together (sensory integration)
Read my mind (intuition)
Defending text and the body
The final showdown

Whether you like it or not, cyberspace has become the new frontier in social relationships. People are making friends, colleagues, lovers, and enemies on the Internet. The fervor with which many people have pursued this new social realm is matched by a backlash reaction from the skeptics. Relationships on the Internet aren't really real, some people say - not like relationships in the real world. Socializing in cyberspace is just a cultural fad, a novelty, a phase that people go through. The critics say it can't compare to real relationships - and if some people prefer communicating with others via wires and circuits, there must be something wrong with them. They must be addicted. They must fear the challenging intimacy of real relationships.

Is this true? Is it true that "real" relationships are intrinsically superior to relationships in cyberspace? Or might relationships in cyberspace in fact be better?... Here is the showdown for us to explore.

But first, let's first settle on some terms. What exactly should we call relationships in cyberspace and relationships in the "real" world? Right off the bat, I'm going to discard the term "real" because it already biases our discussion in favor of relationships in the physical world. Whether or not those relationships are more "real" is the very issue at hand. The same is true of "virtual relationships" because the word "virtual" implies that those relationships are somehow less-than or not quite up to snuff. Some people like to say "face-to-face relationships" (ftf, f2f). I'm not particularly thrilled by that term either, because video conferencing on the Internet surely allows people to present their faces to each other. We could say "physical relationships," although that conjures up images of wrestling and sex.

I've already given away my preference for a term, as you have probably guessed - unless you let the title of this article slip right by you. I like "in-person relationships" because it captures the feeling of physical presence without necessarily getting physical. I doubt that even when holographic multimedia communication arrives (many years from now?) we will ever say that we meet our online acquaintances "in-person." So it seems like a term that safely falls outside the realm of cyberspace. We can even abbreviate it nicely as IP and IPR.

Now we must turn our attention to a term for cyberspace relationships.... How about (surprise again!) "cyberspace relationships" - thus abbreviated CSR? We also might follow current trends by calling it "computer-mediated relationships" (CMR), but I like the word "cyberspace." It conjures up feelings of place, location, and spatial interaction. People do indeed experience cyberspace as containing places where they go and meet others. Rather than highlighting the fact that cyberspace is controlled by computers, I like to emphasize instead that it is a psychological and social space.

With these terms in hand, we're back to the showdown. Which is better? IPR or CSR? The key word here is "relationships." One approach to understanding that social and very human phenomenon is to examine the various pathways by which people communicate, connect, and bond with each other - by the specific mechanisms for "relating."

On the most fundamental level, we can compare IPR and CSR according to how people connect via the five senses:

> hearing the other
> seeing the other
> touching the other
> smelling the other
> tasting (!) the other

The first - hearing - involves the basic human skill for language, which isn't necessarily auditory. So, before getting to the five senses, let's back up a notch to examine language.

The Word

A powerful way that people connect to each other is through words. In the beginning, CSR relied mostly on language conveyed through typed text - mostly e-mail and message board (newsgroup) posts. Even today, typed-text accounts for a very large majority of communication over the Internet. There are at least four distinct advantages of these text-mediated relationships over IPR.

1. The interaction can be asynchronous. It doesn't have to occur in real time, so you can respond to your net-mate whenever you wish, at whatever pace you wish. That gives you time to think about what you want to say and to compose your reply exactly the way you want. This comes in very handy for those awkward or emotional situations in a relationship. Unlike IPR, you're never on the spot to reply immediately. You can think it through first, do a little research or soul-searching, if you wish. My advice for those very emotional moments is to compose a message, wait at least 24 hours, reread your message, modify it if necessary... THEN send it off. This wait-and-revise strategy can do wonders in averting impulsiveness, embarrassment, and regret. Chat and instant messaging systems, which also involve typed text, are much more synchronous than e-mail and message boards. However, they too offer a slightly but meaningfully longer delay than IPR.

2. The written dialogues of CSR may involve different mental mechanisms than in-person talk. It may reflect a distinct cognitive style that enables some people to be more expressive, subtle, organized, or creative in how they communicate. Some people feel that they can express themselves better in the written word. Surely, there have been truly great authors and poets who sounded bumbling or shallow during IP conversation.

3. Text-mediated relationships enable you to record the interactions by saving the typed-text messages. Essentially, you can preserve large chunks of the relationship with your online companion, maybe even the entire relationship if you only communicated via typed-text. At your leisure, you can review what you and your partner said, cherish important moments in the relationship, and reexamine misunderstandings and conflicts. This kind of reevaluation of the relationship usually is impossible in IPR, where you almost always have to rely on the vagaries of memory. In fact, if you want to get downright philosophical about it, you could make the argument that your complete archive of text communications with your net-mate *is* the relationship with that person, perfectly preserved in bits and bytes. It's not unlike a novel, which isn't a record of characters and plot, but rather *is* the characters and plot.

4. Text relationships tend to result in what's called the online disinhibition effect. Because they can't be seen or heard, people may open up and say things that they normally wouldn't say in-person. Self-disclosure and intimacy may be accelerated. Some even argue that a person's true self is more likely to appear online than in-person, and surely that must enhance one's relationships. This is a controversial claim, as is the very concept of a true self.

Skeptics say that the big disadvantage of text-driven relationships is what's missing vis-a-vis IPR. There are no voices, facial expressions, or body language to convey meaning and emotion. That issue takes us to the first of the five senses - hearing.

Listen Carefully (hearing)

The human voice is rich in meaning and emotion. A sharp edge to someone's words can rouse your suspicion or anger. Just the sound of a loved one's voice can be enough to create feelings of comfort and joy. Singing - one of the most expressive of human activities - powerfully unites people. In CSR mediated by text only, both obvious and subtle nuances in voice pitch and volume are completely absent. And singing is impossible (unless you consider the mutual recitation of lyrics as singing... which some onliners do).

Advocates of text-driven CSR do have a comeback to this criticism. Lacking auditory and visual cues, the e-mail message, blog, or newsgroup post can be productively ambiguous in tone. When reading that typed message, there is a strong tendency to project - sometimes unconsciously - your own expectations, wishes, anxieties, and fears into what the person wrote. Psychoanalytic thinkers call this "transference." Your distorting the person's intended meaning could lead to misunderstandings and conflict. It could stimulate countertransference reactions from your online partner. On the other hand, if you discuss your (mis)perceptions with your friend, you are revealing underlying (perhaps unconscious) elements of how you think and feel. In a sense, you are being more real with the other person, allowing a deeper relationship to form. Of course, this more rich and meaningful relationship will only develop when people are mature enough to talk about and work through those projections and transferences with each other. Too often this may not be the case. The skeptics therefore reply that the disadvantage of ambiguity in text communication outweighs the possible advantage.

An entirely different comeback for cyberspace advocates is that one's voice CAN be heard online. It's only a matter of time before audio-streaming becomes perfected to the point where it matches the quality of IPR. In fact, conversing in cyberspace may have some distinct advantages. If you so desire, conversations easily could be saved and replayed - which isn't possible in IPR, unless you're carrying a tape recorder. Using software programs, nuances in voice pitch and volume can be examined more carefully for subtle emotions and meaning. Programs also could allow you to modify your voice as you transmit it. If you want to speak in the voice of Bill Clinton, Arnold Schwartzenegger, or Daffy Duck, so be it. Or you can add in any auditory special effect you desire in order to embellish your words - Pomp and Circumstance, explosions, quacks.

As we'll see over and over again, a unique feature of CSR is the ability to use imagination and fantasy to shape the way in which you desire to present yourself. This can be a fascinating and revealing dimension to a relationship.

Advocates of CSR also will be quick to point out the creative keyboarding techniques that do allow onliners to simulate voice modulation, such as typing in caps to mimic SHOUTING. A poor substitute for the real thing, a skeptic will say.

SEEING is Believing

I could write this section on seeing almost word for word as I wrote the previous section on hearing. The human face and body language are rich in meaning and emotion. Critics of text-only communication in cyberspace complain that all these visual cues are missing, hence making the relationship ambiguous and depleted. Advocates of text-driven CSR again could reply that this ambiguity creates an opportunity to explore one's transference reactions, thereby enriching the relationship. They also may praise its level playing field. Appearances - such as gender, race, and whether you are "attractive" or not - are irrelevant. Everyone has an equal voice and is judged by the same standards: their words. Some claim that text-only talk carries you past the distracting superficial aspects of a person's existence and connects you more directly to their mind and personality.

Like audio-streaming, video transmissions will eventually make face-to-face meetings both practical and realistic, with the added feature of making it possible for you to both sound and look like Bill Clinton, Arnold Schwartzenegger, or Daffy Duck, if you so choose. The multimedia chat environments where people use "avatars" to represent themselves is the first step in this opportunity to present yourself visually in any form you desire. It's the perfect way to express all sorts of things about your personality. You also can interact with others in any of an almost limitless variety of visual scenes. Want to meet your friend at the bottom of the ocean, or on a space station, or in the Oval Office?.... No problem. There is a big disadvantage, though, of audio/visual cyberspace meetings involving three or more people who can see each other only on computer screens. The subtle body language of who is looking and gesturing at whom might be lost. Eventually, holographic meetings will solve that problem.

Can I Hold You in Cyberspace? (touching)

Humans need physical contact with each other. Infants sink into depression and die without it. How parents interact physically with them becomes a cornerstone of their identity and well-being. Adults deprived of tactile contact for long periods will tell you just how depriving it feels. In day-to-day relationships, never underestimate the power of a handshake, a pat on the back, a hug, or a kiss.

On this level of human relating, cyberspace falls short... way short. In multimedia chat communication there are some vague hints of physical contact, as when you snuggle up your avatar next to someone else's. People can also give you a virtual [[[hug]]] in text relationships. But this is a far cry from the in-person counterpart. Unfortunately, it's not very likely that CSR - even holographic ones - will ever develop kinesthetic capabilities, unless technology figures out how to accurately record someone's caress and transmit that digital record into the other's nervous system. Products that transmit tactile stimulation online are being developed, but are still quite crude compared to the subtle but powerful dimensions of in-person human touch. You can argue until the cows come home about how you can psychologically and emotionally embrace someone through words alone, but the bottom line is that you can't and probably never will be able to hold your loved one in cyberspace.
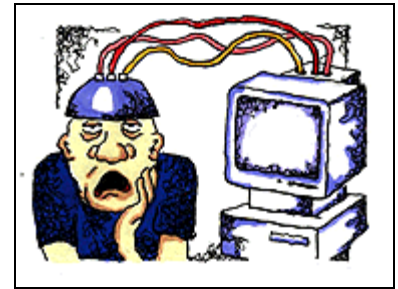
In the physical, tactile, spatial world we also can DO things with people. We can play tennis, go for a walk, eat dinner together... and, of course, have sex. Doing things with people creates bonds. It creates a history to the relationship. Are these things possible in CSR?... Sort of. In cyberspace, especially in multimedia environments, we can "meet" people at some specified site and move with them from one visual setting to another. It feels a bit like "going places" with them. There also are lots of games we can play with others via the Internet - games that sometimes have an imaginary physical feeling to them. Then, of course, there's cybersex, which often consists of talking in a sexual way with each other. That's "doing" something, isn't it?

ALthough doing things with others certainly is possible on the Internet, it doesn't have as powerful a physical, tactile, or spatial feeling as activities in IPR. Almost anything you can do with someone in cyberspace you could also do with them in-person, simply by the fact that they can be sitting side-by-side with you in front of the computer while you do it. But the reverse isn't true - everything you can do with someone in-person can't be duplicated in cyberspace. That's a big disadvantage for CSR.

Getting Real Close! (smelling and tasting)

The scent of perfume, hair, clothes, skin. Smell brings us very close to the other. It stirs up powerful emotional reactions. The sense of taste brings us closer still. It's the sensation of lovers. One might say that smell and taste are rather "primitive" interpersonal sensations, but both are the cornerstones of deep intimacy - maybe because they ARE so primitive, so fundamental. In addition to touch, smell and taste are the primary ways an infant connects to its mother. It is one's very first, essential relationship that serves as the prototype for all later relationships in one's life.

On this level of relating, a CSR once again falls flat on its noseless, tongueless face. Will computers ever be able to duplicate smells and tastes and then accurately transmit those sensations to another person five or five thousand miles away? Products are being developed to accomplish this feat, but don't hold your breath waiting for a tasty full course meal in cyberspace, or for the robust olfactory and gustatory presence of your lover.

As with tactile sensations, when it comes to the smelling/tasting dimension of intimate relationships, IPR wins hands down over CSR.

Putting It All Together (sensory integration)

Rarely in IPR do we connect to the other person by one sense alone. At the very least we see and hear simultaneously. During more intimate relating we see, hear, touch, smell, and maybe even taste. The complex and subtle interactions among all that sensory input far exceeds the interpersonal meaning we can extract from any one of them alone. Mother nature was pretty clever in giving us eyes, ears, skin, noses, and tongues - all interconnected in marvelous ways that science still doesn't fully understand. Those clusters of sensations make for relationships that are highly robust in emotion and meaning.

As Internet technology improves, auditory and visual sensations will be more effectively coordinated with each other. But even with unlimited bandwidth and highly imaginative code, we'll never see all five sensations integrated as in IPR - not unless the virtual realities of The Matrix or a Star Trek holodeck become fact rather than science fiction. In CSR the five senses tend to be dissociated... and that's a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the rich interpersonal qualities afforded by the five senses is lost, resulting in human encounters that may run a bit on the stale side. On the other hand, extracting out some sensory modes - like vision or voice - creates unique ways to interact with others. E-mail and typed chat can be rather fascinating styles of developing a relationship. The sensory limitations can fuel the imagination and lead to creative patterns of communicating that are not found in IPR. CSR also allow for unique combinations of text, audio, and visual relating that usually are not possible in-person. You want to hear but not see people, read their text and see them but not hear them, or see and hear them but not bother with text? Sure, we can do that online - and there will be situations in which presenting some aspects of relating but not others is desirable.

Read My Mind (intuition)

Sometimes we humans connect to each other in ways that seem to defy the traditional laws of sense impressions. Call it telepathy, empathy, or intuition, we seem to know what others are thinking or feeling without being aware of just how we know it. Some people think that we reach those conclusions based on an unconscious detection of subtle qualities in voice, body language, or things said between the lines. If that's the case, then sensory information indeed is influencing how we experience the other. We just don't realize how exactly we're being subliminally influenced.

Curiously, people report that even in the stripped down sensory world of CSR - like text-only chat - others sometimes sense what you are thinking and feeling, even when you didn't say anything to that effect. Did they detect your mood or state of mind from some subtle clue in what or how you typed? Are they picking up on some seemingly minor change in how you typically express yourself?

Or does their empathy reach beyond your words appearing on the screen? Perhaps they are in tune with your mind via some pathway that neither psychology nor computer technology can fully explain. If that kind of intuitive connection really exists, then the differences between IPR and CSR become rather insignificant. On that mysterious level, human relating transcends sense organs and microchips.

Defending Text and the Body

In this article I have discussed a wide range of text and multimedia possibilities for CSR compared to IPR. However, the fact remains that a large majority of online relationships consist mostly of text conversations. Countless romances, friendships, and successful collaborations among colleagues have evolved almost exclusively via the typed word. These people often must endure criticisms from skeptics who believe online relationships are shallow, artificial, and based more on fantasy than reality. The skeptics usually point to the lack of in-person visual, auditory, and tactile cues, including facial expressions, body language, voice intonations, and the ability to interact physically by such actions as shaking hands, patting on the back, hugging, and kissing.

To protect the validity of their online relationships, some people quickly jump to the defense of text communication, perhaps even claiming that all in-person cues can be recreated in text, or that the advantages of text communication in fact results in relationships that are better than in-person. In that quick defense and a tendency to unrealistically idealize text relationships, the limitations are ignored or glossed over, just as the knee-jerk criticisms of the skeptics tend to disregard the advantages. Unfortunately, a narrow-minded defense of text can result in a devaluing as well as a neglect of the physical, bodily human.

While traveling in Europe, I noticed people on trains and in restaurants talking with each other in a variety of languages that were foreign to me. Even though I barely understood the content of their spoken conversation, subtle changes in their mood and attitude were clearly visible in their tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. How people communicate with these nonverbals struck me as a very important and universal aspect of human nature. I reflected on the arguments people make in defense of how subtle, accurate, and comprehensive online text communication can be, but I also realized we have to take very seriously the fact that these nonverbals are missing.

If we show a baby a highly expressive and emotional email message, what will the baby do? Perhaps play with the keyboard or suck on the mouse? The email means nothing to the child. Sit in front of the baby, interact with it using your facial expressions, talk, coo, raise and lower your voice, tickle and hug the child- and watch the baby respond immediately. We adults are no longer children, but we still rely heavily on this inborn reactivity to physical, bodily

presence. It is this kind of intrinsic human reactivity to faces, bodies, voices, and touch that is so important, but which are present in text-based smileys, shouted CAPS, and [[[hugs]]] only through abstract representations that have, at most, an indirect impact on the preverbal, non-symbolic, and physical dimensions of how we humans perceive and relate to each other. As research in developmental psychological shows, our human relatedness via nonverbals is neurologically wired into all us humans. On the other hand, text "nonverbals" are mostly learned and more subject to cultural factors.

LOL and [[Joe]] are textual representations of a laugh and a hug for Joe, but they are NOT the laugh and the hug. What are the implications of interacting with textual representations but not with the actual physical and bodily experiences? How does the psychological and emotional impact of typing an LOL or even the abstractly raucous ROFL compare to the actual experience of rolling on the floor laughing? Does a text hug sink in the same way as actually feeling someone's arms around you? I am reminded of the Zen joke about typing up a description of a delicious dinner, printing it out, and then eating the paper - or the famous Zen image of the finger pointing to the moon. The finger is not the moon. Is the text communication the actual experience, or does it just point to the experience?

As complex and meaningful as text communication can be, it lacks the amount of robust and rich information that can be conveyed via the integration of talking, facial expressions, voice intonation, body language, and physical contact.

I am concerned that my presenting these arguments might, in the minds of some onliners, place me in the skeptic's camp. I hope not, because I appreciate the rich and meaningful quality of text relationships, and in fact enjoy it myself in my own online living. However, I also appreciate the importance of the bodily self in human experience - an aspect of human relationships that tends to be minimized or ignored in the too quick defense of text. If text communication embodies the pure expression of one's mind, which some people claim and admire about it, let's embrace that possibility without devaluing the importance of how people look, talk, move, and feel with their hands and skin. We learn, in a very powerful way, to express our minds via words, but this is no more or less important than the nonverbal experience and expression of ourselves via our bodies. Mind and body are, as many a philosopher and psychologist suggest, two sides of the same coin.

In defense of text, we also should consider the fact that some people may not be able to understand face-to-face nonverbal cues, or may be overwhelmed by complex and especially emotional nonverbal stimulation during in-person encounters. This too has inborn, neurological underpinnings, as demonstrated by research on autism, Aspergers Syndrome, and other more normal-range difficulties in processing face-to-face social information. Research shows that trauma also might result in aversions to ftf stimulation, hence making text feel more comfortable for self-expression and relatedness. In these cases, online text relationships indeed may be more optimal for the person.

Finally, there's the simple fact that some people may not have the opportunity to develop good relationships in-person. Finding those relationships online may be the right choice.

The lesson learned? In defending text relationships we must not unrealistically idealize them in a way that bypasses our deeper understanding of their limitations. If we do not take seriously these limitations, the skeptics will not take us seriously. Of course, some skeptics will react critically in knee-jerk fashion to any explanation of the value of text relationships. In that case, our deeper understanding and acceptance of the limitations can serve the perhaps more important purpose of helping us navigate those relationships more effectively.

The Final Showdown

So what's the outcome of the final showdown? Which is better: IPR or CSR? It's a loaded question since "better" is an ambiguous term. Better for what? There are distinct advantages to the time-stretching, distance-shortening, and potentially fantasy-driven dimensions of CSR. On the other hand, IPR have the advantage of touch, smell, taste, the complex integration of all the five senses, and a more robust potential to "do things with" other people.

So is the showdown a draw? People can and will continue to argue for their side of the debate. As for me, the acid test is a very simple one. As much as I respect and enjoy cyberspace relationships, I would be very unhappy if I could ONLY relate to my family and closest friends via the Internet, even if sophisticated visual/auditory technology made it seem like actually being there with them. Cyberspace relating is a wonderful supplement to IPR, but in the long run it's not ultimately fulfilling as a substitute, especially when it comes to our most intimate relationships. Most people who develop close friendships and romances in cyberspace eventually want and need to meet their friend or lover in-person. And once they've done that, returning to cyberspace-relating can feel at least a tiny bit flat and incomplete, despite the effects of the online disinhibition effect.

In an ideal world, we could have it both ways. We could develop our relationships in-person and in cyberspace, thereby taking advantage of each realm. But we don't always have the luxury of ideal circumstances. There will be some people who we can only or mostly meet in-person, and others only or mostly via the Internet. In the not too distance future, most people will have three types of social lives that will be distinct but overlapping. We'll have friends, colleagues, and lovers whom we know only in-person, those whom we know only via the Internet, and those whom we know both in-person and online.

Variety is the spice of life.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The online disinhibition effect
Presence in cyberspace
E-mail communication and relationships
Hypotheses about online text relationships
Transference among people online
Cyberspace romances
TextTalk: Communicating with typed text chat

The Psychology of Text Relationships

I'll begin this chapter by pointing out the obvious: text communication is as old as recorded history, hence the psychology of text communication dates just as far back. Letter writing and the creation of postal systems enabled more people to interact more personally via text. However, the advent of computer networks made the exchange of text more accessible, efficient, and faster than ever before in history. Online text communication offers unprecedented opportunities to create numerous psychology spaces in which human interactions can unfold. We truly have entered a new age, the age of *text relationships*.

In this chapter I will explore the psychology of these relationships while pointing out the implications for online clinical work. Many of the psychological dimensions of text communication in general apply across the board to the various types of text communication tools in particular - chat, e-mail, message boards, instant messaging, blogs, and others more esoteric or yet to be invented. These different modalities differ in sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle ways that make each a unique psychological environment - a fact the online clinician might keep in mind when choosing a communication tool for working with a particular client. Because e-mail is the most widely used, much of my discussion will pertain to that modality, although I also will address important issues concerning the other modalities. I believe that a true understanding of the therapeutic value of any particular online communication tool rests on a wider appreciation of how it compares and contrasts to the others. Online clinicians might strive to specialize in a particular type of text medium, while recognizing its pros and cons vis-a-vis the others.

Before I proceed into my discussion of the unique aspects of text relationships, I'd like to point out that text is but one dimension of online communication. To encourage a wider view of the whole horizon of possibilities for online clinical work, I'll refer the reader to my conceptual model for understanding the larger set of dimensions that shape the various psychological environments of cyberspace: asynchronous versus synchronous communication, imaginary versus realistic environments, automated versus interpersonal interactions, being invisible versus present, and the extent to which communication is text-driven or sensory rich with sight, sound, even smells (Suler, 2000). All of these dimensions interact with text to create a fascinating variety of therapeutic interventions. Clinicians can combine and sequence these different modalities to address the needs of a particular client.

Let's Text: Writing Skills, Styles, Attitudes

Text talk is a skill and an art, not unlike speaking, yet in important ways different than speaking. Proficiency in one does not guarantee success in the other. Some truly great authors and poets sounded bumbling or shallow during in-person conversation. A person's ability to communicate effectively in text talk obviously depends highly on writing abilities. People who hate to write, or are poor typists probably will not be drawn to text-based therapy. Self-selection is at work. Others report that they prefer writing as a way to express themselves. They take delight in words, sentence structure, and the creative opportunity to subtly craft exactly how they wish to articulate their thoughts and moods. In asynchronous communication - such as e-mail, message boards - they may enjoy the *zone for reflection* where they can ponder on how to express themselves. In those cases, asynchronous text may be a less spontaneous form of communicating than speech and online synchronous communication, such as chat. Unlike verbal conversation - where words issue forth and immediately evaporate - writing also places one's thoughts in a more visible, permanent, concrete, objective format. An e-mail message is a tiny packet of self-representation that is launched off into cyberspace. Some people experience it as a piece of themselves, a creative work, a gift sent to their online companion. They hope or expect it to be treated with understanding and respect. Clinicians might look for how these skills and preferences for writing versus speaking might be associated with important differences in personality and cognitive style.

The quality of the text relationship rests on these writing skills. The better people can express themselves through writing, the more the relationship can develop and deepen. Poor writing can result in misunderstandings and possibly conflicts. In the absence of an accurate perception of what the other is trying to say, people tend to project their own expectations, anxieties, and fantasies onto the other. A disparity in writing ability between people can be problematic. The equivalent in face-to-face encounters would be one person who is very eloquent and forthcoming, talking to another who speaks awkwardly and minimally. The loquacious one eventually may resent putting so much effort into the relationship and taking all the risks of self-disclosure. The quiet one may feel controlled, ignored, and misunderstood. As in face-to-face clinical work, therapists might modify their writing techniques - even basic elements of grammar and composition - in order to interact more effectively and empathically with the client.

We might tend to think of writing abilities as a fixed skill - a tool for expressing oneself that is either sophisticated, unsophisticated, or something in between. It's also possible that the quality of one's writing interacts with the quality of the relationship with the other. As a text relationship deepens - and trust develops - people may open up to more expressive writing. They become more willing to experiment, take risks - not just in what specific thoughts or emotions they express, but also in the words and composition used. Composition can advance when people feel safe to explore; it regresses when they feel threatened, hurt, or angry. Those changes reflect the developmental changes in the relationship. Writing isn't just a tool for developing the text relationship. Writing affects the relationship and the relationship affects the quality of the writing.

This same reciprocal influence exists between the text relationship and *writing style*. Concrete, emotional and abstract expression, complexity of vocabulary and sentence structure, the organization and flow of thought - all reflect one's cognitive/personality style and influence how the other reacts to you. People who are compulsive may strive for well organized and logically constructed, intellectualized messages with sparse emotion and few, if any, spelling or grammatical errors. Those with a histrionic flair may offer a more dramatic presentation, where neatness plays a back seat to the expressive use of spacing, caps, unique keyboard characters, and colorful language. Narcissistic people may write extremely long, rambling blocks of paragraphs. People with schizoid tendencies may be pithy, while those who are more impulsive may dash off a disorganized, spelling-challenged message with emotional phrases highlighted in shouted caps. Different writing/personality styles may be compatible, incompatible, or complementary to other styles.

One's attitude about writing also plays an important role. Composition conjures up memories from the school years of one's past. Self-concept and self-esteem may ride on those memories. In the course of an e-mail relationship, those issues from the past may be stirred up.

The ISMHO Clinical Case Study Group (2001) suggests that the clinician, as part of the initial phase of counseling, assess the client's skills, attitudes, and past experiences regarding both reading and writing. A person's reading, writing, as well as typing skills may not be equivalent, but all are necessary for a text relationship. Some may prefer reading over writing, or vice versa. What does reading and writing mean to the person? What needs do these activities fulfill? Are there any known physical or cognitive problems that will limit the ability to read and write? The clinician might find it helpful to discuss how the person's attitudes and skills regarding in-person communication compare to those regarding text communication. When assessing the person's suitability for text communication, remember that

developing and enhancing the person's reading and writing skills may be intrinsic to the therapeutic process. Because synchronous text talk (chat, instant messaging) is quite different than asynchronous text talk (e-mail, discussion boards), the clinician might also determine the client's skills and preferences regarding each. How does the person feel about the spontaneous, in-the-moment communication of chat as opposed to the opportunity to compose, edit, and reflect, as in e-mail?

Our skills in text-based clinical work will deepen as we continue to explore the benefits of of simply WRITING. Encouraging clients to express themselves in prose may help them tap and strengthen a variety of therapeutic processes. It may encourage an observing ego, insight, working through, installing positive mental resources, and, especially in asynchronous text, the therapeutic construction of a personal narrative, as in journal writing and bibliotherapy.

The Absence of Face-to-face Cues

As we'll see throughout this chapter and book, the absence of face-to-face cues has a major impact on the experience of a text relationship. You can't see other people's faces or hear them speak. All those subtle voice and body language cues are lost, which makes the nuances of communicating more difficult. But humans are creative beings. Avid text communicators develop all sorts of innovative strategies for expressing themselves through typed text - in addition to the obvious fact that a skilled writer can communicate considerable depth and subtlety in the written word. Despite the lack of face-to-face cues, conversing via text has evolved into a sophisticated, expressive art form. The effective text clinician understands and attempts to master this art.

The lack of face-to-face cues may create ambiguity. Without hearing a person's voice or seeing body language and facial expressions, you may not be sure what the person means. This ambiguity activates the imagination, stirs up fantasies, enhances the tendency to project your own expectations, wishes, and anxieties unto the somewhat shadowy figure sitting at the other end of the online connection. When in doubt, we fall back on our old expectations about how people relate to us, expectations that formed in our early relationships with our parents and siblings - what psychoanalytic clinicians would call a *transference reaction*. As a text relationship develops over time, these reactions towards the other person may ebb and flow. When you first communicate via text, transference might be minimal since you do not know the other person well and have yet to develop a strong psychological investment in the relationship. Transference reactions more readily surface when emotional attachments begin to form but you still do not have a good "feel" for the person due to that lack of face-to-face cues. Other peak moments occur when emotional topics come up but you are unable to pinpoint exactly where the other person stands on the issue.

Under ideal conditions, as we spend more and more time conversing with a person via text, we begin to understand and work through those transference reactions so that we can see the other person as he/she really is. However, even under the best of circumstances, some aspect of our mental image of the other person rests more on our own expectations and needs than on the reality of the other person. It may be the way we think he looks, her voice sounds, or some element of his personality. We may not even be consciously aware that we've formed that impression until we meet the person face-to-face or talk to them on the phone, only to discover, much to our surprise, that they are in some important way very different than what we expected. Generally speaking, transference reactions are unconscious. We don't see them coming and don't fully realize how they are steering our behavior. That's why they can get lead us astray and sometimes into trouble.

In online therapy the client is not alone in this susceptibility to misperceptions, projections, and transference. Faced with those silent words scrolling down the screen, the clinician may develop countertransference. The ability to catch oneself possibly misinterpreting and projecting, to always entertain the possibility that one might be in the midst of a text transference, to suspend final judgments about the client until more data comes in, is the key to effective online therapy. Helping clients also to develop this self-correcting awareness, helping them explore and understand their text-based transference as it interacts with the therapist's countertransference, may be a crucial component of their therapy, especially in the psychodynamic varieties.

Some incoming e-mail or discussion board posts may be prepackaged with transference even though the person is a complete stranger to us. If you have a professional or personal web site or other information about you is available on the internet, people can form inaccurate impressions which they launch your way via an "out of the blue" message. They may idealize you, detest you, or anything in-between. These kinds of transference reactions often are deeply ingrained, prepared responses in the person that are ready to leap out at any opportune moment. On a fairly regular basis, I receive e-mail from people whom I call "spoon-feeders." There is no greeting, no sign-off line or name - just a terse request or should I say DEMAND, for something. Another common transference reaction is the "chip on my shoulder" e-mail. People who have antagonistic conflicts with authority figures may feel free to send a flaming e-mail

to someone they perceive as a parental figure. The bottom line with these kinds of unrequested e-mails is this: You may not have a relationship with them, but they think they have a relationship with you. In beginning work with new clients, an online therapist might encourage them to discuss their impressions of the therapist as a result of seeing the web site or other online information about the therapist.

The absence of face-to-face cues will have different effects on different people. For some the lack of physical presence may reduce the sense of intimacy, trust, and commitment in the therapeutic relationship. Typed text may feel formal, distant, unemotional, lacking a supportive and empathic tone. They want and need those in-person cues. Others will be attracted to the silent, less visually stimulating, non-tactile quality of text relationships - which may be true for some people struggling to contain the over-stimulation of past trauma. A person's ambivalence about intimacy may be expressed in text communication because it is a paradoxical blend of allowing people to be honest and feel close, while also maintaining their distance. People suffering with social anxiety or issues regarding shame and guilt may be drawn to text relationships because they cannot be seen. Some people even prefer text because it enables them to avoid the issue of physical appearance which they find distracting or irrelevant to the relationship. Without the distraction of in-person cues, they feel they can connect more directly to the mind and soul of the other person. Text becomes a transitional space, an extension of their mind that blends with the extension of the other person's mind. Consider this woman's experience with her online lover:

Through our closeness, we are easily able to gauge each other's moods, and often type the same things at the same time. We are able to almost read each other's thoughts in a way I have rarely found even in ftf relationships (only my sister and I have a similar relationship in this respect).... It is in the cybersexual relationship where the most interesting aspects have developed. We are now able to actually 'feel' each other, and I am often able to tell what he is wearing, even though we live more than 6000 miles away. I can 'feel' his skin and smell and taste senses have also developed during sexual episodes. I have only seen one very small and blurred picture of this person so I have no idea what he really looks like, but I'm able to accurately describe him. He is able to 'feel' me too. I'm sure that in the main it is just fantasizing, but to actually and accurately describe the clothing and color and texture of skin is really something I have never experienced before.

Although we may be skeptical about the validity of such reports - or not fully agree with the idea that physical presence is irrelevant - we clinicians should take seriously this subjective experience some people have of connecting more directly to the online companion's psyche. If a client experiences the clinician in this way, how might that determine a diagnosis and the therapeutic plan for that person?

Even though in this section I've been underplaying the sensory component of text relationships, I should emphasize that important visual components are present. As I'll discuss later, *creative keyboarding techniques* (emoticons, spacing, caps, font color and size, etc.) offer a wide visual range of possibilities for presenting ideas and optimizing self-expression, often in ways that mimic face-to-face cues. As human factor engineers will tell us, the visual interface of our communication software also affects how we think, perceive, and express ourselves. Clinicians might be wise to compare software before choosing one for their work.

Temporal Fluidity: Synchronicity and Asynchronicity

Unlike in-person encounters, cyberspace offers the choice of meeting in or out of real time. In *asynchronous communication* - such as e-mail and message boards - people do not have to be sitting at their computers at the same time. Usually this means there is a stretching of the time frame in which the interaction occurs, or no sense of a time boundary at all. You have hours, days, or even weeks to respond. Cyberspace creates a flexible temporal space where the ongoing, interactive time together can be stretched out or shortened, as needed.The perception of a temporally locked "meeting" disappears, although sitting down to read a message may subjectively feel as if one has entered a fluid temporal space with the other person, a more subjective sense of here and now. The opportunity to send a message to the therapist at any time can create a comforting feeling that the therapist is always there, always present, which eases feeling of separation and allows clients to articulate their thoughts and feelings in the ongoing stream of their lives, immediately during or after some important event, rather than having to wait for the next appointment.

This asynchronous communication does not require you to respond on-the-spot to what the other has said. You have time to think, evaluate, compose your reply. This *zone for reflection* comes in very handy for those awkward or emotional situations in a relationship.Some people take advantage of this zone. Others, perhaps acting more spontaneously or at times impulsively, do not. When people receive a message that stirs them up emotionally, they might apply what I call the *24 Hour Rule*. They may compose a reply without sending it (or write nothing), wait 24 hours, then go back to reread the other person's message and their unsent reply. "Sleeping on it" may help process the situation on a deeper, more insightful level. The next day, from that new temporal perspective, they may interpret the

other person's message differently, sometimes less emotionally. The reply they do send off may be very different - hopefully much more rationale and mature - than the one they would have sent the day before. The "Stop and Think" rule of thumb can save people from unnecessary misunderstandings and arguments. A wait-and-revise strategy helps avert impulsiveness, embarrassment, and regret. In online therapy clinicians can experiment with creative ways of encouraging clients to use this zone for reflection, to take advantage of the opportunity to self-reflect before responding to the clinician's message, perhaps as a way to stimulate an observing ego or enhance the process of working through an issue. In other cases the clinician may suggest that clients NOT delay their response in order to encourage a more spontaneous, uncensored reply. For the therapist, the zone for reflection allows interventions to be more carefully planned and countertransference reactions managed more effectively.

Because e-mail and other asynchronous forms of communication have this adjustable conversing speed, the pacing of message exchanges will vary over the course of a text relationship. There will be a changing rhythm of freely spontaneous and carefully planned messages that parallels the ebb and flow of the relationship itself. Significant changes in cadence may indicate a significant change in feelings, attitudes, or commitment. The initial excitement of making contact may lead to frequent messages. Some people may even unconsciously experience the interaction as if it is a face-to-face encounter and therefore expect an almost immediate reply. Later in the relationship, the pacing may level off to a rate of exchange that feels comfortable to both partners. As a general rule, the more frequently people e-mail each other, the more important and intimate the relationship feels to them. Some people e-mail each other every day, or several times a day. Bursts in the intensity of the pace occur when hot topics are being discussed or when recent events in one's life need to be explained. These bursts may reflect a sudden deepening of the intimacy in the relationship. Declines in the pace may indicate a temporary or long-term weakening of the bonds between the couple - either due to a lagging interest in the relationship or distractions from other sectors of one's life. Drastic drops in the pace, or an apparent failure of the partner to respond at all, throws you into the *black hole experience*. The partner's silence may be a sign of anger, indifference, stubborn withdrawal, punishment, laziness, preoccupation with other things. But you don't know for sure. The ambiguity inherent in the no-reply easily can become a blank screen onto which we project our own expectations, emotions, and anxieties.

Some clients will be avid text communicators. The computer is a major feature of their interpersonal and professional life. They do e-mail all day long. Other clients will be novices in the online world. They log on only once or twice a week. To effectively adjust the pacing of their work, the clinician needs to take such differences into consideration.

Asynchronicity presents potential problems. Spontaneity and a sense of commitment to the relationship may decline without that in-the-moment contact. Without being together in real time, some clients may experience the therapist as less "present." Although time zones seem irrelevant, clinicians need to sensitize themselves to the fact that the client's temporal experience of the therapeutic encounter may not match that of the clinician. I "see" the client in the morning, but the client "sees" me at night. Pauses in the conversation, coming late to a session, and no-shows are lost as a psychologically significant cues. Although we eliminate the scheduling difficulties associated with an "appointment," we also lose the professional boundaries of that specific, time-limited appointment. In our culture we are not used to interacting with a professional in an asynchronous time frame. Because online therapists run the risk of being overwhelmed with messages from the client, or having the client drift away, they must be careful to create guidelines for an effective, reliable, manageable pacing of messages.

In *synchronous communication* - like chat and instant messaging - the client and therapist are sitting at their computer at the same time, interacting with each other in that moment. Text chat includes the more common message-by-message exchanges in which a button is clicked to transmit the composed and perhaps edited message, as well as chat conversations where everything that both parties type can be seen as it is being typed, including typos, backspacing, and deletions - which enhances the synchronicity, spontaneity, and meaning of the experience. In all types of chat the act of typing does slow down the pace, thus making the conversation a bit asynchronous compared to face-to-face meetings. Technical factors, especially transmission speeds, also determine just how closely a chat meeting approaches the tempo of an in-person encounter. In text-only chat, for example, "lag" due to busy networks may slow down the conversation between the client and therapist, resulting in temporal hiccups of several or even dozens of seconds between exchanges. This creates a small zone for reflection, which can be useful. However, it's not easy knowing when to wait to see if someone will continue to type, when to reply, when to change the topic of discussion. A conversation may accidentally become crisscrossed until both partners get "in sync." Users skilled in online chat create incomplete sentences or use dot *trailers* at the end of a sentence fragment.... that lead the companion into the next message. To allow the other user to express a complex idea, you may need to sit back into a listener mode. Some users will even type "listening" to indicate this posture to others. Some people have a greater intuitive sense of how to pace the conversation, when to talk, when to wait and listen. They possess an empathic understanding of the synchronous text relationship and of the particular person with whom they are conversing.

The temporal pros and cons of synchronous communication are the mirror image of those for synchronous communication. Synchronous communication provides the opportunity to schedule sessions defined by a specific, limited period of time - the culturally familiar "appointment." It can create a point-by-point connectedness that enhances feelings of intimacy, presence, interpersonal impact, and "arriving together" at ideas. People may be more spontaneous, revealing, uncensored in their self disclosures. Pauses in the conversation, coming late to a session, and no-shows are not lost as temporal cues that reveal important psychological meanings.

On the down side, the zone for reflection diminishes. Clients may lose the opportunity to compose their message, to say exactly what they want to say. In fact, some people feel they can create a stronger presence in asynchronous communication because they have more opportunity to express complexity and subtlety in what they write about themselves. They present themselves more fully. In synchronous communication clients also may associate "therapy" specifically with the appointment rather than experiencing it as a process that generalizes to their outside life.

Disinhibition

It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they ordinarily wouldn't in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the *disinhibition effect*. It's a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes, show unusual acts of kindness and generosity, and as a result intimacy develops. Clinicians dare to make important interventions that they would have withheld face-to-face. On the other hand, the disinhibition effect may not be so benign. Out spills rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. People act out in all ways imaginable. Intimacy develops too rapidly resulting in regret, anxiety, and a hasty termination of the relationship. Clinicians say something better left unsaid. On the positive side, disinhibition indicates an attempt to understand and explore oneself, to work through problems and find better ways of relating to others. And sometimes it is simply a blind catharsis, an acting out of unsavory needs and wishes without any personal growth at all. Earlier in this article I cited an e-mail in which a woman, a complete stranger to me, intimately described her relationship with her online lover. Consider also this e-mail from another stranger:

i am so suicidal every day that i have to tell somebody i would die and it would be all my parents fault for beating me every day and my classmates faults for making my life miserable every day and my dealers fault for going out of town and my fault for being manic depressive and suicidal and it would all be yalls fault cause your fuckin site is to god damn confusing and i couldnt talk to anybody. thank you for your time please feel just fucking free to e-mail me back

What causes this online disinhibition? What is it about cyberspace that loosens the psychological barriers that normally block the release these inner feelings and needs? Several factors are operating, many of them driven by the qualities of text communication that I've described previously. For some people, one or two of these factors produces the lion's share of the disinhibition effect. In most cases these factors interact with each other, supplement each other, resulting in a more complex, amplified effect.

Anonymity (You Don't Know Me) - As you move around the internet, most of the people you encounter can't easily tell who you are. People only know what you tell them about yourself. If you wish, you can keep your identity hidden. As the word "anonymous" indicates, you can have no name - at least not your real name. That anonymity works wonders for the disinhibition effect. When people have the opportunity to separate their actions from their real world and identity, they feel less vulnerable about opening up. Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. They don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of who they "really" are. When acting out hostile feelings, the person doesn't have to take responsibility for those actions. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those behaviors "aren't me at all." This is what many clinicians would call *dissociation*.

Invisibility (You Can't See Me) - In many online environments other people cannot see you. They may not even know that you're present. Invisibility gives people the courage do things that they otherwise wouldn't. This power to be concealed overlaps with anonymity because anonymity is the concealment of identity. But there are some important differences. In text communication others may know a great deal about who you are. However, they still can't see or hear you - and you can't see or hear them. Even with everyone's identity visible, the opportunity to be "physically" invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect. You don't have to worry about how you look or sound when you type something. You don't have to worry about how others look or sound. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can slam the breaks on what people are willing to express. The psychoanalyst sits behind the patient in order remain a physically ambiguous figure, without revealing any body language or facial expression, so that the patient has free range to discuss whatever he or she wants without feeling inhibited by how the analyst physically reacts. In everyday relationships people sometimes

avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. It's easier not to look into the other's face. Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.

Delayed Reactions (See You Later) - In asynchronous relationships people may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply to something you say. Not having to deal with someone's immediate reaction can be disinhibiting. The equivalent in real life might be saying something to someone, magically suspending time before that person can reply, and then returning to the conversation when you're willing and able to hear the response. Immediate, real-time feedback from others tends to have a powerful effect on the ongoing flow of how much people express. In e-mail and message boards, where there are delays in that feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards deeper expressions of what they are thinking and feeling. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as running away after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it out there where it can be left behind. Kali Munro, an online clinician, aptly calls this an "emotional hit and run."

Solipsistic Introjection (It's All in My Head) - As I described earlier, people sometimes feel online that their mind has merged with the mind of the other person. Reading another person's message might be experienced as a voice within one's head, as if that person magically has been inserted or introjected into one's psyche. Of course, we may not know what the other person's voice actually sounds like, so in our head we assign a voice to that person. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, we may even assign a visual image to what we think that person looks like and how that person behaves. The online companion now becomes a character within our intrapsychic world, a character that is shaped partly by how the person actually presents him or herself via text communication, but also by our expectations, wishes, and needs. Because the person may remind us of other people we know, we fill in the image of that character with memories of those other acquaintances. As the character now becomes more elaborate and "real" within our minds, we may start to think, perhaps without being fully aware of it, that the typed-text conversation is all taking place within our heads, as if it's a dialogue between us and this character in our imagination - as if we are authors typing out a play or a novel. Actually, even when it doesn't involve online relationships, many people carry on these kinds of conversations in their imagination throughout the day. People fantasize about flirting, arguing with a boss, or very honestly confronting a friend about what they feel. In their imagination, where it's safe, people feel free to say and do all sorts of things that they wouldn't in reality. At that moment, reality IS one's imagination. Online text communication can serve as the psychological tapestry in which a person's mind weaves these fantasy role plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition.

When reading another's message, it's also possible that you "hear" that person's words using your own voice. We may be subvocalizing as we read, thereby projecting the sound of our voice into the other person's message. Perhaps unconsciously, it feels as if I am talking to/with myself. When we talk to ourselves, we say all sorts of things that we wouldn't say to others.

Neutralizing of Status (We're Equals) - In text communication we don't see the trappings of status and power - the fancy office, expensive clothes, diplomas on the walls and books on the shelves. In addition, a long-standing attitude on the internet is that everyone should be equal, everyone should share, everyone should have equivalent access and influence. Respect comes from your skill in communicating (including writing skills), your persistence, the quality of your ideas, your technical know-how. Everyone regardless of status, wealth, race, gender starts off on a level playing field. These factors combined tend to reduce the perception of authority.Usually people are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. A fear of disapproval and punishment from on high dampens the spirit. But online, in what feels more like a peer relationship, people are much more willing to speak out or misbehave.

Of course, the online disinhibition effect is not the only factor that determines how much people open up or act out in cyberspace. The strength of underlying feelings, needs, and drive level has a big influence on how people behave. Personalities also vary greatly in the strength of defense mechanisms and tendencies towards inhibition or expression. People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional. Compulsive people are more restrained. The online disinhibition effect will interact with these personality variables, in some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's baseline (offline) behavior, while in other cases causing dramatic changes.

Fluid and Transcended Space

In text relationships geographical distance poses as no barrier to accessing the online other. Despite hundreds or thousands of miles of distance, the connection is always seconds away, always available, always on. The therapist can reach into the client's environment, intervening in vivo, in ways not possible during face-to-face counseling. In return, clients may experience the therapist as "here" - immediately present in their life space. Issues of separation and individuation take on a new meaning, which may be an advantage or disadvantage, depending on the client and the

therapeutic circumstances.

A much more subjective, psychological sense of space replaces the physical or geographical sense of space. As I mentioned earlier, people may experience text relationships as an intermediate zone between self and other, an interpersonal space that is part self/part other. Sitting down at one's computer and opening up the communication software activates the feeling that one is entering that space. However, the very nature of text relationships - reading, writing, thinking, feeling, all inside our head as we sit quietly at the keyboard - encourages us to continue carrying that internalized interpersonal space with us throughout the day. How often do we compose e-mail messages in our head as we wash dishes and drive the car?

Although text relationships transcend geographical distant, they don't transcend the cultural differences associated with geography. People around the world have different customs for conversing and developing relationships, including text relationships. Some of the ideas discussed in this chapter will be culture-bound. A good rule of thumb in conversing with people from other lands is to be appropriately polite, friendly, and as clear as possible in what you write. Stretch your e-mail empathy muscles. Unless you're very sure of your relationship with the person, avoid colloquialisms, slang, humor, innuendoes, and especially subtle attempts at cynicism and sarcasm, which are difficult to convey in text even under the best of circumstances. Starting off polite and later loosening up as the relationship develops is safer than inadvertently committing a faux pas and then trying to patch up the damage.

Social Multiplicity

Spatial fluidity contributes to another important feature of cyberspace - *social multiplicity*. With relative ease a person can contact hundreds or thousands of people from all walks of life, from all over the world. By posting a message on bulletin boards read by countless numbers of users, people can draw to themselves others who match even their most esoteric interests. Using a web search engine, they can scan through millions of pages in order to zoom their attention onto particular people and groups. The internet will get more powerful as tools for searching, filtering, and contacting specific people and groups become more effective.

But why do we choose only some people to connect with and not others? A person will act on unconscious motivations - as well as conscious preferences and choices - in selecting friends, lovers, and enemies to establish a text relationship. Transference guides them towards specific types of people who address their underlying emotions and needs. Pressed by hidden expectations, wishes, and fears, this unconscious filtering mechanism has at its disposal an almost infinite candy store of online alternatives to choose from. As one experienced online user once said to me, "Everywhere I go in cyberspace, I keep running into the same kinds of people!" Carrying that insight one step further, another said, "Everywhere I go, I find.... ME!"

As I mentioned earlier, online clinicians might keep in mind that a person who contacts them for counseling may already have seen their web site or acquired a substantial amount about them. The client-to-be may have been shopping around the internet for a therapist who seemed right for them. Knowing how and why the client came to you, what pre-contact impressions the client formed, why the client decided against other online therapists, all may be important issues to discuss. The therapist might also keep in mind that the client knows those other online clinicians are still waiting off in the wings. Ending one relationship and beginning another involves just a few clicks. Online social multiplicity may magnify the factors contributing to early termination, such as counterdependence, flights into health, a fear of intimacy and vulnerability, and other forms of resistance. Clinicians with a prominent online presence also may receive many unsolicited contacts from strangers with varying degrees of transference reactions and a wide variety of requests for help, advice, and information. They will need to develop strategies for deciding when and how to respond to such contacts from strangers whose motivations and needs may not be obvious.

Social multiplicity creates opportunities for a fascinating variety of group work. People experiencing similar problems, even unusual problems, easily can join together with a clinician in an e-mail or message board group, regardless of their geographical location. In addition to this ability to form unique, topic-focused groups, online social multiplicity also creates opportunities for group format and process not always possible in face-to-face meetings. Using *layered interactions* a group could function at two different levels using two different channels of communication, with one channel perhaps functioning as a meta-discussion of the other, a computer-mediated enhancement of the "self-reflective loop." The group process becomes layered, with perhaps a core, spontaneous, synchronous experience and a superimposed asynchronous meta-discussion. In a *nested group* people could communicate with each other while also being able to invisibly communicate with one or more people within that group. Although such private messaging could create subgrouping and conflict, it also could be useful in enabling group members, as well as the therapist, to offer hidden coaching and support that ultimately enhances the whole group. In *overlapping groups* individuals or subgroups within one group can communicate with individuals or subgroups from a sister group, which enables a

comparing of experiences across groups. Some online clinicians also use a meta-group that silently observes a meeting and then offers its feedback to the whole group, or privately to individuals during or after the online meeting. In a *wheel group* the clinician might multi-converse with several clients at the same time, as in chat or instant messaging, essentially serving as the hub of the group with all lines of communication directed at the clinician. The clients may not even know that other clients are present, that a "group" even exists.

Recordability: Archives and Quoted Text

Most text communication, including e-mail and chat sessions, can be recorded and saved. Unlike real world interactions, we have the opportunity to keep a permanent record of what was said, to whom, and when. Most e-mail programs enable users to create filters and a special folder to direct and store messages from a particular person or group, thereby creating a distinct space or "room" for those relationships. If we've only known certain people via text, we may even go so far as to say that our relationships with them ARE the messages we exchanged, that these relationships can be permanently recorded in their entirety, perfectly preserved in bits and bytes. It's not unlike a novel which isn't a record of characters and plot, but rather IS the characters and plot.

At your leisure, you can review what you and your partner said, cherish important moments in the relationship, reexamine misunderstandings and conflicts, refresh a faulty memory. The archive offers clinicians an excellent to examine nuances of the therapeutic relationship and the progress of their work with the client. Clinicians also might encourage clients to create their own archives, as well as invent a variety of therapeutic exercises that have specific objectives in guiding the client's reviewing of that stored text.

Left to their own design, people differ in how much of a text relationship they save. The person who saves less - or maybe none at all - may have a lower investment in the relationship. Or they may not be as self-reflective about relationships as people who wish to reread and think about what was said. On the other hand, that person may simply have less of a need to capture, preserve, or control the relationship. Some people like to "live in the moment." They may not feel a need to store away what was said, which doesn't necessarily indicate less of an emotional attachment.

When a person only saves some of the text, they usually choose those chunks of the relationship that are especially meaningful to them - emotional high points, moments of intimacy, important personal information, or other milestones in the relationship. Comparing the text saved by one person to those saved by the partner could reveal similarities and discrepancies in what each of them finds most important about the relationship. One person might savor humor, practical information, personal self-disclosures, emotional recollections, or intellectual debate - while the other may not. Saving mostly one's own messages, or mostly the other person's messages, may reflect a difference in focus on either self or other. The area of significant overlap in saved messages reflects the common ground of interest and attitude that holds the relationship together.

Unless you're simply searching for practical information (e.g., phone number, address), what prompts you to go back and read old text may indicate something significant happening in the relationship or your reaction to it. Doubt, worry, confusion, anger, nostalgia? What motivates you to search your archive? The curious thing about rereading old text (even if it is just a few days old) is that it sounds different than it did the first time you read it. You see the previous communication in a new light, from a new perspective, or notice nuances that you did not see before. You might discover that the emotions and meanings you previously detected were really your own projections and really nothing that the sender put there (i.e., your transference reaction). You might realize that your own feelings have distorted your recall of the history of the relationship.

We are tempted to think that a text archive is a factual record of what was said. In some ways it is. But saved text also is a container into which we pour our own psyche. We invest it with all sorts of meanings and emotions depending on our state of mind at the moment. Herein lies the therapeutic potential of encouraging clients to reread previous conversations, as well as the opportunity for the therapist to understand countertransference reactions.

An advantage of e-mail conversations over those face-to-face is the ability to quote parts or all of what the other person said in the previous message. Hitting "reply" and then tacking your response to the top or bottom of the quoted e-mail is a quick and easy rejoinder. In some cases it's a very appropriate strategy - especially when the other person's message was short, which makes it obvious what you are replying to. However, inserting a reply at the top or bottom of a long quoted message may be perceived by the other person as laziness or indifference on your part - as if you simply hit the reply button, typed your response, and clicked on "send." The person may not be sure exactly what part of the message you are responding to and also may feel annoyed at having to download an unnecessarily long file. Sticking a reply at the end of the lengthy quoted message can be particularly annoying because it forces the person to scroll and scroll and scroll, looking for the reply. All in all, quoting the entirety of a hefty message may not come across as a considerate and

personal response. The impersonal tone may be exacerbated by those e-mail programs that automatically preface a block of quoted text with a standardized notice like, "On Saturday, May 28, Joe Smith said:" While this automated notation may work fine for formal, businesslike relationships, or on e-mail lists where multiple conversations are taking place, it may leave a bad taste in the mouth during more personal relationships.

The alternative to quoting the whole message is to select out and respond individually to segments of it. It takes more time and effort to quote segments rather than the whole message, but there are several advantages. People may appreciate the fact that you put that time and effort into your response. It makes your message clearer, more to the point, easier to read. It may convey to your partner a kind of empathic attentiveness because you are responding to specific things that he or she said. Applying Rogerian reflection, you are letting the person know exactly what from their seemed most important. Replying to several segments can create an intriguingly rich e-mail in which several threads of conversation occur at the same time, each with a different content and emotional tone. In one multilevel e-mail, you may be joking, explaining, questioning, recalling a past event, anticipating a future one. To establish continuity over several back-and-forth exchanges, you can create embedded layers of quoted segments, with each layer containing text from an earlier message. However, too many layers results in a confusing message in which it is unclear who said what and when. Messages with multiple quoted segments need to be formatted clearly.

Usually, one quotes lines from the most recent message received from the e-mail partner. If you have an e-mail archive, you also can quote lines from earlier messages, including messages from long ago. This may have a dramatic impact on your partner. On the positive side, people may be pleased to realize that you are saving their messages - in a sense, holding them in your memory, even cherishing their words. On the negative side, they may feel uncomfortable seeing their words revived from the distant past - especially when they don't quite remember when or in what context they said it. It's a reminder that you have a record of them. The situation can be even more unnerving when they don't have a record of the message themselves, so they can't verify the accuracy of the quote. A slightly paranoid feeling seeps in. "Am I being deceived, held hostage? Why didn't *I* save that message?" Of course, all of these negative reactions are amplified when people use old quoted text in an accusatory or hostile manner.

Quoting segments can create other problems too. Divvying up the other person's message into numerous quotes, with your comments interspersed, may be experienced by other people as impatient, interruptive, unempathically disrespectful of the integrity of their message. In flame wars you often see people citing more and more of what the opponent said, using it as ammunition to launch counterattacks. A series of point-by-point retorts becomes a verbal slicing up of the foe, almost as if it reflects an unconscious wish to tear up the person by dissecting his or her message. Often attackers want to legitimize their arguments by citing the opponent's exact words, as if the citation stands as concrete, unquestionable evidence. "This is precisely what you said." However, it's very easy to take sentences out of context, completely misread their emotional tone, or juxtapose several segments extracted from different parts of the other person's e-mails in order to draw a false conclusion from that forced composite of ideas. It's an attempt to create a contrived reality, what Michael Fenichel has aptly called a "cut and paste reality."

Media Disruption

With the exception of such things as laryngitis and noisy heating systems, we take for granted the accuracy and stability of the communication channel during face-to-face conversations. Online, we need to be more cognizant of possible communication disruptions. There will be moments when software and hardware do not work properly, when noise intrudes into the communication, when connections break. Busy servers result in lag that drastically slows down a chat conversation. A server crashes, preventing everyone from getting to the message board. Our e-mail that we carefully constructed with special indentations and different fonts of different colors may lose all that formatting as it passes through mail servers which don't notice our creative keyboarding - essentially, a problem in translation. There will even be moments in a text relationship when we receive no reply and no error message at all, leaving us wondering if the problem is technical or interpersonal. That lack of response opens the door for us to project all sorts of worries, anxieties, and fantasies into this *black hole experience*.

Some computer-mediated environments are more robust than others, a fact online clinicians need to take into consideration when choosing their tools. Even in stable channels, therapists might take measures to confirm that the mechanical translation of the message is accurate ("Can you see this font?") and to create back-up communication procedures if the primary channel fails.

The Message Body

In e-mail and message boards, the body of the message contains the meat of the communication. I like the metaphor of "the body" because it captures the connotation of the physical self - how people appear, move, their sound and tone,

their body language, even the elusive and rather mysterious dimensions of "presence." The message body is the most complex component of the communication. Messages can vary widely in length, organization, the flow of ideas, spelling errors, grammar sophistication, the spacing of paragraphs, the use of quoted text, caps, tabs, emoticons and other unique keyboard characters, as well as in the overall visual "feel" of the message. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the structure of the e-mail body reflects the cognitive and personality style of the individual who creates it.

One interesting feature of the message body - not unlike the physical body - is the extent to which it is planned and controlled versus spontaneous and free. Carefully constructed text, even when intended to be empathic, may lack spontaneity. It is possible to over-think and micromanage the message to the point where it sounds contrived. Nevertheless, despite conscious attempts to present oneself exactly as one wishes, hidden elements of one's personality unconsciously may surface. On the other hand, completely freeform, loosely constructed text may confuse or annoy people. The most effective message is one that strikes a balance between spontaneity and carefully planned organization. Short messages with a few obvious spelling errors, glitches, or a slightly chaotic visual appearance can be a sincere expression of affection and friendship - as if the person is willing to let you see how they look hanging around the house, wearing an old t-shirt and jeans. Or such a message can be a genuine expression of the person's state of mind at that moment. "I'm in a hurry, but I wanted to dash this off to you!" In the course of an ongoing text relationship, there will be a engaging rhythm of spontaneous and carefully thought out messages that parallels the ebb and flow of the relationship itself. Composition can become more casual, detailed, and expressive as the relationship develops and people feel safe to explore; it regresses when they feel threatened, hurt, or angry. In some cases chaotic, regressed text may indicate decompensation and psychosis.

Text construction reflects an important personality trait - *text empathy*. Is there just the right measure of organization so the reader understands, along with the right measure of spontaneity so the reader appreciates the writer's genuineness? Does the sender pay attention to and anticipate the needs of the recipient? Empathic people specifically respond to what their text partners have said. They ask their partners questions about themselves and their lives. They also construct their messages anticipating what it will be like for the recipient to read it. They write in a style that is both engaging and readily understood. With appropriate use of spacing, paragraph breaks, and various keyboard characters (....///**) to serve as highlights and dividers, they visually construct the message so that it is easy and pleasing to read. They estimate just how long is too long. Essentially, they are good writers who pay attention to the needs of their reader. This is quite unlike people with narcissistic tendencies who have difficulty putting themselves into the shoes of the recipient. They may produce lengthy blocks of unbroken text, expecting that their partner will sustain an interest in scrolling, and reading for seemingly endless screens of long-winded descriptions of what the sender thinks and feels. Paradoxically, the narcissistic person's need to be heard and admired may result in the recipient hitting the delete key out of frustration or boredom.

Text empathy includes an intuitive feeling for what the others might be feeling and thinking. Curiously, people report that even in the stripped down sensory world of text relationships - even in the bare bones of chat communication - others sometimes sense what's on your mind, even when you didn't say anything to that effect. Did they detect your state of mind from subtle clues in what or how you typed? Are they picking up on some seemingly minor change in how you typically express yourself? Or does their empathy reach beyond your words appearing on the screen? Obviously, this intuitive insight into the message body is a skill crucial to the success of an online clinician. It's a skill that may be different than intuition in face-to-face communication.

Humans are curious creatures. When faced with barriers, they find all sorts of creative ways to work around those barriers, especially when those barriers involve communication. Despite the auditory and visual limitations of text relating, experienced onliners have developed a variety of keyboard techniques to overcome some of the limitations of typed text - techniques that lend a vocal, kinesthetic quality to the message, that indeed create a metaphorical message "body." They attempt to make text conversations less like postal letters and more like a face-to-face encounter. In addition to the expressive use of fonts, colors, spacing, and indentations, some of these creative keyboarding strategies include the following:

-- *Emoticons* like the smiley, winky, and frown, which are seemingly simple character sets that nevertheless capture very subtle nuances of meaning and emotion. The smiley often is used to clarify a friendly feeling when otherwise the tone of your sentence might be ambiguous. It also can reflect benign assertiveness, an attempt to undo hostility, subtle denial or sarcasm, self-consciousness, and apologetic anxiety. The winky is like elbowing your e-mail partner, implying that you both know something that doesn't need to be said out loud. It often is used to express sarcasm.

-- *Parenthetical expressions* that convey body language or "subvocal" thoughts and feelings (sigh, feeling unsure here). It's an intentional effort to convey some underlying mood or state of mind, almost implicitly saying, "Hey, if there is something hidden or unconscious going on inside me, this is probably it!"

-- V*oice accentuation* via the use of caps, asterisks, and other keyboard characters in order to place vocal *EMPHASIS* on a particular word or phrase.

-- *Trailers* to indicate a pause in thinking.... or a transition in one's stream of thought. Combined with such vocal expressions as.... uh.... um.... trailers can mimic the cadence of in-person speech, perhaps simulating hesitation or confusion.

-- *LOL*, the acronym for "laughing out loud" which serves a handy tool for responding to something funny without having to actually say "Oh, that's funny!" It's feels more natural and spontaneous - more like the way you would respond in a face-to-face situation.

-- *Exclamation Points* which tend to lighten up the mood of otherwise bland or serious sounding text. Text peppered lightly with exclamations, at just the right spots, provides a varying texture of energy that highlights mood and enthusiasm. Too many exclamation points may result in text that seems contrived, shallow, or even uncomfortably manic.

-- *Expressive acronyms* like imo (in my opinion) and jk (just kidding) used as shorthand expressions.

As with all things, practice makes perfect, so people tend to fine-tune and enhance their text expressiveness over time. As a relationship develops, the partners also become more sensitive to the nuances of each other's typed expression. Together they develop their own emoticons, acronyms, and unique communication techniques not immediately obvious to an outsider. They develop a *private language* that solidifies their relationship and the distinctness of their identity together. Usually that language crystallizes around issues that are discussed frequently and therefore personally important to them. To understand and enhance the therapeutic relationship, clinicians might pay attention to, even encourage, the development of this private language with the client.

Message Peripherals

Important features of interpersonal communication surround the message body in discussion board posts and especially e-mail. Sometimes we overlook these peripheral features and head directly for the meat of the message. Nevertheless, as experienced online clinicians well know, these message peripherals can yield sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle, but always useful insights into the psychology of the other person and our relationship with that person. As seemingly insignificant aspects of the communication, they often become small gems of communication, deceptively packed with meaning. When they change over time they serve as signposts indicating changes in the relationship.

The *username* people choose reflects the identity that they wish to present online. The name chosen may be one's real name, a pseudonym, or a combination thereof. Using one's real name indicates a wish to simply be oneself. It is a straightforward presentation. Pseudonyms can be more mysterious, playful, revealing approaches. They may express some hidden aspect of the person's self-concept. They may reveal unconscious motivating fantasies and wishes (or fears) about one's identity. Changing their username may reflect an important change in how they wish to relate to others and be perceived by others. Moving from a pseudonym to one's real name may express the wish to drop the "mask" (albeit a meaningful mask).

The *subject line* is a tiny microcosm unto itself. Often people use it to simply summarize or introduce the major idea/s contained in the text body. Experienced onliners understand the more subtle techniques for communicating meaning and emotion in the titles they bestow to their text. The subject line can lead into, highlight, or elaborate a particular idea in the text body. It can ask a definitive question, shoot back a terse answer, joke, tease, prod, berate, shout, whisper, or emote. Sometimes its meaning may blatantly or discreetly contradict the sentiment expressed in the text body. A creative application of caps, commas, slashes, parentheses, and other keyboard characters adds emphasis and complexity to the thoughts and emotions expressed in the subject line. Here are some examples illustrating these ideas:

the solution is....

loved it!

Jim! help, Help, HELP!!

I'm so impressed (yawn)

Have To Do This

Things afoot...

Even more/sorry

????

OK folks, settle down

&**%$#))(*@#%%$

Bob / battles / techniques / bullshit

sigh...

In an e-mail archive, examining the list of subject lines across the development of the relationship is like perusing the headlines of a newspaper over the course of months or years. That list of titles reflects the flow of important themes in the history of the e-mail encounter. These patterns or trends over time might reveal subtle or unconscious elements in the relationship. Even if online clinicians are reluctant to devote much time to rereading old messages, they can gain considerable insight into the progress of therapy by creating pithy subject titles, paying attention to the titles created by the client, and periodically scrolling through their archives to peruse those titles.

The use of "re:" versus creating a new subject title reflects an interesting dynamic interchange between text partners. Creating a new title means taking the lead in the relationship by introducing a new caption for the interaction. It is an attempt to conceptualize, summarize, and highlight what the person perceives as the most important feature of the conversation. Creating a new title calls into play the "observing ego" - that ability to step back and reflect on what is happening. It also reveals a sense of responsibility and ownership for the dialogue - in some cases maybe even an attempt to control the dialogue. In this fashion, some text partners "duel" with each other via the subject line. Simply clicking on reply without creating a new title may indicate less of an observing ego and more of a spontaneous reaction. It suggests a "I want to reply to what you said" mode of operation. Some people chronically fail to create a new title and persistently use "re:" They may be a bit passive in the relationship, indifferent, lazy. They may not feel that sense of responsibility, ownership, or control. Even if none of this is true, their partner may still perceive them as being that way. Online clinicians might pay special attention to when and how they create new titles versus using "re:" to maintain the captioned continuity of the discussion.

Similar to writing letters or meeting someone on the street, the text conversation usually begins with *the greeting*. Different greetings convey slightly different emotional tones and levels of intimacy. It sets the mood for the rest of the message - and sometimes may contradict the tone of the message. Starting with "Dear Jane" is somewhat formal, reminiscent of writing letters, and rarely used among experienced text communicators. "Hello Jane" is more casual, but still polite as compared to the looser "Hi Jane." The more enthusiastic "Hi Jane!" or "Hi there!" may have quite a significant impact on the reader when it appears for the first time, as well as when later it defaults to a plain "Hi Jane," perhaps indicating indifference, anger, or depression. "Jane!!" conveys an even higher level of enthusiasm, surprise, or delight. On the contrary, a simple "Jane" as a greeting tends to be a very matter-of-fact, "let's get to the point" opening, sometimes suggesting an almost ominous tone, as if the sender is trying to get your attention in preparation for some unpleasant discussion. Of course, adding the person's name to the greeting as in "Hi Jane" rather than simply "Hi" always indicates a deeper level of intimacy - or, at the very least, the fact that the person made the small extra effort to personalize the message.   Over the course of a batch of messages, the back-and-forth changes in the greeting become a revealing little dance - sometimes playful, sometimes competitive. Who is being polite, friendly, intimate, enthusiastic, emotional?

No greeting at all is an interesting phenomenon that cuts two ways. In some cases, it may reveal that the sender is lazy, passive, or how he/she lacks any personal connection to you or any desire for a personal connection. In some messages I've received of this type, I felt almost as if the sender perceived me as a computer program ready to respond their needs - with no identity or needs of my own. On the other hand, no greeting may indicate the exact opposite motive. The sender indeed feels connected to you - so much so that a greeting isn't required. She assumes you know that it's you who's on her mind. Or he never felt like he left the conversation and the psychological "space" he inhabits with you: so why inject a greeting into the message? In an ongoing, back-and-forth dialogue, there may be no greetings at all throughout a string of exchanged text. In the face-to-face world, you don't say "hello" in the midst of a energetic discussion. In cyberspace, the same principle holds. Although each e-mail message looks like a letter that, according to

tradition, should start off with a greeting, it actually isn't. It's a segment of an ongoing conversation.

Whereas the greeting is the way people say hello and "sign in," *the sign-off line* is the way they exit from their message. As with the greeting, the sign-off is a fingerprint revealing the status of the person's mood and state of mind - sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. "Here's where I'm at as I say good-bye." A contrast between the greeting and the sign-off may be significant, as if writing the message altered the person's attitudes and feelings. Across a series of messages the sign-off lines may be a string of repartees between the partners that amplifies, highlights or adds nuance to their dialogue in the message bodies. The progression of exchanged sign-off lines may itself become an encapsulated, Morse-code dialogue between the partners. "Sincerely," "Regards" or other similar sign-offs are rather safe, all-purpose tools borrowed from the world of postal mail. They are formal, polite ways to exit. Some avid e-mailer users use them sparingly because they suggest a snail-mail mentality and a lack of appreciation for the creatively conversational quality of e-mail. Here are some examples of sign-off lines that are a bit more revealing of the person's state of mind and his/her relationship to the e-mail partner:

HUGZZ,

an unusually annoyed,

just my 2 cents,

stay cool,

still confused,

sheesh....

Almost invariably, the person's name follows the sign-off line, which demonstrates how intrinsically connected the sign-off line is to his/her identity. Simply typing one's real name is the easiest, most straightforward tactic. Some people creatively play with the *sign-off name* as a way to express their state of mind, some aspect of their identity, or their relationship to the text partner. Usually this type of play only feels appropriate with friends, or it indicates that one wishes to be friendly, loose, and imaginative.

Leaving out the sign-off line and/or name may be an omission with meaning. It might suggest a curt, efficient, formal, impersonal, or even angry attitude about the conversation. The ending could appear especially bureaucratic or impersonal if the person inserts his signature block and nothing else. On the other hand, friends may leave out a sign-off line and name as a gesture of informality and familiarity. "You know it's me." They may assume that the conversation is ongoing as in a face-to-face talk, so there's no need to type anything that suggests a good-bye.

Many e-mail programs offer the option of creating a *signature block* that automatically will be placed at the bottom of the message, unless that feature is turned off. People usually place factual or identifying information into that file - such as their full name, title, e-mail address, institutional affiliation, phone number, etc. It's a prepackaged stamp indicating "who, what, where I am." What a person puts into that file reflects what they hold dear to their public identity. Some programs offer the feature of writing alternative signature files, which gives the person the opportunity to create several different fingerprints, each one tailored for a specific purpose. For example, one block may be formal and factual, another more casual and playful. Each one is a slightly different slice of the person's identity. Because all signature blocks have a non-spontaneous, prepackaged feeling to them, friends often make a conscious effort to turn this feature off when writing to someone who knows them well. In a sense they are dropping their formal status and title. The message in which the signature block first disappears may reflect the sender's move towards feeling more friendly and casual in the relationship. As with the sign-off line and name, a change in a person's signature block reflects a shift in their identity or in how they wish to present their identity.

Some e-mail users place an ASCII drawing or a quote into their signature block. Sometimes the quotes are serious, humorous, intellectual, tongue-in-cheek, famous, or homespun. Whatever people use can reveal an important slice of their personality, life style, or philosophy of life. In online counseling the clinician might consider talking with the client about the meaning of the drawing or quote and any changes the client makes in them.

Text Talk in Real Time

The synchronous forms of text communication - as in instant messaging and chat - have evolved into a style of relating quite different than the asynchronous methods. The exchange of text usually involves only short sentences and phrases,

what I like to call *staccato speak*. Some people find that experience too sparse. They feel disoriented in that screen of silently scrolling dialogue. Other people enjoy that minimalist style. They love to see how people creatively express themselves despite the limitations. They love to immerse themselves in the quiet flow of words that feels like a more direct, in the moment, intimate connection between one's mind and the minds of others. Some clinicians also prefer this point-by-point exchange of ideas. They feel it creates a greater sense of presence and a more full interpersonal influence "in the now."

Staccato speak influences communication in a variety of ways. The terse style works well for witty social banter and sometimes pulls for that type of relating. Conversations may involve very short, superficial exchanges, or very honest and "to-the-point" discussions of personal issues. One doesn't have the verbose luxury of gradually leading the conversation to a serious topic, so self-disclosures sometimes are sudden and very revealing. To make conversations more efficient experienced synchronous communicators develop a complex collection of acronyms, which accelerates the development of a private language. In public chat settings, when people are meeting for the first time, they often quickly test the waters to determine the characteristics of the users around them and whom they want to engage. Questions that would be considered less than tactful in face-to-face encounters are a bit more socially acceptable here. Terse inquiries tossed out to a fellow user, or the entire room, might include "Age?", "M/F?", "Married?"

Synchronous communication in groups is considerably more challenging than one-on-one discussions - a fact the clinician interested in group work might consider. Chat room banter can seem quite chaotic, especially when many people are talking, or you have just entered a room and attempt to dive into the ongoing flow of overlapping conversations. There are no visual cues indicating what pairs or groups of people are huddled together in conversation, so the lines of scrolling dialogue seem disconnected. If people don't preface their message with the other user's name, it's not easy to tell who is reacting to whom or if someone is speaking to the whole group. Messages appear on your screen in an intermixed, slightly non-sequential order. The net result is a group free association where temporality is suspended, ideas bounce off each other, and the owner and recipient of the ideas become secondary.

You have to sit back and follow the flow of the text to decipher the themes of conversation and who is talking with whom. Consciously and unconsciously, you set up mental filters and points of focus that help you screen out noise and zoom in your concentration on particular people or topics of discussion. Often, you become immersed in one or two strings of dialogue and filter out the others. With experience, you develop an eye for efficiently reading the scrolling text. Some people may be better at this specific cognitive-perceptual task than others.

Saved transcripts of chat sessions often are more difficult to read than actually being there at the time the chat occurred. In part, this is due to the fact that during a post-hoc reading of a log, you read at the pace you usually read any written material - which is quickly, but much too quickly to absorb the chat conversation. While online, the lag created by people typing and by thousands of miles of busy internet wires forces the conversation into a slower pace. And so you sit back, read, wait, scan backwards and forwards in the dialogue (something you can't do in ftf conversation), and think about what to say next. There's more time for those perceptual/cognitive filters and lens to operate. There's also more time for a psychological/emotional context to evolve in your mind - a context that helps you follow and shape the nuances of meaning that develop in the conversation.

Quite unlike face-to-face encounters, people can send private messages to others in a chat room - a message that no one else in the room can see. There may be very few or no messages appearing on your screen but people may be very busy conversing. In face-to-face encounters the equivalent would be a silent room filled with telepaths! If you are engaged in one of those private discussions, as well as conversing with people out loud, you are placed in the peculiar situation of carrying on dual social roles - an intimate you and a public you, simultaneously. Even more complex is when you attempt to conduct two or more private conversations, perhaps in addition to public ones. You may be joking privately with Harold, conducting a serious personal discussion with Elizabeth, while engaging in simple chitchat out loud with the rest of the room. This complex social maneuver requires the psychological mechanism of dissociation - the ability to separate out and direct the components of your mind in more than one direction at the same time. It takes a great deal of online experience, mental concentration, and keyboarding skill (eye/hand coordination) to pull it off. A clinician needs to be aware of how these complex communication patterns might be affecting the group's dynamics, as well as hone the skills of conducting public and private conversations simultaneously. Most important is the ability to coordinate efforts with a co-therapist via private messaging while also speaking to the group.

Integration: Crossing the Text Boundary

If there are any universally valid principles in psychology, one of them is the importance of integration: the fitting together and balancing of the various elements of the psyche to make a complete, harmonious whole. A faulty or pathological psychic system often is described with terms connoting division and fragmentation, such as "repression,"

"dissociation," and splitting." Health, on the other hand, is usually specified with terms that imply integration and union, such as "insight," "assimilation," and "self actualization." Integration - like commerce - creates synergy. It leads to development and prosperity. The exchange enriches both sides of the trade.

Even though I've devoted this chapter to a discussion of text relationships, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the clinician considering the therapeutic possibilities of moving beyond the text relationship, of crossing the text boundary into other modes of communication. People learn by reading and writing, but they learn more by combining reading and writing with seeing, hearing, speaking, doing. The integration of difference modes of communication accelerates the process of understanding, working through, and assimilating psychological change. The clinician might consider the therapeutic possibilities of embedding graphics, audio, and video files into the text relationship. The clinician might also consider if, when, and how speaking with the client on the phone or in-person might enhance the progress of therapy.

The developmental path in most online relationships leads towards becoming more and more real to the other person - a process accelerated by bringing the relationship into new channels of communication. At first the companions may converse only via e-mail or chat. If they try chat in addition to e-mail, or vice versa, they often experience that move as a deepening of the relationship. Crossing any communication boundary often is perceived as reaching out to the other in a new way, as a gesture of intimacy. The big move of crossing the text boundary into phone and later in-person contact often becomes an important turning point in the relationship.

Hearing the others voice on the phone and especially meeting face-to-face, you have the opportunity to test out the image of the other person that you had created in your mind. While conversing via text, how did you accurately perceive this person and where did your perceptions go astray? By answering those questions, you may come to understand how your own mind set shaped your online impressions. You may have wanted or needed the person to be a certain way. Steered by your past intimate relationships, you may have expected them to be a certain way. You may have completely overlooked something in the text relationship that couldn't be ignored in the real world encounter. Afterwards you may together discuss, assimilate, reminisce, and build on the encounter. You can share the ways in which the meeting confirmed and altered your perceptions of each other. But the in-person meeting doesn't always enhance the relationship for some people. They may be disappointed after the meeting. The other person was not what they had hoped. This unfortunate outcome may indicate that their online wishes were strong but unrealistic.

Some people choose not to phone or meet in-person their e-mail companion, even though such meetings could be arranged. They prefer to limit the relationship to cyberspace. Perhaps they fear that their expectations and hopes will be dashed, or they feel more safe and comfortable with the relative anonymity of e-mail contact. They may be relishing the online fantasy they have created for themselves. Or they simply enjoy the text relationship as it is and have no desire to develop the relationship any further. In all cases, choosing not to increase face-to-face contact with the text companion is a choice not to make the relationship more intimate, well-rounded, or reality-based.

The implications of these ideas for online counseling and psychotherapy can be profound. Although therapists sometimes may choose to communicate with a client only via text - given the needs of that client or perhaps of the therapist - they might keep in mind the therapeutic possibilities of using different modes of communication and especially crossing the text boundary. Combining different modes, or progressing from one to another, offers opportunities for a more robust understanding of the other person, for deepening intimacy and trust, and for exploring transference and countertransference reactions.

An important dimension of what I call the *integration principle* is the process of bringing together one's online lifestyle with one's in-person lifestyle. Encourage clients to discuss and translate their face-to-face behaviors within the text relationship. Encourage them to take whatever new, productive behaviors they are learning via text and apply them to their in-person lifestyle. Encourage them to talk to trusted friends and family members about their online text relationships, including their therapy. If you are working with someone via text as well as in-person, help them discuss the text relationship when meeting in-person and the in-person relationship when online. This will prevent a *dual relationship* in which certain issues are isolated to one channel of communication (probably text) and never fully worked through. Encourage clients to communicate via online text with their in-person family members and friends, while also encouraging (but not forcing) them to meet in-person or via phone the people they know online.

If a goal of life is to know thyself, as Socrates suggested, then it must entail knowing how the various elements of thyself fit together to make that Big Self that is you. Reaching that goal means understanding and taming the barriers between the sectors of self. Barriers are erected out of the need to protect, out of fear. Those barriers and anxieties too are a component of one's identity. Sequencing, combining, and integrating different modalities of communication helps us explore the different dimensions of self expressed in those modalities, as well as understanding our resistances to

communicating in new and perhaps growth-promoting ways.

Summary

The internet makes text relationships more accessible than ever before in history. Their unique aspects open up new possibilities for online clinical work: reading and writing skills shape the communication; there are minimal visual and auditory cues; communication is temporally fluid; a subjective sense of interpersonal space replaces the importance of geographical space; people can converse with almost anyone online and with multiple partners simultaneously; conversations can be saved and later reexamined, and; the environment is more susceptible to disruption. Several of these factors cause social disinhibition. Although we tend to focus on the body of the message, the peripheral components of a text communication - such as the username and message title - also enhance meaning. As effective as text work can be, we should not overlook the therapeutic possibilities of moving outside text and integrating other communication modalities into our work.

References

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Suler, J.R. (2000). Psychotherapy in cyberspace: A 5-dimension model of online and computer-mediated psychotherapy. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 3, 151-160. Also in *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/psycyber.html

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

TextTalk: Communicating with typed text chat
Hypotheses about online text relationships
E-mail communication and relationships

Hypotheses about Online Text Relationships

Even though cyberspace is filled with all sorts of sights and sounds - and becoming more multimedia rich every day - most relationships among people form and grow within typed text. E-mail probably accounts for most one-on-one relating, but message boards, chat, and instant messaging also bring people together. Even web sites, especially those of an autobiographical nature, can lead to friendships and romances. The site starts out as a one-to-many relationship between the creator and the readers - and over time, contact via private e-mail between a reader and the writer refines that relationship and moves it to a more personal, one-on-one level. Such text relationships are not unique to cyberspace. Writers have connected to their readers for as long as there have been books. Letters have supplemented f2f relationships since the birth of the alphabet. It's just that cyberspace has made text relationships so much easier and efficient as on a day-to-day level.

So how do text relationships work? Below are a list of hypotheses that I've gather from articles I read and written, and from my discussions with all sorts of people, online and off. I've gathered them loosely into 7 categories. Some of these hypotheses are more robust than others, but they are JUST hypotheses - not truths etched into stone.

1. The subjective experience of text communication

1.1. Text talk is a sophisticated, expressive art form. People vary greatly in their ability to express themselves via text. While it can be learned, some people are naturally good at it.

1.2. Some people are more sensitive in detecting the meaning and mood expressed "between the lines" of text communication. There is a special type of interpersonal empathy that is unique to text relationships.

1.3. The psychological meaning people associate with "writing" (often related to school years) will affect how they experience text communication. People with insecurities about writing may prefer chat over e-mail.

1.4. Some people may experience text communication as a type of "merging" with the mind of the online other.

1.5. People experience the other's text message as a "voice" inside their head.

1.6. Text communication restructures the way people think about their relationships and themselves.

1.7. People may experience text from their online relationships as being "pieces" of those relationships.

1.8. Some people experience their message as a piece of themselves.

1.9. Even though not fully aware of it, we develop a mental image of the other person in a text relationship.

1.10. Humor, and especially sarcasm, is difficult to express in text relationships.

1.11. Text relationships lend themselves to "multi-tasking" - i.e., carrying on multiple relationships simultaneously.

1.12. In text relationships one participates in the relationship while simultaneously observing oneself in the relationship ("seeing" oneself on screen).

1.13. Receiving no reply in a text relationship tends to result in projections as to why the person did not reply.

1.14. A person's ambivalence about intimacy may be expressed in text communication, which is a paradoxical blend of allowing people to be honest and to feel close, while also maintaining their distance.

2. **The relationship between f2f and online relationships**

2.1. For some people, text relationships encourage more self-expression and self-reflection than f2f communication. For others, less.

2.2 Some people experience text relationships as more predictable, safe, and less anxiety-provoking than f2f relationships.

2.3. People who are very verbal and expressive offline may not be in an online relationship. And vice versa.

2.4. People who lack f2f verbal skills may prefer text relationships.

2.5. Some important aspects of a person may be obvious in-person but almost invisible online.

2.6. Some people prefer the text relationship over knowing each other f2f.

2.7. Elements of people's online relationships may reveal what's missing in their f2f relationships.

2.8. In text relationships, some people explore their interpersonal style and experiment with new behaviors. What is learned online can be carried into offline relationships.

2.9. Online relationships form and disappear more easily than f2f relationships.

2.10. Intimacy develops more rapidly in text relationships than in f2f relationships.

2.11. Combining f2f contact with online contact of various types offers people the opportunity to explore and integrate different cognitive styles and ways of being. Different channels of communication may work best for different people.

2.12. Close online relationships naturally progress to f2f meetings.

2.13. Meeting f2f for the first time changes how one subsequently perceives the other online.

2.14. Meeting f2f enriches the online relationship and/or challenges the image one had of the online other.

2.15. Interacting with someone online and offline on an ongoing basis may result in a "separate tracks" relationship. The relationship may be a bit different online than it is offline.

3. **Absent f2f cues and stimulation**

3.1. Lacking f2f cues, text communication can be limited, ambiguous and an easy target for misunderstanding and projection.

3.2. Lacking f2f cues, text communication disinhibits people, encouraging them to be more open and honest than usual, or encouraging them to act out inappropriately.

3.3. The lack of touch and body contact can significantly reduce the experience of intimacy in text relationships.

3.4 Some people are attracted to the silent, less visually stimulating, and non-tactile quality of text relationships.

3.5. People struggling with social anxiety or with issues about shame and guilt may be drawn to text relationships in which they cannot be "seen."

3.6. Text communication enables people to avoid the f2f cues that are distracting or irrelevant to the relationship.

3.7. Without the distraction of f2f cues, text relationships enable people to connect more directly to the other's psyche.

4. <u>Saved messages</u>

4.1. Saved messages can be accurate information for reliving and reevaluating the relationship. They provide continuity in the relationship.

4.2. Quoted text may be cited as "proof" of something someone previously said, but quoted text can be taken out of context and juxtaposed with other quoted text, which distorts its meaning.

4.3. Saving text dialogues can help people reduce errors in recall, some of which might be due to distorted perceptions of the other person.

4.4. Saved text read at different points in time will be interpreted differently based on changes in the person's state of mind and the overall psychological context in which the text is read.

4.5. People vary widely in how much of their messages they save and what types of messages they save. This reflects their attitude and style of being in the relationship.

4.6. By using several sections of quoted text within a single message, multiple layers of one's online relationship can be addressed simultaneously... sometimes considerably different layers.

5. <u>Temporality and Pacing (asynchronous/synchronous factors)</u>

5.1. The ability to delay responding in e-mail and message boards can enhance self-control, self-reflection, and the assimilation of experiences in the relationship.

5.2. Delayed text communication enables people to say exactly what they want to say.

5.3. During emotional points in an asynchronous text relationship, people sometimes respond immediately without taking advantage of the time delay.

5.4. Because text communication is slower than speaking, people are motivated to "get to the point."

5.5. People vary widely in the intensity and frequency that they communicate via text. Adjusting to the other person's pace is important in the relationship.

5.6. The short and long delays in text exchanges require people to get "in synch" with each other for communication to be more effective.

5.7. A change in the pacing of messages reflects a change in the relationship.

5.8. In the course of an ongoing text relationship, there will be a changing rhythm of spontaneous and carefully thought out messages that parallels the ebb and flow of the relationship itself.

5.9. The easy and continuous opportunity to send a message to the other person can create a comforting feeling that the connection to that person is "always there" or even that the other is "always present." Feelings of separation may be eased.

5.10. The feeling of the other's presence is stronger in synchronous communication in that they are present in-the-moment. The feeling of the other's presence is stronger in asynchronous communication in that people have more opportunity to express complexity and subtlety in what they write about themselves.

5.11. Meeting an e-mail or message board friend in chat is a sign of increased intimacy and/or commitment to the relationship. Contacting a chat friend via e-mail is a sign of increased intimacy and/or commitment to the relationship.

5.12. Some people enjoy and benefit from the spontaneity and specific temporal boundary that is involved in chat meetings.

5.13. Chat meetings create a point-by-point connectedness that enhances feelings of intimacy, presence, and "arriving together" at ideas.

6. <u>Message construction</u>

6.1. Text relationships are not the same as traditional "writing" activities, including letter writing.

6.2. The overall visual construction of a text message (frequency of line breaks, size of paragraphs, insertion of quoted text, etc.) reveals a person's mood and state of mind.

6.3. Writing style and effectiveness changes as a result of what is happening in the ongoing relationship. Composition can become more casual, detailed, and expressive as the relationship develops and people feel safe to explore; it regresses when they feel threatened, hurt, or angry.

6.4. In an ongoing text relationship, the people involved develop their own private "language" of abbreviations, symbols, and phrasings.

6.5. The subject title of a message is an important layer of the communication. It can lead into, highlight, elaborate, or even contradict a particular idea in the message.

6.6. Even very simple behaviors, like saying "hello," can be expressed in many different, subtle ways.

6.7. Parenthetical expressions (behaviors or internal thoughts described as "asides" in parentheses) can be as expressive or perhaps more expressive than f2f cues.

6.8. The use of emoticons, trailers, caps, and other keyboard techniques adds an almost infinite variety of creative expressiveness to a text message.

7. <u>Online identity and interpersonal styles</u>

7.1. The person's writing style and message format reflects his/her personality. Changes in style and format reflect changes in mood and thinking.

7.2. Some people express their "true self" in text relationships, or believe they do.

7.3. Despite conscious attempts to present oneself exactly as one wishes, hidden elements of one's personality unconsciously surface in text communication.

7.4. The online name/s and identities that people choose for themselves reflects their personalities.

7.5. Socially anxious people may enjoy and benefit from text relationships. Text relationships can be used to desensitize social anxieties and build social skills.

7.6. Talking about one's online text relationships with friends and family helps one gain a better perspective on those relationships.

7.7. As a way to avoid "saying their goodbyes," online relationships and groups may tend to "fizzle out" by people gradually sending fewer and fewer messages.

7.8. Even though audio and visual internet technology will become easier and less expensive to use, text communication will never disappear and will be preferred by some people.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

In-person versus cyberspace relationships
E-mail communication and relationships
Subtlety in multimedia chat
TextTalk: Communicating with typed text chat
In-person versus cyberspace relationships

E-Mail Communication and Relationships

1. The Nuts and Bolts of E-mail Communication:

typed text (TextTalk)
missing face-to-face cues
anonymity
asynchronous interaction
adjustable conversing speed
adjustable group size
spam

2. Novice and Pro - Intensity of E-mail Use:

avid users
regular users
casual users
newbie users

Writing Abilities and Styles

3. Anatomy of an E-mail Message:

Sender's name -- Subject line -- Greeting
The Body of the Message
    E-mail empathy
    Planning versus spontaneity
    Creative keyboarding:
        parenthetical expression,
        voice and action accentuation,
        trailers, emoticons, LOL,
        quoted text, rich text
Sign-off line and name -- Signature block

4. Advanced Issues:

An e-mail make-over
Multimedia enhancements
Just between you and me: Private language
Pacing: The ebb and flow of mail
Transference: Seeing the other clearly
Keeping record: The e-mail archive
Developmental history and meeting ftf
Dual relationships
E-mail stress
Cross-cultural e-mail

E-mail may be the most important, unique method for communicating and developing relationships since the telephone. First of all, it is easy to use. People also find it familiar and safe because it is similar in many respects to writing letters - minus the annoyances of addressing envelopes, licking stamps, and trips to the mail box. Of all the methods for developing relationships on the internet, it is the most common - and perhaps the most powerful. Although friendships and romances may indeed begin in chat rooms, instant messagin, avatar communities, blogs, or other environments, these relationships almost always expand into e-mail as a way to deepen the communication. It is a more private, more reliable, less chaotic way to talk. Even when other online tools improve greatly by becoming more effectively visual and auditory - as in video teleconferencing - e-mail will not disappear. Many people will prefer it because it is a non-visual and non-auditory form of communication. After all, we don't see people rushing out to buy video equipment to accessorize their telephone, even though that technology has been available for some time.

E-mail is not just electronic mail sent via the internet. E-mail communication creates a psychological space in which pairs of people - or groups of people - interact. It creates a context and boundary in which human relationships can unfold.

Typed Text (TextTalk) - People type words to communicate via e-mail. More technologically sophisticated methods enable you to incorporate pictures and sounds into the message, but that's a more complex process that some people avoid. It's the simplicity and ease of use that attracts many people to e-mailing. On the other hand, some people may not like e-mail BECAUSE it involves typing. While everyone knows how to talk, not everyone knows how to type. Some people also may not feel comfortable or skilled in expressing themselves through writing. The typing/writing barrier filters some people out of the e-mail world. For those who love to write, e-mail is heaven. It's even possible that there is a difference in cognitive style between people who love to communicate with written words and those who don't. "Text talk," as I like to call it, is a language unto itself, overlapping with but not quite the same as writing letters, reports, other traditional types of documents.

Missing Face-to-Face Cues - In the typed text of e-mail, you can't see other people's faces or hear them speak. All those subtle voice and body language cues are lost, which can make the nuances of communicating more difficult. But humans are creative beings. Avid e-mailers have developed all sorts of innovative strategies for expressing themselves through typed text. A skilled writer may be able to communicate considerable depth and subtlety in the deceptively simple written word. Despite the lack of face-to-face cues, conversing via e-mail has evolved into a sophisticated, expressive art form.

Anonymity - People may not know who you are or where you are when you send them an e-mail. If you want, you can use a pseudonym in the message. And the return address contains only general information about where you are. The average user doesn't know how to track down the origin and identity of a mysterious message. If someone is determined to remain hidden, they can send their mail through an anonymous mailer service that will strip away all identifying information from the e-mail. This potential for anonymity in e-mailing disinhibits some people. They say things they wouldn't ordinarily say. The lack of face-to-face cues amplifies this disinhibiting effect. In some cases the result may be people who speak in an aggressive, antisocial manner. Sometimes it encourages people to be more open, honest, and affectionate. Anonymity isn't intrinsically a "good" or "bad" thing. It cuts both ways.

Asynchronous Interaction - E-mail conversations do not occur in "real time." You and your partner do not have to be sitting at the computer at the same moment in order to talk. Unlike face-to-face encounters, which are synchronous, e-mail discussions do not require you to respond on-the-spot to what they other has said. You have time to think, evaluate, and compose your reply. Some people take advantage of this convenient "zone of reflection." Some do not. When I receive a message that emotionally stirs me up, I apply my "24-Hours Rule." I compose a reply without sending it (or write nothing), wait 24 hours, then go back to reread the other person's message and my unsent reply. Very often, I interpret the other person's message differently - usually less emotionally - the second time around. Very often, the reply I do send off is very different - usually much more rationale and mature - than the one I would have sent the day before. The 24-Hours Rule has saved me from unnecessary misunderstandings and arguments (see the section on transference).

Adjustable Conversing Speed - Because e-mail communication is asynchronous, the rate at which you converse is maneuverable. A conversation may occur over the course of minutes, days, weeks, or months. Interactive time can be shortened or stretched, as needed. Changes in the pacing of the e-mail exchange between two people reflects the dynamics of their relationship.

Adjustable Group Size - Most e-mail programs allow you to cc people or create a mailing list. These features make it very easy to expand a dyad conversation into a group discussion. Large groups of dozens or more people can be managed through several online services that offer e-mail group services. The membership boundary of the e-mail interactive space is as flexible as its members want it to be. Sometimes the boundaries are hidden: people can be dropped from a discussion without their even knowing it. Many of the ideas discussed in this article apply to e-mail dyads as well as groups. But the topic of mailing lists is a whole universe unto itself, involving all the subtleties and complexities of group dynamics. For example, through what stages does an e-mail group progress?; what is it like being a member of an online working group, such as a wizard mailing list?; how can decisions be made in a mailing list?; what are the pros and cons of online support groups?; what happens when in-person work groups are extended into e-mail?

Spam - Inevitably, e-mail users are subjected to the spam of unrequested messages designed to sell an idea or a product. Junk mail. To internet oldtimers, spam is anathema. It's the apocalyptic sign of the commercialization of cyberspace. People subjectively experience e-mail as a personal space in which they interact with family, friends, and

colleagues. Spam is the commercial that pops up in your face, intruding on that private zone. In the list of incoming mail, it stands out like a wart. One of the very few good things about spam is that it reminds you of how e-mail is not a totally private space. Unwelcomed others can inject their irrelevance. Defending the in-box has become a game of wits between the user and the relentless spammers.

Novice and Pro: Intensity of E-mail Use

Although it seems that almost everyone is using e-mail nowadays, not everyone is using it to the same extent. One way to classify people is by the intensity of their e-mail use. People in each category tend to behave a bit differently in their e-mail relationships than people in the other categories. The impact e-mail has on your social life increases as you become more avidly involved. It becomes an upward spiraling process: the more you e-mail, the more relationships you develop, the more you need to continue e-mailing in order to stay connected to your colleagues and friends. With that ever-expanding e-mail life comes increased skill in composing, reading, and organizing e-mail. You become sensitized to the nuances of e-mail relationships, which makes that interpersonal world even more enticing, challenging, and rewarding.

For **avid e-mail users**, the computer is a major feature of their interpersonal and/or professional life, including dyad relationships and group memberships. Their online world has become deeply ingrained into their psyche and e-mail is an extremely important tool for psychologically maintaining that world. They check their e-mail at least once a day, often several times a day. It's one of very first things they do in the morning and may be the last thing they do before bedtime. Each day they may receive a hundred or more messages - the bulk of those messages coming from the group lists to which they belong. Some avid users may have their e-mail programs set to automatically download at regular intervals, while even more hardcore users (who may do their professional work online) check each message as soon as it comes in. For the avid user, a technical failure resulting in a loss of e-mail capability is a catastrophe. You feel cut off, out of the loop. Many avid users have some type of back-up system to counteract such disasters - for example, a second or third e-mail account, or a second e-mail capable computer (e.g., a computer at the office as well as at home). Avid users almost always have at least one online buddy who acts as an emergency intermediary. When the user's e-mail access goes down, he or she contacts the buddy who relays news of the user's predicament to their online friends and colleagues.

Regular e-mail users check and write e-mail a few times each week, usually at at a prescribed time. That scheduled e-mail session becomes a type of psychological space in which they leave the face-to-face world and momentarily immerse themselves into their cyberspace social reality. Their internet relationships can become a very significant feature of their lives, as with the avid user - although their e-mail worlds do not take on the same intensity as with avid users. Technical failures resulting in disconnection also doesn't stir up the same degree of anxiety.

The **casual e-mail user** does e-mail sporadically, maybe once a week, or less than that. For these users, e-mail is a curiosity, a toy to play with, an amusement for leisure time. They may enjoy tinkering with this form of communication - and may even establish some friends and colleagues through it. But e-mail has not become an important feature of their interpersonal world. Difficulties may arise when regular users - and especially avid users - begin e-mailing with casual users. There is a disparity in the perceived importance of developing the relationship via e-mail. The avid or regular user may be expecting more frequent exchanges, but does not receive them. Experienced users quickly recognize this disparity and adjust accordingly. The problem usually arises when casual user s misrepresents themselves: "Sure! I do e-mail all the time!" These casual users may misunderstand what experienced e-mailing is all about - or they naively are mislead by their "wannabe" inclinations.

E-mail usually is one of the first things a new internet user attempts. So the **newbie e-mail user** usually has just entered the world of cyberspace. These newbies don't understand the rules of the road or how things work. They may breach etiquette, like typing in caps, which is the text-talk equivalent of shouting. They don't fully understand the depth and complexity of the e-mail world. They don't yet appreciate its potential for developing relationships. Essentially, they don't know what they are getting into. Avid users often can spot a newbie very quickly. Some of these more experienced users enjoy taking the newbie under their wing. Other undesirable types may toy with or try to take advantage of the naive newbie. Eventually, the newbie differentiates into one of the other three types of e-mail users.

Writing Abilities and Styles

A person's ability to communicate effectively via e-mail depends highly on his or her writing skills. People who hate to write probably will not become consistent e-mail users. Regular and avid users usually enjoy writing. Some even report that they prefer writing as a way to express themselves. They take delight in words, sentence structure, message formatting, and the opportunity to craft exactly how they wish to express their thoughts and moods. They enjoy that "zone of reflection" where they can ponder and self-reflect before expressing themselves. In that zone e-mail usually is a less spontaneous form of communicating than speech. Unlike verbal conversation - where words issue forth and immediately evaporate - writing places one's thoughts in a more visible, permanent, concrete, and objective format. An e-mail message is a tiny packet of self-representation that launches off into cyberspace. Some even experience it as a creative work, a gift sent to one's Internet pal. It's a piece of oneself that experienced e-mail users enjoy constructing.

The quality of the relationship between e-mail correspondents rests on their writing skills. The better people can express themselves through writing, the more the relationship can develop and deepen. Poor writing can result in misunderstandings and conflicts. In the absence of an accurate perception of what the other is trying to say, people tend to project their own expectations, anxieties, and fantasies onto the other (see the section on transference). A disparity in writing ability between e-mail partners also can be problematic. The equivalent in in-person encounters would be one person who is very eloquent and forthcoming, talking to another who speaks awkwardly and minimally. The loquacious one eventually may resent putting so much effort into the relationship and taking all the risks of self-disclosure. The quiet one may feel controlled, ignored, and misunderstood.

We tend to think of writing abilities as a fixed skill - a tool for expressing oneself that is either sophisticated or not. It's also possible that the quality of one's writing is affected by the quality of the relationship with the other. As an e-mail relationship deepens and trust develops, a person may open up to more expressive forms of writing. They are more willing to experiment, take risks - not just in what specific thoughts or emotions they express, but also in the words and composition used. Spelling and grammar conjure up all sorts of memories and emotions from the school years of one's childhood. Your self-concept may ride on those memories. In the course of an e-mail relationship, those issues from the past may be stirred up.

Writing isn't just a tool for developing the e-mail relationship. Writing affects the relationship, and the relationship influences the quality of the writing. Writing effectiveness changes as a result of what is happening in the ongoing e-mail encounter. Composition advances when people feel safe and are ready to explore; it regresses when they feel threatened, hurt, or angry. Those changes reflect the developmental changes in the relationship.

In addition to writing skill, writing STYLE also affects the e-mail relationship and is in turn affected by it. Concrete, abstract, and emotional expression, complexity of vocabulary and sentence structure, the organization and flow of thought - all reflect one's cognitive/personality style and influence how others reacts to you. Compulsive people may construct highly organized, intellectualized messages with little emotional revelation. Histrionic people may show less concern about organization and much more for the emotions they express. Narcissists may write extremely long, rambling blocks of paragraphs. Schizoids may produce very short but penetrating messages. Different writing/personality styles may be compatible, incompatible, or complementary to other styles.

Anatomy of an E-mail Message: Facets and Structure

An e-mail message can be dissected into seven components: (1) the sender's name as indicated in your inbox, (2) the subject line, as indicated in your inbox, (3) the greeting that introduces the body of the message, (4) the body of message, including quoted text, (5) the sign-off line and name, and, (6) the signature block. The body of the message is what most people consider the actual "message" itself. Surely, it is the most lengthy, complex, and changing aspect of the exchange between e-mail partners. However, the other components of the message also can be tiny gems of communication. Much meaning can be packed into those little nuggets. How those deceptively simple components of the message change over time may signal important changes in the relationship.

1. The Sender's Name

Most people set their e-mail username in their e-mail program and leave it that way. It reflects the ongoing identity that one wishes to present online. The name chosen usually is one's real name, a pseudonym, or a combined name (e.g., Bill and Martha Smith). Using one's real name indicates a wish to simply be oneself. It's a straightforward, "honest" presentation. Pseudonyms are more mysterious, playful approaches: "Can you guess who I am?" They may express

some non-obvious or underlying aspect of the person's identity and self-concept. They may reveal unconscious motivating fantasies and wishes (or fears) about one's identity. A combined name is a "letting it be known" that you have a partner - that the two of you are sharing the e-mail program and may both be reading all the mail (which may significantly affect how others respond). When people change the username setting in their e-mail program, it reflects a significant change in how they wish to present their ongoing, online identity. Moving from a pseudonym to one's real name expresses the wish to drop the "mask" (albeit a meaningful mask). Changing the combined name to a single name is a move towards separation and individuation that invites more private, one-on-one dialogue.

2. The Subject Line

The subject line is a tiny microcosm unto itself. Often people use it to just summarize or introduce the major idea/s contained in the body of the message. But experienced e-mail users understand the more subtle techniques for communicating meaning and emotion in the titles they bestow to their e-mail. The subject line can lead into, highlight, or elaborate a particular idea in the message. It can ask a definitive question, shoot back a definitive answer, joke, tease, prod, berate, shout, whisper, or emote. Sometimes its meaning may blatantly or discreetly contradict the sentiment expressed in the body of the message. A creative application of caps, commas, slashes, parentheses, and other keyboard characters adds emphasis and complexity to the thoughts and emotions expressed in the subject line. Here are some examples illustrating these ideas:

> HELLO SAM!
> and now for something completely different
> What should I do?
> the solution is....
> loved it!
> Jim! help, Help, HELP!!
> offensive
> ACCK!!!
> I'm so impressed (yawn)
> Have To Do This
> **PASSWORD CHANGE**
> (sic)
> Things afoot...
> Even more/sorry
> thanks for your compliment and support, really!
> please read
> ????
> guitar, our visit, money
> OK folks, settle down
> It's been fun, boys & girls ;-)
> apology
> &**%$#))(*@#%%$
> HUGZZZ
> Bob / battles / techniques / bullshit
> sigh...

In an e-mail archive, examining the list of subject lines across the development of the relationship is like perusing the headlines of a newspaper over the course of months or years. It reflects the flow of important themes in the history of the e-mail encounter. These patterns and trends over time might reveal hidden or unconscious elements in relationship between the two people. For example, one interesting feature is the use of "re:" as a prefix to the subject line. For how many messages did the couple continue to click on "reply" and reuse the same subject? This might indicate the emotional intensity of that particular thread.

The use of "re:" versus creating a new subject line can be an interesting dynamic interchange between e-mail partners. Creating a new line is a bit like taking the lead in the relationship by introducing a new title for the interaction - like creating a headline for the story that is the ongoing dialogue. It's an attempt to conceptualize, summarize, and highlight what the person perceives as the most important feature of the conversation. Creating a new subject line calls into play the "observing ego" - that ability to step back and reflect on what is happening. It shows a sense of responsibility and ownership for the dialogue - in some cases maybe even an attempt to control the dialogue. In this fashion, some e-mail partners duel with each other via the subject line. Simply clicking on reply without creating a new message title may

indicate less of an observing ego and more of a spontaneous reaction. It suggests a "I want to reply to what you said" mode of operation. Some people chronically fail to create a new subject line and persistently use "re:" They may be a bit passive in the relationship, or lazy. They may not feel that sense of responsibility, ownership, or control. If this isn't true, their partner may nevertheless perceive them as being that way.

Spammers will try to exploit the subject line in order to trick you into opening the message. Beware of subject headings written all in caps, embellished with asterisks and exclamation points, or containing overly friendly or seductive messages ("Just wanted to say hello...") - especially when you don't recognize the sender's name. If it looks and smells like spam, it's spam.

3. The Greeting

Similar to writing letters or meeting someone on the street, the conversation usually begins with a greeting of some sort. Different greetings convey slightly different emotional tones and levels of intimacy. It sets the mood for the rest of the message, and sometimes may contradict the tone of the message. Over the course of a batch of messages, the back-and-forth changes in the greeting can become a revealing little dance - sometimes playful, sometimes competitive. Who is being more polite, friendly, intimate, enthusiastic, emotional? Adding the person's name to the greeting - "Hi Pat," rather than simply "Hi" - always indicates a deeper level of intimacy - or, at the very least, the fact that you made the small extra effort to personalize the message.

Here is a sample of some greetings:

> Dear Pat - A somewhat formal opening, highly reminiscent of letter writing. In fact, newbie e-mail users often fall back on this familiar way to start off a correspondence. I've rarely seen experienced users begin with "Dear" - except, perhaps, when approaching a stranger for whom respectful formality might be appropriate. In most cases, it's a bit too polite for the casual atmosphere that many associate with the Internet. Because "Dear" is associated with snail mail - an inferior mode of communicating, in the eyes of avid users - some people may frown upon it's use. They might view the sender as being naive about the social dynamics of e-mail.

> Hello Pat - A more causal, friendly greeting, with a hint of politeness and respect. A very handy, all-purpose opener.

> Hi Pat - A slightly more casual, friendlier greeting than "Hello." It's probably not appropriate for the first e-mail exchange with a stranger, unless you immediately want to set the tone of "friendliness among peers."

> Hi Pat! / Hello Pat!! - A more enthusiastic salutation, almost like hugging or slapping the person on the back. There also can be an element of surprise or delight in the exclamation point - as if you just called the person on the phone and can hear in their "Hi!" how they happily recognize that it's you! The more exclamation points, the more enthusiasm - although a long row of exclamation points might be perceived as phony or contrived overkill.

> Pat!!! - This one conveys an even higher level of enthusiasm, surprise, or delight - so much so that only and simply the companion's name gushes forth from one's consciousness.

> Pat, - A very matter-of-fact, "let's get to the point" opening. Sometimes there's an almost ominous tone to this greeting, as if the sender is trying to get your attention in preparation for some unpleasant discussion.

> Hey there! - A very informal greeting, usually reserved for friends. Although the recipient's name is omitted, it's assumed that the sender knows it's you.

> Hey Dude! / Yo! - Another very informal hello reserved for friends, usually (but not always) between males. It conveys a feeling of camaraderie.

> Greetings! - A sure sign that spam is coming at you, or perhaps a message from a colleague or friend who is trying to be a bit humorous by offering a deceptively "formal" hello.

<u>Hi.</u> / <u>Hello.</u> - Whereas the Hi is a bit more casual than the Hello, both of these greetings lack the intimate touch of including the recipients name. They come across as a bit flat or impersonal. Spammers and other people who are basically indifferent to who you are will top off the message with this lackluster intro.

No greeting at all is an interesting phenomenon that cuts both ways. In some cases, it may reveal that the sender is lazy, passive, or how he/she lacks any personal connection to you (as well as any desire for a personal connection). In some messages I've received of this type, I felt almost as if the sender perceived me as a computer program ready to respond their needs - with no identity or needs of my own.

On the other hand, no greeting may indicate the exact opposite scenario. The sender indeed feels connected to you - so much so that a greeting isn't required. She assumes you know that it's you who's on her mind. Or he never felt like he left the conversation and the psychological space he inhabits with you: so why inject a greeting into the message? In an ongoing, back-and-forth dialogue, there may be no greetings at all throughout a string of exchanged e-mails. In the face-to-face world, you don't say "hello" in the midst of an energetic discussion. In cyberspace, the same principle holds. Although each e-mail message looks like a letter that traditionally starts off with a greeting, it actually isn't. In many cases it is a segment of an ongoing conversation.

4. The Body of the Message

The body of the message is the most complex component of the e-mail. Messages can vary widely in length, organization, flow of ideas, the use of quoted text, spelling errors, grammar sophistication, the use of caps, tabs, smileys and other unique keyboard characters, the spacing of paragraphs, and the overall visual "feel" of the message.

The structure of the e-mail body reflects the cognitive and personality style of the individual who creates it. People who are compulsive may strive for well organized and logically constructed messages with few, if any, spelling or grammatical errors (they will take advantage of their spell-check programs). Those with a histrionic flair may offer a more dramatic presentation, where neatness plays a back seat to the expressive use of spacing, caps, unique keyboard characters, and colorful language. People with schizoid tendencies may be pithy, while those who are more impulsive may dash off a disorganized, spelling-challenged message with emotional phrases highlighted in shouted caps.

E-mail Empathy - Does the sender pay attention to and anticipate the needs of the recipient? Empathic people will specifically respond to what their e-mail partners have said. They ask their partners questions about themselves and their lives. But they also construct their messages anticipating what it will be like for the recipient to read it. They write in a style that is both engaging and readily understood. With appropriate use of spacing, paragraph breaks, and various keyboard characters (....////****) to serve as highlights and dividers, they visually construct the message so that it is easy and pleasing to read. They estimate just how long is too long. Essentially, they are good writers who pay attention to the needs of their audience. This is quite unlike people with narcissistic tendencies, who have difficulty putting themselves into the shoes of the recipient. They may produce lengthy blocks of unbroken text, expecting that their partner will sustain an interest in scrolling, reading, scrolling, reading, for seemingly endless screens of long-winded descriptions of what the sender thinks and feels. Paradoxically, the narcissistic person's need to be heard and admired may result in the recipient hitting the delete key out of frustration or boredom.

Planning versus Spontaneity - A carefully, empathically constructed e-mail sometimes lacks spontaneity. It is possible to over-think and micro-manage the message to the point where it sounds a bit contrived. Perhaps the most effective message is one that strikes a balance between spontaneity and carefully planned organization. Also, short messages with some obvious spelling errors, glitches, or a slightly chaotic visual appearance can be a sincere expression of affection and friendship - as if the person is willing to let you see how they look hanging around the house, wearing an old t-shirt and jeans. Or such a message can be a genuine expression of the person's state of mind at that moment. "I'm in a hurry, but I wanted to dash this off to you!" In the course of an ongoing e-mail relationship, there will be a engaging rhythm of spontaneous and carefully thought out messages that parallels the ebb and flow of the relationship itself.

Creative Keyboarding - Humans are curious creatures. When faced with barriers, they find all sorts of creative ways to work around them - especially when those barriers involve communication. Experienced e-mailers have developed a variety of keyboard techniques to overcome some of the limitations of typed text - techniques that lend a vocal and kinesthetic quality to the message. They attempt to make e-mail conversations less like postal letters and more like a face-to-face encounter. Some of these strategies come from the world of Internet chat rooms.

Thank you so much! (happy, happy, happy)
[feeling insecure here]
I completely forgot! (slapping myself on the forehead)
Hi (yawn) everyone.
I know exactly what I'm talking about (scratching forehead)
(thinking this over...)
[g]

Thoughts and feelings placed in parentheses or brackets are a kind of subvocal muttering to oneself - as if one is thinking outloud, tipping one's hand, allowing the other to peek inside one's head. There's an honest or even vulnerable quality to this **parenthetical expression** because you're letting the other person in on something that otherwise could be kept hidden. Actions placed in parentheses indicate body language - an attempt to convey some of the face-to-face cues that are missing in typed text encounters. Options range from a simple standard grin [g] to more complex, personally tailored descriptions. Of course, people have much more conscious control over these parenthetical actions than they do over body language in the in-person world. Sometimes it's an intentional effort to convey some subtle mood or state of mind. In a way, one almost implicitly is saying, "Hey, if there is something hidden or unconscious going on inside me, this is what it probably is!"

I'd love to hear about *your* opinion
I urge you to PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE keep everything you have!
I will **NOT** do it!!!
On the other hand, if it _IS_ true, then we have to do something.
big smoochies
[[[HUGS]]]

Voice accentuation can be accomplished using caps, asterisks, underlining, and other keyboard characters. Exclamation points add to the effect. It's an attempt to mimic the changes in voice emphasis that you might hear in hte face-to-face world as well as the emotions that accompany that emphasis. Accentuating a single word in a sentence sometimes can drastically alter the meaning and impact of that sentence. Rather than highlighting voice, those last two examples above illustrate an **action accentuation**. Like parenthetical actions, it expresses body language - but body language that is always completely intentional and obvious.

Speaking of which....
Thanks.... and.... happy birthday to you.....happy birthday to yooooouuuuuu!!
That's for sure..... On the other hand, I may be wrong.
I would say that......um..... uh....

A series of dots - "**trailers**" - can be used creatively in a variety of ways. Usually they mimic a pause in one's speaking. That pause might be used dramatically, to lead the person into or psychologically prepare them for your next idea - sometimes even a "you might want to sit down for this" warning. Or the trailer indicates a pause to breathe (as in singing), a transition in your thinking, or a temporary lapse or faltering in your train of thought. The addition of the "um" and "uh" in that last example helps simulate the sense of hesitation and confusion in that faltering thought process. It mimics in-person speech patterns.

That's wonderful! :-)
I disagree with you Bill :-)
Take this job and shove it :-)
I have complete faith in you :-)
My, aren't we defensive :-)
I really am a serial yakker :-)
I myself have been guilty of this. :-)
Thanks for listening to my rant. :-)
I have warned you not to stray over that fine line :-)

Gotta go :-(
This is really upsetting :-(

Know what I mean? ;-)
We'll show him a thing or two. ;-)
Just throwing in my 2 cents ;-)

He has SUCH a magnetic personality ;-)
Forget PC's, there is WebTv now ;-)

As the term "**emoticons**" suggests, these keyboard faces are tagged onto the end of a sentence to enhance emotional expression. Including the smiley, the frown, and the winky (among others), they may amplify the feeling expressed in the sentence, add a subtle affective spin to the sentence, or even contradict its sentiment. The smiley often is used to clarify a friendly feeling when otherwise the tone of your sentence might be ambiguous. It also can reflect benign assertiveness, an attempt to undo hostility, subtle denial or sarcasm, self-consciousness, and apologetic anxiety. The winky is like elbowing your e-mail partner, implying that you both know something that doesn't need to be said outloud. It's also a good way to express sarcasm.

lol
LOL
LOL!!!!
ROFL!!!!
LMAO!!!

The ubiquitous **LOL** (laughing out loud) - which originated in chat rooms - is very handy tool for responding to something funny without having to actually say "Oh, that's funny!" It's feels more natural and spontaneous - more like the way you would respond in a face-to-face situation. The sequence of acronyms listed above indicate increasing levels of mirth - beginning with the weak, perhaps even perfunctory "lol" and moving toward the unrestrained "rolling on floor laughing" and raucous "laughing my ass off." Once again, exclamation points enhance the effect.

Hello Sam. Thank you for the message you sent. I enjoyed it. I didn't know that you felt that way. Let's talk more about it.

Hello Sam! Thank you for the message you sent. I enjoyed it!! I didn't know that you felt that way. Let's talk more about it!

Hello Sam!! Thank you for the message you sent!! I enjoyed it!!! I didn't know that you felt that way!!! Let's talk more about it!!!

How and when to use **exclamation points** is a bit of an art form. Unless the sentiment of the sentence is clearly negative, they tend to lighten up the mood. But like spice in cooking, there are dangers of excess as well as omissions. Leaving out exclamation points entirely - as in the first example above - may result in a message that appears emotionally bland, ambiguous, maybe overly serious. Without even a hint of enthusiasm, some people might wonder if the sender is suppressing some hostility. On the other extreme, too many exclamation points - as in the third example above - may result in a message mood that seems contrived, shallow, or even uncomfortably manic. A message peppered lightly with exclamations, at just the right spots, can give the message a varying texture of energy that emphasizes what needs to be emphasized. Of the three examples above, the second best illustrates this.

Quoted Text - An advantage of e-mail conversations over face-to-face ones is that you have the ability to quote parts or all of what your partner said in his previous message. Hitting "reply" - which, in many e-mail programs, places arrow marks > or vertical lines next to the whole quoted message - and then tacking your response to the top or bottom of the e-mail is a quick and easy rejoinder. In some cases it's a very appropriate strategy, especially when your partner's message was short, which makes it obvious what you are replying to. However, inserting a reply at the top or bottom of an entire quoted message which is LONG may be perceived by your partner as laziness or indifference on your part - as if you simply hit the reply button, typed your response, and clicked on "send." The person may not be sure exactly what part of the message you are responding to. You also force your partner to download an unnecessarily long file. Sticking a reply at the end of the lengthy quoted message can be particularly annoying because it forces the person to scroll and scroll and scroll, looking for the reply.

All in all, quoting the entirety of a hefty message may not come across as a considerate and personal response. The impersonal, business-like, or "for the record" tone may be exacerbated by those e-mail programs that automatically preface a block of quoted text with a standardized notice like, "On Saturday, May 28, Joe Smith said:" While this automated notation may work fine in formal, business-like relationships, or on e-mail lists where multiple conversations are taking place, it may leave a bad taste in the mouth of an e-mail friend or acquaintance.

The alternative to quoting the whole message is to select out and respond individually to segments of it. Some e-mail programs allow you to place vertical lines or arrow marks next to each line of quoted text, or the sender may place

arrows at the beginning and end of the quoted segment (>>often like this<<). Some people use [snip] to indicate that what follows is quoted text.

It takes more time and effort to quote segments rather than the whole message, but there are several advantages. People may appreciate the fact that you put that time and effort into your response. It makes your message clearer, more to the point, easier to read. It may convey to your partner a kind of empathic attentiveness because you are responding to specific things that she said. You are letting the person know exactly what from his message stood out in your mind. Replying to several segments can result in an entertaining and intriguingly rich e-mail in which there are several threads of conversation occurring at the same time, each with a different content and emotional tone. In one multilevel e-mail, you may be joking, explaining, questioning, recalling a past event, and anticipating a future one. For continuity and clarity, several back-and-forth exchanges can be captured by embedding quoted segments. Experienced e-mail users have a variety of keyboard techniques for making a series of embedded quotes easier to read. Here is an example using arrows:

>> I know what you mean. He said the same thing to me.
> What was your reaction?
I didn't know exactly how to react.

>> I know what you mean. He said the same thing to me.
> What was your reaction?
------> I didn't know exactly how to react.

>> I know what you mean. He said the same thing to me.
> What was your reaction?
...... I didn't know exactly how to react.

>> I know what you mean. He said the same thing to me.
> What was your reaction?

I didn't know exactly how to react.

There is a downside to quoting segments. In flame wars, you often see people citing more and more of what the opponent said, using it as ammunition to launch counterattacks. A series of point-by-point retorts becomes a verbal slicing up of the foe, almost as if it reflects an unconscious wish to "tear up" the person by tearing up his message. Often the attacker wants to legitimize his arguments by citing the opponent's exact words, as if the citation stands as concrete, unquestionable evidence. "This is precisely what you said." However, it's very easy to take sentences out of context, completely misread their emotional tone, or juxtapose several segments extracted from different parts of the other person's e-mail and then draw a false conclusion from that forced composite of ideas. My colleague Michael Fenichel aptly calls this a "cut and paste reality."

Rich Text - Many e-mail programs enable the person to control font type, size, color, centering, left and right justification, bold and italic styling. These options provide another dimension for creatively formatting the e-mail and expressing oneself. Bold print comes in handy for voice accentuation. Color can highlight mood - for example, conveying **anger** or **jubilation**. Different text colors and/or fonts also work effectively for indicating quoted text, especially when two or more people are cited within your message, with a different font and/or color for each person.

However, as in cuisine, overly rich text can make the reader queasy. A heavy mixture of fonts, colors, styling, and indentations becomes confusing, unpalatable. All creative keyboarding techniques require a light, sensitive hand - a delicate balance of expressive and straightforward communication.

Those eager for creative e-mails also need to know that not all e-mail programs or e-mail servers will be kind to their creations. Some programs and servers may not recognize the special formatting. A paragraph innovatively and beautifully formatted by the sender may be riddled with meaningless glitches in the reader's window. Or that part of the message may simply disappear. Essentially, the machines at both ends - and inbetween - speak different languages, resulting in these annoying **e-mail translation errors**. Before attempting rich text, it is wise to send a sample message to the recipient, to test out what can and can't be read.

5. The Sign-Off Line and Name

Whereas the greeting is the way people say hello and sign in, the sign-off line is the way they exit from their message. As with the greeting, the sign-off is a fingerprint revealing the status of the person's mood and state of mind - sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. "Here's where I'm at as I say good-bye." A contrast between the greeting and the sign-off may be significant - as if writing the e-mail altered the person's attitudes and feelings. Across a series of messages, the sign-off lines may be a string of repartees between the partners that amplifies, highlights or adds nuance to their dialogue in the message bodies. The progression of exchanged sign-off lines may itself become an encapsulated, Morse-code dialogue between the partners. "Sincerely," "Regards" or other similar sign-offs are rather safe, all-purpose tools borrowed from the world of postal mail. They are formal, polite ways to exit. Some avid e-mailer users use them sparingly because they suggest a snail-mail mentality and a lack of appreciation for the creatively conversational quality of e-mail. Here are some examples of sign-off lines that are a bit more revealing of the person's state of mind and his/her relationship to the e-mail partner:

> HUGZZ,
> take care,
> an unusually annoyed,
> thanks for listening,
> Live long and prosper,
> ACK!
> peace,
> just my 2 cents,
> stay cool,
> have fun!
> still confused,
> sheesh....
> looking forward to hearing from you,
> enough for now,

Almost invariably, the sender's name follows the sign-off line, which demonstrates how intrinsically connected the sign-off line is to the identity of the sender. Simply typing your real name is the easiest, most straightforward tactic. If the e-mail partners both belong to the same online community, they may have to make a conscious choice about whether to use their real names or their online usernames. The online name can be entertaining and revealing, but changing from that imaginary handle to your real name may be a gesture of honestly and intimacy - a kind of "coming out." Creatively playing with your sign-off name can be an another effective way to express your state of mind, some aspect of your identity, or your relationship to your e-mail partner. Usually this type of play only feels appropriate with friends, or it indicates that one wishes to be friendly, loose, and imaginative. Proclaiming their identification with net culture, people sometimes apply the common cyberspace practice of fusing two capitalized words to create a "neologistic name" for themselves. Here are some examples of playful sign-off names:

> Ed!
> Kat :-)
> Busy Guy
> Sam (aka SupraSuds)
> Weary2
> BirthdayGal
> The Frozen Man
> BigBro
> Cyberhappy
> Po'

Leaving out the sign-off line and/or name may be an omission with meaning. It might suggest a curt, efficient, formal, impersonal, or even angry attitude about the conversation. The ending could appear especially bureaucratic or impersonal if the person inserts his signature block and nothing else. On the other hand, friends may leave out a sign-off line and name as a gesture of informality and familiarity. "You know it's me." They may assume that the conversation is ongoing - as in a face-to-face talk - so there's no need to type anything that suggests a good-bye.

6. The Signature Block

Many e-mail programs offer the option of creating a signature file or "block" that automatically will be placed at the bottom of your message (unless that feature is turned off). People usually place factual or identifying information into that file - such as their full name, title, e-mail address, postal address, institutional affiliation, phone number, etc. It's a prepackaged stamp indicating "who and where I am." What a person puts into that file reflects what they hold dear to their public identity. Some programs offer the feature of writing alternative signature files, which gives the person the opportunity to create several different fingerprints, each one tailored for a specific purpose. For example, one may be formal and factual, another more casual and playful. Each one is a slightly different slice of the person's identity. Because all signature blocks have a non-spontaneous, prepackaged feeling to them, friends often make a conscious effort to turn it off when writing to a cyberspace pal. In a sense, you are dropping your status and title while also assuming the person knows your e-mail address, phone number, etc. The first message in which the sig block is eliminated probably reflects the sender's move towards feeling more friendly and casual in the relationship. As with the sign-off line and name, a change in a person's sig block reflects a shift in their identity or in how they wish to present their identity.

Ambitious and creative e-mail users sometimes place an ASCII drawing or an abstract pattern into the sig file. It's an attempt to be artistic, which may or may not be successful. When it is, people often are impressed. "How'd she do that!?" It's not easy to create a good looking ASCII drawing. Producing an effective one is a public demonstration of one's artistic and technical skill.

According to traditional net culture, people also place quotes into their sig block. Sometimes the quotes are serious, humorous, intellectual, tongue-in-cheek, famous, or home-spun. Which quote a person chooses - and how they present it - can reveal an important slice of their personality, life style, or philosophy of life. Here are some examples:

> I think..... therefore I am confused
> Life is what happens when we're busy planning other things - J. Lennon
> The respected man is the man that will ALWAYS remember where he came from........."
> - yuujou - doryoku - shouri -
> I need to.... get back in the arms of a good friend
> Humorous redhead on the loose... be afraid, be VERY afraid! =)
> DENIAL is NOT a RIVER in EGYPT
> life may be short, but it sure is wide
>
> When the only tool one owns is a hammer, every problem begins to resemble a nail. - Abraham Maslow
>
> If I am not for myself,
> Who will be for me?
> And if I am only for myself,
> What am I?
> And if not now,
> When?"
> -Hillel
>
> The way out is via the door. Why is it that no-one will use this method? -Confucius

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An E-mail Make-Over

What follows is an example of a "before" and "after" message. The two are similar in terms of the surface content of what Susan is saying to Joe. However, the second one illustrates the variety of e-mail composition techniques discussed in the previous sections of this article. It shows a balance between spontaneity and thoughtful organization; empathic attentiveness to the recipient; and the expressive use of quoted text, caps, special characters, spacing, trailers, parenthetical thoughts and actions, and smileys. As such, it conveys an entirely different range of meanings and feelings that the first message:

----
version 1

Joe,
Quoting text in e-mail is something we all have to learn at some point or another. No problem. If your e-mail program doesn't automatically set up a new message with the quoted text in it, there are other ways to do it. One way is like this. Open the e-mail I sent to you. Create a new (blank) e-mail to send to me. Use your mouse to select and copy the text from the e-mail I sent you. Insert that copied text into the new e-mail message. Add in whatever new text you want into the message to send to me. This is easy to do on a Mac. I think you're working on a PC, right? It should be pretty easy for you too, though the steps might be slightly different. Let me know how it works out. Have a great time on your vacation. We were supposed to leave for vacation last week, but our car broke down. Something to do with the transmission. It's at the dealers now being fixed. It will probably cost an arm and a leg. But that doesn't matter. You know us. We have lots of money.
- Susan

----
version 2

Hello Joe!

>>Working on the paper together through e-mail is a great idea. My trouble is that I don't know how to add onto your e-mail, though I've seen others respond to my e-mails by just writing below what I had written. I'm sure it's a1-2-3 type of thing, so if you give me a hand I'd really appreciate it. I'm such a dolt!<<

LOL! Hey! It's something we all have to learn at some point or another. No prob. If your e-mail program doesn't automatically set up a new message with the quoted text in it, there are other ways to do it. One way is like this:

- open the e-mail I sent to you
- create a new (blank) e-mail to send to me
- use your mouse to select and copy the text from the e-mail I sent you
- insert that copied text into the new e-mail message
- add in whatever new text you want into the message to send to me

Voila. This is easy to do on a Mac. I think you're working on a PC, right? It should be pretty easy for you too, though the steps might be slightly different. Let me know how it works out.

>> Otherwise all is going well here. We're headed to the beach for our vacation next week. We're looking forward to it. We need some time off from work.<<

Have a GREAT time! :-) .... (feeling jealous).... We were *supposed* to leave for vacation last week, but our car broke down. Something to do with the transmission. It's at the dealers now being fixed. It will probably cost an arm and a leg. But that doesn't matter. You know us....we.... uh... (cough)...have LOTS of money. ;-)

hands in holes in pockets,
Susan

Simply Susan
msmith@newnet.com
"Life without art isn't life."

Multimedia Enhancements

As e-mail technology has matured, we have access to more features to enhance our messages. Many programs make it easy to attach images, sounds, programs, and almost any type of document to the message. The recipient may perceive such attachments - especially images from friends - as little gifts piggybacked onto the e-mail. Large attachments may require a long download time, which might make the recipient annoyed. Because attachments often are perceived as "extras" - something in addition to the message, something unrequested and maybe unwanted - proper etiquette suggests asking ahead of time before sending it. Because computer viruses spread as attachments, such files can stir anxiety and suspicion, especially when the sender is unknown. Also, spam with graphcs embedded into the message often contain image attachments. Given these potential problems with attachments, when people don't react to them as gifts, they perceive them as intrusions upon their e-mail territory.

Many e-mail programs enable senders to insert images directly into the body of the message, which adds another level of expressive complexity. Usually people insert pictures at the end of the message, so as not to disrupt the integrity of the message body. In that position, the image can serve as a visual appendix to an idea within the message, as a concluding comment, or even as a surprise the recipient only discovers after scrolling down to the end.

Senders add hypertext addresses into their message to provide a springboard for the recipient to jump from the message into the web. When e-mail programs enable these links to be "hot," simply clicking them within the message catapults the reader into a web browser and onto a web page. Such links create a swift and easy transition between private space and public space, almost as if the sender and reader are sitting side-by-side within the e-mail space, talking privately, but then are able to open a door to step out into a worldwide public area of information and entertainment.

Some e-mail programs also enable messages to display web page codes, complete with full page layout, graphics, and links. The message looks very similar to a web page, thus eliminating much of the distinction between private e-mail space versus public web space. This distinction is magnified by the fact that commercial e-mail tends to involve such elaborate formatting much more often than private e-mail between individuals.

As with e-mail containing rich text, multimedia e-mail may not translate well in all e-mail programs, especially older ones incapable of recognizing the special formatting. Inserted images disappear. A paragraph innovatively and beautifully formatted with html codes is riddled with meaningless glitches in the reader's window. Your computer crashes. The machines at both ends speak different languages, resulting in these **e-mail translation errors** that range from mild annoyances to major mishaps. Before attempting to send multimedia e-mail, it is wise to send a sample message to the recipient, to test out what can and can't be read.

Just Between You and Me: Private Language

Like any subculture, the world of e-mailing has developed a unique language. Having its own novel terms and expressions that outsiders don't understand gives any group a sense of distinctive identity. To be in the group is to be in the know. If you appropriately use the parlance, you are demonstrating your knowledge of and belonging to the subculture. The unique language also evolves for purely practical reasons. It makes communication more efficient. In the world of avid e-mail users, a variety of acronyms and abbreviations have developed. Many of these were borrowed from chat lingo. For example:

    imho - in my humble opinion
    btw - by the way
    jk - just kidding
    ppl - people
    irl - in real life
    fyi - for your information
    brb - be right back
    afk - away from keyboard

A private language also may develop between two people or among a small group of people who e-mail each other frequently. It may include unique acronyms, expressions, character symbols and words (neologisms) that only those people understand. The evolution of that private language reflects the evolving identity, cohesion, and intimacy of the dyad or group. Usually the language crystallizes around issues that are discussed frequently and therefore personally important to the e-mail partners.

Pacing: The Ebb and Flow of Mail

Because e-mail has an adjustable conversing speed, the pacing of message exchanges will vary over the course of an e-mail relationship. The excitement of getting to know each other - and enjoying each others company - will result in an increasing pace that eventually plateaus into a rate of exchange that feels comfortable to both partners. As a general rule, the more frequently people e-mail each other, the more important and intimate the relationship feels to them. Some people e-mail each other every day, or several times a day. Bursts in the intensity of the pace occur when hot topics are being discussed, when recent events in one's life need to be explained, or when work needs to be done. These bursts may reflect a sudden deepening of the intimacy in the relationship. Declines in the pace may indicate a temporary or longterm weakening of the bonds between the couple - either due to a growing disinterest in the relationship or distractions from other sectors of one's life (usually "real" life). Significant changes in the cadence always indicates a significant change in feelings, attitudes, or commitment.

When people become enthused about e-mail, they may expect that their partners will respond at a pace as intense as their own enthusiasm. They may even unconsciously experience the interaction as if it is a face-to-face encounter - and so, perhaps unconsciously, they are expecting an almost immediate reply. Experienced e-mail users understand that different people have different paces. Some do e-mail every day; some two or three times a week; some once a week or less. Even avid and regular users have slightly different rhythms. You adjust yourself accordingly. You settle into a tempo that is right for each relationship. You accept that tempo as a meaningful indication of what that relationship is about.

Drastic drops in the pace, or an apparent failure of the partner to respond at all, throws you into the "black hole" experience. The partner's silence may be a sign of anger, indifference, stubborn withdrawal, punishment, laziness, preoccupation with other things... But you don't know for sure. The ambiguity inherent in the no-reply easily can become a blank screen onto which we project our own expectations, emotions, and anxieties.

Transference: Seeing the Other Clearly

The lack of face-to-face cues in e-mail often results in ambiguity. Without hearing a person's voice - or seeing body language and facial expressions - you may not be exactly sure what the person means. This ambiguity enhances the tendency to project your own expectations, wishes, and anxieties stemming from past relationships onto the somewhat shadowy figure sitting at the other end of the Internet - what is called a "transference reaction." As an e-mail relationship develops over time, there may be ebbs and flows in the transferential feelings and attitudes towards the other person. When you first connect through e-mail, they tend to be minimal because you do not know the other person and have little psychological investment in the relationship. Transference reactions are more likely to surface when emotional attachments begin to form but you still do not have a good "feel" for the person due to that lack of ftf cues. Other peak moments occur when emotional topics come up but you are unable to pinpoint exactly where the other person stands on the issue. When in doubt, we fall back on our old expectations about how people relate to us - expectations that formed in our early relationships with our parents and siblings. Black hole experiences - the ultimate "blank screens" - also are notorious for stirring up transference.

Under ideal conditions, as we spend more and more time conversing with an e-mail partner, we begin to understand and work through those transference reactions so that we can see the other person as he/she really is. However, even under the best of circumstances, there often is some aspect of our mental image of the other person that is based more on our own expectations and needs than on the reality of the other person. It may be the way we think he looks, her voice sounds, or some aspect of his personality. We may not even be consciously aware that we've formed that impression until we meet the person ftf and discover, much to our surprise, that they are - in some way - very different than what we expected. Generally speaking, transference reactions are unconscious. We don't see them coming, and don't fully realize how they are steering our behavior. That's why they can get lead us astray and into trouble.

Some incoming e-mail may be prepackaged with transference even though the person is a complete stranger to us. If you have a web site - or other information about you is available on the internet - people can form inaccurate impressions which they launch your way in the form of an e-mail. They may idealize you, detest you, or anything inbetween. These kind of transference reactions often are deeply ingrained, prepared responses in the person that are ready to leap out at an opportune moment. On a fairly regular basis, I receive e-mail from people whom I call "spoon-feeders." There is no greeting, no sign-off line or name - just a terse request, or should I say DEMAND, for something. For example:

> I'm working on a project about online relationships.

> Send me information about this topic.
> I need it by tomorrow.

Even though many articles about this topic are easily available on my web site, I'm usually happy to share some ideas with people via e-mail. Yet messages like the one above don't convey any interest in a relationship. The transference reaction is one in which I am perceived as an information machine, just waiting to dole out data upon request. Leaning towards passive dependency, they are operating at a rather immature interpersonal level - a developmentally primitive form of "object relations," some psychoanalytic thinkers would say. They see others in terms of their own needs rather than as separate people with needs of their own. The spoon-feeder also might be a good example of transference towards one's computer ("I need control...serve me") that carries over into transference towards other people.

Unfortunately, another common transference reaction is the "chip on my shoulder" e-mail. People who have antagonistic conflicts with authority figures may feel free to send a flaming e-mail to someone they perceive as an parental figure. The sometimes extreme hostility in such a message reflects the depth and intensity of the transference reaction. Anyone who has a web site that in any way presents themselves as an authority on some topic may be subjected to the "chip on my shoulder" e-mail.

The bottom line with these kinds of unrequested e-mails is this: You may not have a relationship with them, but they think they have a relationship with you.

Keeping Record: The E-mail Archive

A big advantage of e-mail encounters over ftf ones is that you can keep an exact record of what was said. At your leisure you can reread and reflect on the exchanges between you and your e-mail partner. If two people only know each other via e-mail - and at least one of them saves all of the exchanges messages - we could even make the argument that the relationship has been preserved in its entirety. Often, however, a person only saves some of the messages, probably those that are especially meaningful - emotional high points, moments of intimacy, important personal information, or other milestones in the relationship. Comparing the messages saved by one person to those saved by the partner could reveal similarities and discrepancies in what each of them finds most important about the relationship. One person might savor humor, practical information, personal self-disclosures, emotional recollections, or intellectual debate - while the other may not. Saving mostly one's own messages, or mostly the other person's messages, may reflect a difference in focus on either self or other. The area of significant overlap in saved messages reflects the common ground of interest and attitude that holds the relationship together.

It's very possible that there might be a significant difference between partners in the number of saved messages. The person who saves less - or maybe none at all - may have a lower investment in the relationship. Or they may not be as self-reflective about relationships as people who wish to reread and think about what was said. On the other hand, that person may simply have less of a need to capture, preserve, or control the relationship. Some people like to "live in the moment." They may not feel a need to store away what was said... and that doesn't necessarily indicate less of an emotional involvement.

Unless you're simply searching for information (e.g., phone number, address), what prompts you to go back and read old messages may be a sign of something significant happening in the relationship or your reaction to it. Doubt, worry, confusion, anger, nostalgia? What motivates you to search your archive? The curious thing about rereading old messages (even if they are just a few days old) is that they sound different than they did the first time you read them. You see the old message in a new light, from a new perspective. You notice nuances that you did not see before. Or you discover that the emotions and meanings you previously detected were really your own projections and really nothing that the sender put there (i.e., your transference reaction). We are tempted to think that an e-mail archive is a factual record of what was said. In some ways it is. But a saved message also is a container into which we pour our own psyche.

We invest it with all sorts of meanings and emotions depending on our state of mind at the moment.

Previously in this article, I discussed the use quoted text. Usually, one quotes lines from the most recent message received from the e-mail partner. If you have an e-mail archive, you also can quote lines from earlier messages, including messages from long ago. These recitations may have a dramatic impact on your partner. On the positive side, the person may be pleased to realize that you are saving her messages - in a sense, holding him in your memory, even cherishing her words. On the negative side, it can feel eerie seeing one's words revived from the distant past, especially when you don't quite remember when or in what context you said it. It's a reminder that the person has a record of you. The situation can be even more unnerving when you don't have a record of the message yourself, so you can't verify the accuracy of the quote. A slightly paranoid feeling seeps in. "Am I being deceived, held hostage?... Why didn't *I* save that message?" Of course, all of these negative reactions are amplified when the old quoted text is being thrown at you in an accusatory or hostile manner. At other times the remembrance feels benign and nostalgic.

Developmental History and Meeting FtF

Often there are several stages in the development of an e-mail relationship. First, the people must come in contact with each other. That may seem like a serendipitous or uneventful occurrence - they just "happened" to run into each other on the Internet, or that first round of e-mail involved some simple request for information. But often there is more going on below the surface. Although, theoretically, people can connect with everyone else on the Internet, they don't. They establish ongoing relationships with only a handful of people. Consciously - and often unconsciously - we filter through the hundreds and thousands of persona that scroll down our monitor and select out those people that have similar interests to ours, those that address our psychological and emotional needs... those that fit our transference dynamics. When reflecting on one of your ongoing e-mail relationships, it's interesting to open your archive and look up those first few messages that were exchanged. Exactly when and where did you meet? Exactly what was said? Those first few messages can reveal the needs and emotional dynamics that sparked the relationship.

As in all relationships, the momentum begins with those sparked dynamics and evolves from there. The people gradually reveal more about themselves to each other, which adds more layers of complexity onto the core dynamics that drew them together. The lack of face-to-face cues encourages them to discuss thoughts and feelings that they otherwise might not reveal - which helps solidify the bond between them. But filling in for that lack of face-to-face cues also deepens the relationship. Describing how one looks, for example, is a powerful way of saying, "I want you to see the real me." The same principle holds true for disclosing facts about your in-person life. Because cyberspace easily can be a world isolated from one's "real" life - a world where you can remain anonymous or take on an imaginative identity - revealing your actual identity is taken as a sign of intimacy and commitment. The more people start to share that kind of real-world information in their e-mail, the more the relationship deepens.

The developmental path in e-mail relationships is one that leads towards becoming more and more real to the other person. For the relationship to move beyond a certain point, the couple will want and need to have more real-time and face-to-face contact. They might try meeting in online chat or instant messaging, which can make the other person's temporal "presence" seem more powerful and thereby enhance the feeling of actually being together in real time. It also tests each other's commitment to the relationship, because you both have to be there at a specific time. If they have the technical skills, they might try communicating with video or audio streaming. They might attach pictures of themselves to their e-mail. An even bigger move forward is to step outside the sometimes invisible psychological boundary that "we are ONLINE friends." You break the cyberspace barrier by sending letters, photos, and gifts via postal mail.... or telephone the other person... or you take the final, inevitable step of actually meeting your friend in-person.

Each of these moves towards becoming more real to the e-mail partner is a significant turning point in the relationship. The thoughts and feelings that are discussed during and after each of these more intimate contacts builds new dimensions to the relationship. This is especially true of taking that big step forward by meeting your e-mail companion in-person. Both of you are taking that decisive step out of cyberspace and into the face-to-face encounter. It can be a bit anxiety-provoking. Will he be what I've imagined him to be? What will she think of me? Why did we decide to meet each other NOW in the relationship? What are we both expecting from the rendezvous? All of these are important questions.

Some experienced online people feel they can suspend any expectations about what others will actually be like when they meet in-person. They claim that they are rarely surprised by that real world encounter. Others say that got to know someone so well through e-mail that meeting in person seemed very smooth and natural. In many cases, however, finally standing toe to toe with the other person can be a real eye-opener. The companion is not exactly what you expected. They look or talk differently than you had imagined. Some aspect of their personality is very different than

you had imagined. Due to the lack of f2f cues and the resulting disinhibition effect, people do not act the same in e-mail as they do in-person. That difference may be striking when you meet. On the other hand, the contrast in how they appear on and offline may be the result of the false impression you had formed of them.

Standing toe to toe, you have the opportunity to test out the image of your companion that you had created in your mind. While conversing via e-mail, how did you accurately perceive this person? Where did your perceptions go astray? By answering those questions, you may come to understand how your own mindset shaped the image you had formed. You may have wanted or needed the person to be a certain way. Steered by your past intimate relationships, you may have expected them to be a certain way. Or you may have completely overlooked something in the e-mail that couldn't be ignored in the ftf encounter. Stated in a nutshell, meeting the person gives you the opportunity to understand and work through your transference reactions.

Meeting in-person often will deepen the relationship. Afterwards the couple discuss, assimilate, reminisce, and cherish the encounter. They build on it. They share the ways in which the meeting confirmed and altered their perceptions of each other. As such, ideally, they help each other understand and work through their transference reactions. But the in-person meeting doesn't always enhance the relationship. People may be disappointed after the meeting. The companion was not what they had hoped for. This unfortunate outcome may indicate that transference wishes were strong and very off target.

Some e-mail companions may not have the opportunity to meet each other. In some cases, the relationship still thrives - though there may be periods when the conversation dwindles. In other cases, the e-mail contact fades away for good. A face-to-face meeting may have been needed to energize the relationship, or perhaps it was inevitable that the relationship would evaporate.

Some people choose NOT to phone or meet in-person their e-mail companion, even though such meetings could be arranged. They prefer to limit the relationship to cyberspace. Perhaps they fear that their expectations and hopes will be dashed, or they feel more safe and comfortable with the relative anonymity of e-mail contact. They may be relishing the online fantasy they have created for themselves. Or they simply enjoy the e-mail relationship as it is and have no desire the develop the relationship any further. In all cases, choosing not to increase face-to-face contact with the e-mail partner is a choice not to make the relationship more intimate, well-rounded, or reality-based.

Dual Relationships

Experienced e-mailers often have friends and colleagues with whom they converse in-person and via e-mail on a regular basis. These dual relationships can be tricky. Sometimes the two realms become a bit dissociated from each other. The relationship starts to operate on two different psychological levels. Due to the lack of ftf cues in e-mail, thoughts and feelings that are difficult to express in-person may surface online. Those disclosures may occur consciously or unconsciously. Unless those disclosures are quickly brought into the ftf relationship, a gap starts to develop between the online encounters and the in-person meetings. It may become more and more difficult to speak in-person about what was said online. The ftf relationship may become uncomfortable, or feel stiff and shallow. It's best to prevent this uneasy situation before it starts. Even under the most benign of circumstances, you may experience a tiny psychological hurdle that needs to be jumped in order to bring the online encounter into the ftf encounter, and vice versa. But do jump it. The most rewarding outcome is an integrated in-person and e-mail relationship.

E-mail Stress

Although e-mail certainly stands near the top of the list of important modern inventions, it comes with a price, as do many if not all inventions. In this complex and harried technological world we live in, e-mail can add to the stress of everyday living. A variety of factors contribute to e-mail induced stress:

Social and information overload: People can be overwhelmed by the fast pace and heavy bombardment of incoming messages, often from many different types of people with many different agendas, and saturated with all sorts of information, some valuable, some useless, all needing to be evaluated as important or not. This social and work multitasking can overload a person's ability to cope.

Social ambiguity: As discussed earlier in this article, the missing face-to-face cues of e-mail makes it potentially ambiguous. Even sophisticated e-mail users will lapse into moments of miscommunication. It's very easy to misunderstand what others mean, resulting in worried efforts to decipher their possible

intentions. That social ambiguity tends to draw out and heighten one's own anxieties and insecurities.

Disintegrated work/leisure boundaries: For some people the borders between fun, socializing, and work break down in e-mail communication. Messages from family, friends, lovers, coworkers, and bosses all stack up next to each other in the inbox. You move swiftly, easily from one message to another. To make matters worse, many people can access e-mail at home or at work. When the boundaries between work and leisure break down, so does the distinction between stress and relaxation, sometimes to the detriment of relaxation.

Emotional Intensity: Due to the disinhibition effect, people may quickly open up and reveal a great deal about themselves in e-mail. In some cases, they may regret their self-disclosures, feeling exposed and vulnerable, even shame. An excessively rapid and even "false" intimacy may develop that later destroys the relationship when one or both people feel overwhelmed, anxious, or disappointed.

Tenuous privacy: Privacy in e-mail communication is tenuous at best, although people often perceive it as private. An e-mail message is a record of a conversation that can be accessed by a third party, forwarded to a third party, or unintentionally sent to a third party or an entire group. The disruption of perceived privacy feels like a personal violation if initiated by someone else, and may result in severe humiliation when the person accidentally sends the message to the wrong person or group. Some people live with a chronic, low level paranoia about invisible and perhaps hostile people listening in.

Black hole experiences: As discussed earlier, receiving no reply from an e-mail companion makes a person wonder. Did I say something wrong? Am I being rejected? Did something bad happen to him? Yet another feature of the ambiguity of cyberspace, this black hole experience tends draws out one's anxieties and insecurities.

Spam trickery and disruption: Unfortunately, e-mail spam has reached voluminous proportions. Spammers lie to us, attempt to induce guilt and anxiety in us, pretend to be someone they are not - any trick they can think of to get us to open their message. Not to mention the fact that they bombard us with unwanted soapbox pleas as well as pornographic thinking. This pervasive problem heightens suspicion and even paranoia in some users - a distrust not just of e-mail, but of the Internet in general. At the very least, spam throws noise in the channel of e-mail communication, making it difficult to find and focus on one's e-mail relationships. Some people even believe that spam has broken the e-mail system beyond repair, which, if true, casts some doubt on the reliability and survival of e-mail relationships.

Cross-Cultural E-mail

On the positive side, the beauty of e-mail is that you have the opportunity to contact people from around the world. The challenge, however, is that people from around the world have different customs for conversing and developing relationships. At least some of the ideas discussed in this article may be culture-bound, applying mostly to Western, European, or specifically American people (which I am). A good rule of thumb in conversing with folks from other lands is to be appropriately polite, friendly, and as clear as possible in what you write. Stretch your e-mail empathy muscles. Unless you're very sure of your relationship with the person, avoid colloquialisms, slang, humor, innuendoes, and especially subtle attempts at cynicism and sarcasm, which can be difficult to convey in TextTalk even under the best of circumstances. It's much safer to start off polite and later loosen up as the relationship develops than it is to inadvertently commit a faux pas, find out that you indeed committed a faux pas, and then try to patch up the damage. Despite the cultural differences, the delight of doing international e-mail is discovering that there *is* a universal e-mail language. You'll feel a warm tingle of camaraderie when someone from a foreign land types you a :-)

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

TextTalk: Communicating with typed text chat
Hypotheses about online text relationships
Extending a work group into cyberspace
Conflict in Cyberspace: How to resolve conflict online
Subtlety in multimedia chat

How to Resolve Conflict Online

Kali Munro, M.Ed., Psychotherapist

Have you ever noticed how conflict can get blown out of proportion online? What may begin as a small difference of opinion, or misunderstanding, becomes a major issue very quickly. Conflict can be difficult at the best of times, but what is it about online communication that seems to ignite "flaming" and make conflicts more difficult to resolve?

There are a number of reasons to explain why conflict may be heightened online. One is the absence of visual and auditory cues. When we talk to someone in person, we see their facial expressions, their body language, and hear their tone of voice. Someone can say the exact same thing in a number of different ways, and that usually effects how we respond.

For example, someone could shout and shake their finger at you, or they could speak gently and with kindness. They could stand up and tower over you, or they could sit down beside you. How you feel, interpret, and respond to someone's message often depends on how they speak to you, even when it's a difficult message to hear.

In online communications, we have no visual or auditory cues to help us to decipher the intent, meaning, and tone of the messenger. All we have are the words on a computer screen, and *how we hear those words in our head*. While people who know each other have a better chance at accurately understanding each others? meaning and intentions, even they can have arguments online that they would not have in-person.

Projections and Transference

While many people are convinced that how they read an email is the only way it *can* be read, the truth is, how we read a text, or view a work of art, often says more about ourselves than it does about the message or the messenger.

All of our communications, online and in real-time, are filled with projections. We perceive the world through our expectations, needs, desires, fantasies, and feelings, and we project those onto other people. For example, if we expect people to be critical of us, we perceive other people's communication as being critical - it *sounds* critical to us even though it may not be. We do the same thing online; in fact we are more likely to project when we are online precisely because we don't have the visual or auditory cues to guide us in our interpretations. How we hear an email or post is how we hear it in our own heads, which may or may not reflect the tone or attitude of the sender.

We usually can't know from an email or post alone whether someone is shouting, using a criticizing tone, or speaking kindly. Unless the tone is *clearly and carefully* communicated by the messenger, and/or we are very skilled at understanding text and human communication, we most likely hear the voice we hear, or create in our head and react to that. This is one of the reasons why controversial or potentially conflictual issues are best dealt with by using great care and *explicit expressions of our tone, meaning, and intent.*

Where do projections come from? They come from our life experiences - how we've been treated, how important figures in our lives have behaved, how we felt growing up, how we responded and coped, etc. All of us project or transfer our feelings and views of important figures in our lives onto other people.

To take a look at your own projections or transference with people online, think back to the last time you felt angry at someone online. What was it about them or their email that made you so angry? What did you believe that they were doing to you or someone else? How did you react internally and externally? Was your reaction to this person (whether spoken or not) influenced by someone or something from your past? While it certainly happens that people are treated with disrespect and anger online, if there are any parallels between this experience and any of your past experiences, it's likely that how you felt and responded was coloured by your past. When our past is involved, particularly when we are

unaware of it happening, we invariably project and transfer old feelings onto the present situation.

Disinhibition Effect

Conflict can be heightened online by what is known as the "disinhibition effect," a phenomenon that psychologist, Dr. John Suler, has written extensively about. Suler writes,

> "It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the "disinhibition effect." It's a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. Or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity. On the other hand, the disinhibition effect may not be so benign. Out spills rude language and harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats" (Suler, 2002)

Suler explains that the disinihibition effect is caused by or heightened by the following features of online communication:

a) anonymity - no one knows who you are on the net, and so you are free to say whatever you want without anyone knowing it's you who said it.

b) invisibility - you don't have to worry about how you physically look or sound to other people when you say something. You don't have to worry about how others look or sound when you say something to them. "Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can slam the breaks on what people are willing to express." (Suler, 2002)

c) delayed reactions - you can say anything you think and feel without censorship at any time, including in the middle of the night when you're most tired and upset, leave immediately without waiting for a response, and possibly never return - in the extreme this can feel to someone like an emotional "hit and run."

d) the perception that the interaction is happening in your head - with the absence of visual and auditory cues you may feel as though the interaction is occurring in your head. Everyone thinks all kinds of things about other people in their minds that they would never say to someone's face - online, you can say things you'd otherwise only think.

e) neutralizing of status - in face-to-face interactions, you may be intimidated to say something to someone because of their job, authority, gender, or race. Because this is not visible to you online, you feel freer to say what ever you want to anyone.

f) your own personality style may be heightened online - for example, if your communication style tends to be reactive or angry, you may be more reactive or angry online.

Tips for Resolving Conflict Online

What can be done to prevent unnecessary conflict in cyberspace? The following are tips for handling conflict online with respect, sensitivity, and care:

Don't respond right away

When you feel hurt or angry about an email or post, it's best not to respond right away. You may want to write a response immediately, to get it off your chest, but don't hit send! Suler recommends waiting 24 hours before responding - sleep on it and then reread and rewrite your response the next day.

Read the post again later

Sometimes, your first reaction to a post is a lot about how you're feeling at the time. Reading it later, and sometimes a few times, can bring a new perspective. You might even experiment by reading it with different tones (matter-of-fact, gentle, non-critical) to see if it could have been written with a different tone in mind than the one you initially heard.

Discuss the situation with someone who knows you

Ask them what they think about the post and the response you plan to send. Having input from others who are hopefully more objective can help you to step back from the situation and look at it differently. Suler recommends getting out of the medium in which the conflict occurred - in this case talking to someone in person - to gain a better perspective.

Choose whether or not you want to respond

You do have a choice, and you don't have to respond. You may be too upset to respond in the way that you would like, or it may not be worthy of a response. If the post is accusatory or inflammatory and the person's style tends to be aggressive or bullying, the best strategy is to ignore them.

Assume that people mean well, unless they have a history or pattern of aggression

Everyone has their bad days, gets triggered, reacts insensitively, and writes an email without thinking it through completely. It doesn't mean that they don't have good intentions.

On the other hand, some people pick fights no matter how kind and patient you are with them. They distort what you say, quote you out of context, and make all sorts of accusations all to vilify and antagonize you. Don't take the "bait" by engaging in a struggle with them - they'll never stop. Sometimes, the best strategy is to have nothing more to do with choossomeone.

Clarify what was meant

We all misinterpret what we hear and read, particularly when we feel hurt or upset. It's a good idea to check out that you understood them correctly. For example, you could ask, "When you said...did you mean...or, what did you mean by..." Or, "when you said...I heard...is that what you meant?" Often times, what we think someone said is not even close to what they meant to say. Give them the benefit of the doubt and the chance to be clear about what they meant.

Think about what you want to accomplish by your communication

Are you trying to connect with this person? Are you trying to understand them and be understood? What is the message you hope to convey? What is the tone you want to communicate? Consider how you can convey that.

Verbalize what you want to accomplish

Here are some examples, "I want to understand what you're saying." "I feel hurt by some stuff that you said. I want to talk about it in a way that we both feel heard and understood." "I want to find a way to work this out. I know we don't agree about everything and that's okay. I'd like to talk with you about how I felt reading your post." "I hope we can talk this through because I really like you. I don't want to be argumentative or blaming."

Use "I" statements when sharing your feelings or thoughts

For example, "I feel"... versus... "You made me feel"

Use strictly *feeling* statements

Feeling statements include saying you felt hurt, sad, scared, angry, happy, guilty, remorseful, etc. In everyday conversations, we describe our feelings differently than this. For example, we say that we felt attacked, threatened, unsafe, or punched in the stomach. When the person we're upset with is not present, or able to read our words, this is an understandable way to express the full depth of our feelings and experience. Generally though, these statements are not simply feeling statements because they contain within them *unexpressed beliefs*. For example, you believe that you *were* attacked by the person, not that it just felt that way. If you want to communicate with the person involved (or they can read your words), it is best to stick to simple feeling statements otherwise they will hear you as accusing them of attacking them and be angry or upset with you. Some people get confused why other people get upset with them when they think they are only expressing their feelings; usually in these cases there were unstated beliefs expressed which the person reacted to.

Choose your words carefully and thoughtfully, particularly when you?re upset

Do your best to keep in mind that the person will read your post alone. You are not physically or virtually present with them to clarify what you meant, and they can't see the kindness in your eyes. They must rely entirely on your words to interpret your meaning, intent, and tone. This is why it's important to choose your words carefully and thoughtfully. You can still be real and honest while being selective.

Place yourself in the other person's shoes

How might they hear your message? To avoid unnecessary conflict or a lot of hurt feelings, it helps to take into account who you're writing to. One person might be able to hear you say it exactly how you think it, and another person would be threatened by that style of communication. Think about the other person when writing your email or post. Do your best to communicate in a way that is respectful, sensitive, and clear *to them*. People often say, to do that feels like they're being controlled and why *shouldn't* they just write it the way they want to. Of course you can write it any way you want, especially online, but if you want to communicate with this person and have them hear and understand what you're saying, it helps to think about how they will hear it.

Use emoticons to express your tone

In online communication, visual and auditory cues are replaced by emoticons, for example, smiles, winks, and laughter. It helps to use emoticons to convey your tone. Additionally, if you like the person, tell them! Having a conflict or misunderstanding doesn't mean you don't like the person any more, but people often forget that reality, or don't think to say it. It may be most needed during a tense interaction.

Start and end your post with positive, affirming, and validating statements

Say what you agree with, what you understand about how they feel, and any other positive statements at the beginning of your email. This helps set a positive tone. End on a positive note as well.

The Paradox of Online Communication

Handling conflict constructively is hard at the best times, and it can be even harder online. It can take a great deal of effort, care, and thoughtfulness to address differences, tensions, and conflicts online. Paradoxically, some of the same things that contribute to heightened conflict online can contribute to peaceful resolutions as well. The internet is an ideal place to practice communication and conflict resolution skills. Just as the absence of visual and auditory cues, the anonymity, invisibility, delayed reactions, and neutralizing of status free us to say what ever *negative* thing we want, they can also free us to try new, and more positive communication styles and to take all the time we need to do that. As with any new technology, the internet can be used to enhance our personal growth and relationships, or to alienate us from each other. It's our choice.

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See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace

The online disinhibition effect
Regressive behavior in cyberspace
Integrating online and offline living
Transference among people online

Cyberspace Romances

In this Interview with Jean-Francois Perreault of Branchez-vous!
I talk about romances on the internet.

What factors lead someone to a cyber-romance? Is it the exotic quality of it?

The "exotic" quality of a cyber-romances might be one factor that attracts some people. Using computers is a relatively new way to have an intimate relationship with someone. Because it occurs through this seemingly powerful and mysterious thing call the "internet" or "cyberspace", it may feel exciting to some people. The lover's presence enters your home (or office) without the person physically being there, which feels very magical. On a more down-to-earth level, people are drawn to cyber-romances for the same reasons they are drawn to "face-to-face" romances - either they don't have a "real-life" love relationship, or there is something missing in their "real-life" love relationship. On the internet, they may indeed find what they are missing. Or, because of the partial anonymity of cyberspace, which allows lots of room for fantasy and imagination, they may THINK they have found what they are missing.

When the feelings are mutual, is the cyber-romance a true relationship? What about when they actually meet each other?

Cyber-romances can indeed be "true" (genuine) relationships. A great deal of intimacy is possible simply by communicating with someone through typed text. Some people believe that they are more directly encountering the mind, heart, and even soul of the other person when they are not being distracted or mislead by the physical appearance of the person, as in "real life." Of course, there is also much to be learned about someone by being with them physically. Physical presence is an important dimension of communication and intimacy. This is why most people who fall in love on the internet eventually feel that they MUST meet the person. Physical contact is a basic human need, a basic element of human intimacy. You can't hold your lover in cyberspace.

As relationships with strangers increase because of the internet, do you think that Platonic loves are going to increase?

I'm not entirely sure what a "Platonic" love is. If it means "friendship" as compared to a romantic/sexual relationship, then I'd say yes. I guess that in a Platonic love you are attracted primarily to someone's MIND. In cyberspace, most of the time all you really experience is the other person's mind, and not their physical qualities. So perhaps Platonic loves are more likely to occur.

What are the psychological dangers or side effects of a cyber-romance? Is there a dependency on it, or a loss of a sense of reality, or a loss of connection with people in real life? Or is there no danger because it's simply a new way to interact with people?

My guess is that in a "true" romance on the internet, the couple eventually will want to meet each other face-to-face. They may HAVE to meet each other for the relationship to fully develop and to be fully satisfying. For these people, the internet simply was a way to meet each other. I say "simply" but this feature of the internet shouldn't be underestimated. It is a POWERFUL way for people with compatible interests and personalities to find each other.

There are some people who may NOT want to meet the lover face-to-face. My guess is that these people prefer living with the fantasy that they have created (consciously or unconsciously) about the cyber-lover. The couple may be collaborating in the creation of a mutually satisfying fantasy that portrays themselves in ways very different from how they truly are in reality. They may not want to meet each other face-to-face because the fantasy might be destroyed by

the hard facts of reality. Who can say whether this is "wrong" or "dangerous?" Many people allow themselves the luxury of fantasy - either through books, or TV, or movies. And most people don't confuse this fantasy with reality. A cyber-lover is just another type of "escape fantasy" - only it's much more interactive, and therefore much more exciting, than the more usual methods.

What changes do you predict in cyberspace relationships in the next century?

I think the internet is having a major impact on how people will relate to each other. As I see it, cyberspace relationships will evolve in two distinct directions. The first will be more sophisticated imitations of "real-life" interactions involving video and audio technology. Through the computer, you will see and hear the other person almost as if they are in the room with you. In the second, and more fascinating scenario, people will interact with each other in more sophisticated imaginary worlds and with imaginary identities. Think of the "holodecks" of Star Trek and you will see where this direction might take us. We might think of these alternative styles of interacting with others as entertainment - but using "fantasy" to discover new dimensions of ourselves and how we relate to others can be very powerful. So it may be much more than just a game.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The online disinhibition effect
Transference to one's computer and cyberspace
Integrating online and offline living
In-person versus cyberspace relationships
E-mail communication and relationships
Transference among people online

Communicative Subtlety in Multimedia Chat

How many ways can you say "Hi" at the Palace?

By their very nature, humans love to communicate. They love to express themselves. They love to explore subtlety in communicating and expressing themselves. In the "real" world of five senses, people freely can experiment with language, voice modulation, dress, hand gestures, facial expressions, body language, even perfume - all as ways to communicate nuances in meaning. In cyberspace, the sensory options are not nearly as numerous or versatile. But that doesn't mean that subtlety is absent. When immersed in a medium that places some restrictions on paths to communicate, humans get downright clever and creative in overcoming the barriers. In the traditional text-only chat environments, users have developed a wide variety of symbols, phrases, and acronyms - a whole new vernacular - to get their ideas and feelings across to their cyberpeers. In the newer graphical/auditory chat environments, the addition of even relatively simple sight and sound options has provided considerably more elbow room for subtlety in communication and creative self-expression. And sometimes these environments provide options for communication that are NOT available in the real world!

As the simplest example, let's explore the vicissitudes of saying "hello." In cyberspace, how many different ways can you do it?

Tinkering with Text Balloons

To answer that question, let's travel to the Palace - a social (chat) community on the web that combines typed-text communication with graphics and sound. We pop into Harry's Bar at the Main Mansion site, hoping to find our friend Lucy. She's not there, so we settle down into one of the plush chairs and watch the members and guests talking together down on the oriental carpet in the middle of the room. Suddenly, we see Lucy standing in the doorway from the Red Room.

We type "hi lucy" and hit return. Now if Lucy is a good friend, we've committed a bit of a faux pas here. This salute is rather lukewarm. It's perfectly appropriate as a polite greeting to strangers and casual acquaintances, but for a friend it's a week gesture. First of all, without even one exclamation point, or caps, there's very little evidence of enthusiasm. The fact that we didn't even bother to capitalize Lucy's name (or the "H" in high) might be taken as a sign of indifference or laziness. Lucy may wonder why we seem a bit distant and formal.

So let's try again. Lucy appears in the doorway, only this time we type "Hi Lucy!" That's better. Caps, an exclamation point... some enthusiasm! An unspoken norm at the Palace is that one's degree of enthusiasm is loosely correlated with the number of exclamation points in the greeting. The more, the better, unless your exclamations start piling up in an ostentatiously long row and spill over to another line of typed text. That might be considered overkill... overly eager enthusiasm (or a perseveration indicative of an underlying organic mental disorder).

For a slightly different interpersonal effect, we might use a "spikey" - also known as an "excited balloon." It indicates, obviously, that we're excited to see Lucy. The enthusiasm here is a bit different that simply using exclamation points. The very electric-looking spikey has a more visceral impact. It will be much more quickly noticed by Lucy than a standard text balloon. It also will be quickly noticed by other users. We're making it very clear to everyone in the room that we're saying hello to Lucy and are elated about seeing her. It also takes a bit more keyboarding effort to create a spikey, which suggests that we went out of our way to show our enthusiasm for Lucy. A spikey with just "LUCY" (in caps) is like jumping up out of your chair while shooting your arms into the air with surprise and delight.

As with abundant exclamation points, a spikey greeting will cause others to think that we must be good friends with Lucy. But if you use too many spikeys (or exclamation points) with too many people, others will assume that you're putting on an act and being a bit disingenuous.

Maybe we want to show emotion other than enthusiasm when Lucy arrives. Maybe we want to show warmth, affection. For quite some time in many chat environments, this affection has been expressed by the use of brackets or parentheses that "hug" the name of the fellow user. It's interesting that this technique rarely is used at the Palace. It's hard to say why. Palatians do like to think of their culture as unique - especially its graphical features. So widespread habits from other virtual communities may be viewed as a bit hackneyed when applied at the Palace.

Here's another greeting that one rarely sees at the Palace, even though it does involve a uniquely Palatian visual effect. Perhaps it's rarely used because a similar greeting violates norms in the real world. If we put up a rectangular "sign," it will hang in the air indefinitely until we type more text and hit return. In the real world, it would be like hanging a "Hi Lucy!" poster around your neck. That may work fine at airports or as a way to catch the attention of family when you're among a crowd on TV. But otherwise, it's a bit strange. Other Palatians would probably interpret our "Hi Lucy!" sign as overly persistent and attention-seeking, as if we were repeating "Hi Lucy!... Hi Lucy!....Hi Lucy!" over and over again.

A "thought balloon" greeting also is rare because it doesn't have an equivalent in the real world. Could we think "Hi Lucy!" and expect her to know that we were saying hello? Not in real life. Not unless we're a schizophrenic afflicted with delusions of thought-broadcasting. For that very reason, our "Hi Lucy!" in a thought balloon would look quite strange at the Palace. People might think that we simply mistyped, don't understand how to use Palace commands, or deliberately are trying to under-emphasize our greeting to Lucy by playing our cards close to our chest. They may wonder if we're muttering to ourself, or expect other people to read our mind. They may simply WONDER about us....and why Lucy has this effect on us! Lucy probably will be thinking the same things.

Actions Speak Louder...

The beauty of the Palace compared to text-only chat is that we (or rather, our avatars) can MOVE. When Lucy arrives we could "run" to her side. She most likely will notice this and take our gesture as a sign that we feel close to her. With exclamations punctuating our hello, we are showing bursting enthusiasm that may cause people to take notice. We obviously like Lucy because we scream and run to her side when she arrives. Running to Lucy with a spikey would magnify this effect even more, though it might be a bit over the top in expressing enthusiasm.

Running to Lucy with a simple "Hi Lucy" WITHOUT exclamations or spikeys can take on a very different meaning. Lucy most likely will know that we ran to her, but in a crowded room other people probably won't notice this. It's a more subtle, private, even secretive way to express our hello. If it's an uncrowded room, people will surmise that we are close to Lucy. They may even think that we are an "item" and are not hesitant about letting others see that.

Just Between You and Me (whispering)

If we want a guarantee that other people will not overhear our greeting to Lucy, we can always "whisper" our hello to her. Most chat environments have the option of sending a message to someone that other users cannot see. At the Palace, NO ONE can see it, not even a wizard or a god. This is something that is NOT possible in the real world, which makes it feel very special, even powerful as a unique feature of cyberspace. It's almost as if you are telepathically connecting your mind to the recipient of your whisper. Whispering "Hi Lucy" is a sign of intimacy, something shared just between friends. It's a bit secretive, as if you don't particularly want anyone else to know that you're saying hello. If the recipient of your whisper is someone you don't know well, they may experience your hello as a bit intrusive on their psychic space, or as an "advance" of some sort - perhaps a gesture of friendship, or a hint at desired intimacy.

All of this holds true for any chat environment where private messaging is possible. But at the Palace, there's an added visual dimension. When you whisper, everyone else's avatar fades into grey while just you and the recipient of your message remain in bold, living color - as if the whole world has dropped away, leaving just the two of you. It's a very powerful visual effect. And at the Palace you also are located within the visual space of a room, which is absent in text-only chat. This can significantly affect how whispering is perceived. For example, there's a subtle difference between whispering to someone from the other side of the room (especially a crowded one), as opposed to being right next to them. Our private "Hello Lucy" launched from across the room means that we have singled her out from the crowd and are attempting an intimate connection... yet we are also keeping our distance. If we are next to her - especially if we run to greet her - our salute is a much more unambivalent expression of intimacy.

Speak to Me!

If we so desire, we can actually SAY hello to Lucy. She can hear our actual voice and any emotional expression we desire to put into it, just as in real life. This can only happen, however, if we created a sound (wav) file and sent it to her. In fact, we could send Lucy as many different "Hi Lucy" sound files as we care to create. As long as she has them in her Palace sound folder, she (and we) will hear our greetings loud and clear when we type the appropriate command. Because no one else will hear the sound, the greeting is a truly private, intimate experience. Maybe Lucy also has a sound greeting for us! When people exchange sounds, it binds their friendship in at least two different ways. First, they made a special effort to create the greeting specifically for their Palace chum. Second, we are sharing a "real-life" piece of ourselves - the sound of our voices. Stepping out of cyberspace anonymity (like sharing photos) is almost always interpreted as a gesture of friendship and intimacy.

Worth a 1000 Words

Finally, we may not have to type or say anything to greet our dear Lucy. Thanks to the visual wonders of avatars, and especially animated avatars, we can don any picture that conveys our hello. We can wave, turn a cartwheel, slip her a high-five, clasp our hands over our head... or flap. It's good ol' body language, which can be quite powerful. The emotion and meaning we convey in our graphical greeting is limited only by our imagination. Some of these visual effects may have universal meanings that everyone in the room will recognize. Or it may be a visual effect that will be meaningful only to Lucy. The fact that she is the wind beneath our wings may our little secret.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

TextTalk: Psychological Dynamics of Online Synchronous Conversations in Text-Driven Chat Environments
The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space

Part 4

Group Dynamics in Cyberspace

The Psychology
of Online Groups and Communities

Groups ranging in size from a few people to thousands and millions within a "community" are forming within cyberspace. Many of the classic social-psychological principles of group dynamics can be applied in understanding and improving the functioning of these groups - such as issues concerning leadership, communication patterns, group boundaries, cohesion, alliances and subgroupings.

However, given the special psychological features of cyberspace, online groups also can be quite different than in-person groups. Text-only communications, equalization of status, and the opportunity for altering or hiding one's identity are all unique monkey wrenches tossed into the online group process. The asynchronous communication in forums and social media makes these groups rather unique not only as compared to in-person groups, but also in relation to traditional chat rooms, texting, and video-conferencing that rely on synchronous communication.

The ability to access and filter through numerous potential relationships, as well as the stretching of spatial boundaries, has resulted in unique groups forming online that may never have existed in-person. The needs addressed by these online groups may be needs that traditional in-person organizations and institutions have been unable to address. Such groups may be a gold mine for social-psychological research. While some of these groups are potentially beneficial and healthy (self-help groups, special interest consumer and hobbyist groups, etc.), the value of others is questionable and in some cases obviously pathological (e.g., pedophile, hate, and terrorist groups). Nevertheless, even these pathological groups can be a source of valuable information for researchers who are attempting to understand and remedy important psychological and social problems. The various unique groups forming in cyberspace are a crystalization of the various hidden facets of the larger, in-person culture.

New social-psychological principles may be needed to account for these varied and unusual group dynamics in cyberspace. Designing and improving online communities will require a synergistic blend of traditional and innovative psychological theory. Also, perhaps for the first time in history, social psychology will need to merge with computer technology and know-how.

My research began with a focus on the unique community called The Palace, based one of the original client/server programs that generates a highly visual, spatial, and auditory chat environment. It is an excellent example of the trend toward graphical, interactive domains on the Internet, sometimes referred to as "habitats," "GMUKS" (Graphical Multi-user Konversation), or, "multimedia chat." More recent programs usually involve a game of some kind, including specific rules, social roles, and objectives. Palace is a much more open-ended environment with no specific purpose other than socializing and, for many users, experimenting with one's online identity. Currently, there are many Palace sites located across the Internet, varying widely in technical and artistic sophistication as well as graphical themes (e.g., a futuristic Cybertown, a haunted house, Japan, Star Trek, etc.). Some sites are commercial, some private. Some even may be considered "art."

Any given Palace site consists of various interlinked rooms. Users can move freely within and between the rooms. A unique feature of Palace is the ability to create icons to represent oneself. These icons, called "avatars" or "props" can be changed at will. Users talk with each other via typed text that appears in balloons that pop out from the avatar's head, similar to characters in comic strips.

My social science research at the Palace began in 1995, shortly after the opening of the first and original Palace site known as Main Mansion, or simply "Main" or "Mansion." It consisted of approximately 30 rooms - including a bar, a game room, bedrooms, a study, a beach, a moor, and several surrealistic locales, such as the orbit of an alien planet and an underground space that looks like Hades. My research at Mansion consisted of an intensive case study of the psychological and social dynamics of this new online community. What makes the Palace environment so fascinating is its highly visual and spatial qualities. At that time, this was a new dimension to social interaction on the Internet, and certainly a predictor of the online multimedia experiences that have appeared since Mansion first opened.

My career as a cyberpsychologist began in this Palace study, with my first article focusing on the members' "addiction" to Palace life. Since leaving the community, I expanded my research to other cyberpsychology topics, while Palace evolved in its own new directions. The articles in *The Psychology of Cyberspace* therefore serve as a window into, and a psychological record of, the early days at Palace. No doubt, many of the observations here still hold true for many Palace sites, and for cyberpsychology in general.

At the 1997 Convention of the American Psychological Association, I presented my first paper about the research I was doing at the Palace. That talk, which appears below, was part of the symposium "Research and Theory of Online Behavior," with John Grohol as chairperson. In retrospect I see how it anticipated many of the cyberpsychological issues that would come to light about online groups, and how those groups shape the psyche of their members.

Imagine this.

You materialize in a lovely, old mansion. Immediately you notice that several of your friends are already there, some sitting on the velvet couch, some hovering in midair near the giggling suit of armor, and one joker suspended upside down from the chandelier. "Here's Johnnnnnie!" a friend calls out in a perfectly replicated Jack Nickelson's voice. "Come on, we were just headed to the beach." You follow them through the gilded mirror and arrive on the coast of a surrealistic Big Sur. In a silly adolescent attempt to outdo your friends who have shapeshifted into their Bay Watch characters, you transform yourself into Arnold Schwartzenegger wearing a polka dot 1920s bathing suit. With the blanket laid out over the waves, everyone relaxes to enjoy the glasses of wine that materialize in their hands. A few people get caught up in a game of tic-tac-toe drawn in the sky, until community politics comes up in the conversation. Should third level wizards be allowed to clone other members' avatars? What should be done about the latest wave of clueless newbies, or that new snert gang that is bent on crashing the server? "Forget that stuff," a voice calls out from the sky, "It's time for that psychologist's lecture on the 27 genders of cyberspace." "Hey, we can stay right here and have it pumped in," you reply. "True," a friend ESPs to you so no one else can hear, "but then we wouldn't be able to gossip about everyone's avatar."

So, is this a scene from a Star Trek holodeck? It very well could be, someday. Actually, many aspects of this scenario are already taking place right now on the internet. Technology has moved far beyond the text-only communication of chat environments, as in AOL and IRC. Now there are multimedia chat communities where users interact in a visual scene, with text, sound, movement, and visual representations of themselves called "avatars." True, this is all happening on a computer monitor and not in a 3D physical space, as in a Star Trek holodeck. But we're moving in that direction.

The Palace

In this presentation I'd like to discuss my ongoing research on the community that has developed within the multimedia chat environment known as the Palace, which originally was created by Jim Bumgardner. The Palace is a client/server program where users can purchase the client and/or the server. That means that a user can visit other people's Palace sites or create his or her own site. Over the past two years since Palace was introduced, hundreds of Palace sites have been created. The most highly populated sites are those created by the company that introduced the program, The Palace Incorporated (aka, "TPI"). In my research, I've focused mainly on these TPI sites.

On the Palace Study home page is a miniature example of a Palace scene. The visual backdrop (called a "room") for this particular scene is a beach, though the backdrop could be anything. Users create small graphics called "avatars" to represent themselves. You can move your avatar anywhere on the screen. These avatars can be any picture the user desires. Users communicate with each other through typed text that appear on the screen as balloons similar to comic strips. They also communicate with prerecorded sounds (.wav files) and in how they move their avatars about the screen.

My Research Methods

Now that you have some idea of what the Palace is like, let me describe my research. First, my methods. As an undergraduate, I had a biology professor who once told us that if all biologists got together to intensely study one single species of fly and attempted to integrate all information about that fly - its anatomy, biochemistry, neurology, genetics, behavior - then we would REALLY understand something.

This is the approach I've taken to Palace. An intensive case study. I'm attempting to study and integrate findings on as many aspects of Palace as possible - including the psychological impact of its visual features, the individual's experience of Palace, interpersonal and group dynamics, norms and deviance, addiction, and historical stages. I gathered information through four basic methods: (1) field observations (which, paradoxically, I conducted from an armchair in

my living room...this is one of the perks of cyberpsychology research), (2) email interviews, (3) studies of the various Palace mailing lists, and, (4) participant observation. That last one - participant observation - is especially interesting. As a psychoanalytically trained psychologist, I've always been fascinated by research that juggles the issues of subjectivity and objectivity, transference and countertransference. I firmly believe that a powerful way to understand the Palace experience and the Palace community was to become a Palatian myself.

So far I've covered a lot of territory in this research, so let me just highlight a few of my findings. If you're interested in reading more, all of my papers on this research are published on my Psychology of Cyberspace web site. By the way, I'm also interested in the topic of publishing scholarly work online in hypertext format (what some people call "web sites") - but that's a topic for another day.

Avatars and Graphical Space

First let's take the psychology of avatars and graphical space. There's no doubt that adding visuals to a chat environment greatly magnifies its social and psychological subtlety and complexity. You can tell a lot about people by how they position and move their avatars in a room. Some people place their avatars in the corner of the room, some obey the supposed laws of physics and sit in chairs or stand on tables, some defy the laws of physics and hang from the ceiling. All the rules of personal space apply. Old timers sometimes have a specific spot in the room that everyone respects as their territory. If you place your avatar close to someone, it often is taken as either a gesture of intimacy or a violation of their personal space, depending on your relationship to that person.

Even more powerful is the psychology of avatar selection. Because avatars are the images that people use to represent themselves, a great deal of thought and creativity goes into the collection of avatars that a user creates. I've categorized them into various types: cartoon avatars, celebrity avatars, evil avatars, power avatars, seductive avatars, symbols and abstract designs, and, of course, pictures of your real face. They reflect your moods, your intentions, your personal interests, and various aspects of your personality - real and wished for, conscious and unconscious. To display a picture of your real face often is a sign of honesty, openness, and in some cases, an act of intimacy.

Most Palatians are very attached to their avatars and very captivated by the process of creating them and showing them off to others. I think this high psychic investment in avatars reflects a deep psychological dynamic which is present in many online environments - and that's the need to experiment with one's identity, to try out new personae and express previously unexpressed aspects of one's personality.

Group and Community Dynamics

Now let me say a little bit about the community that has evolved within this environment. Let me do that from a historical perspective. History is always a complex subject, but I think I can succinctly summarize what has happened to Palace during it's first two years of rapid development. It started off as a small, intimate community of a few dozen people dwelling mostly at one TPI site. Then the population started to boom, and with that came a whole slew of fascinating social psychological dynamics. Cliques, organizations, class systems and bureaucracies developed. Intergroup conflicts flared up. More complex rules, regulations, and social norms emerged. Immigrants (aka "newbies") became the target of prejudice. New Palace sites were created and colonized, each with its own distinct culture.

The driving force behind many of these changes was the need to establish an identity, a sense of belonging, and some feeling of power and efficacy. As the intimacy of the small community faded with the arrival of the masses, the Palace population differentiated into a complex system of smaller groups where people felt they belonged, where they possessed some status and identity, where they felt they had some impact on their environment. In other words, the history of Palace is a microcosm of life and a recapitulation of the rise of civilization.

A big problem in the growing Palace community was similar to that found in any expanding, urbanizing population - deviance and crime. As in the "real" world, deviance spanned the range from mild to severe. "Blocking" someone else by placing your avatar on top of theirs is equivalent to sitting on someone in real life. It's an interpersonal faux pas. Wearing seductive looking avatars may be playful exhibitionism or flirting, but where do you draw the line between that and pornography? A difficult question for Palace officials. The most serious problems were the development of gangs that verbally abused other users or attempted to crash the server. Most interesting, though, are those crimes that are rather unique to cyberspace and point to its power in allowing people to play with social identity. Stealing someone's avatar and wearing it is like stealing their persona, but even worse is deliberately impersonating another Palatian by using their avatar AND username, and then attempting to destroy their reputation.

How is deviance controled? Here let me briefly mention the fascinating group known as the "wizards." Members of the Palace community are invited to become wizards by the wizard group and TPI. As sophisticated and knowledgeable oldtimers, their job is a complex combination of being a host, a technical consultant, a legislator and judge, a Police force, and psychotherapist. They welcome and help new users, suggest technical changes to TPI, and control deviant behavior. They alone have the power to pin a person's avatar in the corner of the screen or disconnect a user from the server. They also are placed into the rather difficult position of making complex judgements about what constitutes deviant behavior. For example, when is an avatar TOO obscene. Supreme court justices have a hard time with that one.

There's a lot more to say about deviance, but let me add just one more point. Much is being said nowadays about how anonymity on the internet tends to act as a disinhibiting factor. People act out more, regress, and are more sexual and aggressive when no one knows who they are. I believe this is true, but I think it's important to give this idea a slightly different spin. Rarely does someone wish to be totally anonymous, invisible, without any name or identity. Everyone wants and needs to express some aspect of who they are. The internet offers the opportunity to hide some features of your identity, while expressing others. People who are acting out sexually and aggressively are expressing a need, an aspect of self. They want people to acknowledge it, to react to it. But they may also want to hide or dissociate this from their "real world" public identity.

Community Infrastructures

So far, I've been talking about the Palace community mostly in terms of the Palace chat program itself. I think it's important to point out that there's a lot more to the community than that particular environment - and this is probably true of other chat communities. There are several other internet resources and paths of communication that supplement and enrich the social activity at the Palace sites: (1) numerous web pages which act as libraries of technical and social information about Palace life, (2) several mailing lists where there are group discussions about Palace, (3) private e-mail, which allows more personal conversations between pairs of people and acts as a complex communication network that is a backbone of the community, (4) telephone contacts, and lastly, (5) face-to-face meetings of people, either in small gatherings or the larger Palace parties which take place every few months in various cities throughout the US. A sign of the health of a particular online community is the extent to which these other resources and paths of communication are developed.

This Thing that Is Eating My Life

In the spa at the Palace, if you happen to use the word "Palace" in a sentence - like "I just downloaded the new version of Palace" - the program plays an interesting joke on you. Instead of the word "Palace" appearing on your screen, you'll see the words " This thing that is eating my life." And so your sentence becomes "I just downloaded the new version of this thing that is eating my life."

Some people spend a great deal of time there. Some would say that it's a bit "addictive" (and I use that term in the non-technical sense). I think there are a variety of reasons' why people are drawn to the program and the community. In part, it's simply an cyberspace novelty. But there's more to it than that.

In one of the articles on my Psychology of Cyberspace web site I discuss - somewhat tongue in cheek - how Palace satisfies many of the needs in Maslow's hierarchy. On the lowest level, if you're interested in satisfying your sexual desires, there's cybersex Palace style, which means you and your partner can play with avatars. It may be lacking on the physical/tactile dimension, but when it comes to visuals, the sky is the limit. Relatively few people are interested in Palace for sexual reasons. Higher on Maslow's hierarchy, you satisfy your social needs. People do make good friends at the Palace, and it can become - like the TV program Cheers - a place where everyone knows your name. Higher yet on the hierarchy, people satisfy their need to learn, their curiosity, and their need to develop a sense of mastery. The Palace is a highly complex social and technical environment. It's a fascinating place to explore. For the engineering types, you can stretch and apply your knowledge of computers and programming. For the social types, you can meet people from around the world and explore the subtleties of the community. For the artistic types, you can create avatars or even an entire Palace site.

Now, at the top of Maslow's hierarchy... is there self-actualization? This is an interesting question. At the Palace you can assume any name you want, any appearance you want. You can experiment with your identity and new ways to relate to other people. Could that be a path to self-actualization.... Maybe.

There's one other interesting quality of Palace that makes it attractive. The Palace experience is a bit dream-like. The graphics are imaginary, sometimes surrealistic. Physical laws don't apply. You can shapeshift, float in the air, walk through walls, make objects appear out of nowhere, and instantaneously move to another place. It's like magic. Some

psychological norms also don't apply. You telepathically can speak with another person in a room filled with other people who can't hear you. You can talk to person you can't see in another room.

All of these features mimic the dream and unconscious styles of thinking (in psychoanalytic theory known as "primary process"). Palace may be attractive to some people because it is a mild altered state of consciousness. It's an opportunity to dream while awake - and like the dream, it may allow the individual to express, explore, and master aspects of oneself and one's life.

Is it Just Chat?

A few weeks ago I briefly mentioned my research to one of my colleagues in the biology department. His reply was, "Oh, I think those online things are just plain silly." Are these online communities just a novelty, just an idle form of entertainment without any real value. I think not. Just from the viewpoint of basic research in social and organizational psychology, it's fascinating to study how the development of these online worlds compare to the "real world." Because online worlds develop very rapidly, we can observe an accelerated recapitulation of real world events.

But it's also very interesting - and very valuable, I believe - to study the psychological effect of these communities as a leisure activity. Imaginary worlds like Palace are very flexible in how they provide users with many opportunities to shape themselves and their environment. People often end up creating a world that is a microcosm of their real and/or ideal world - a microcosm where they have more leeway to experiment with their identity. In the worst case scenario, people use this world as a substitute for face-to-face living or as a place to act out their same old problems. In the best scenario, the microcosm is therapeutic. People use it to understand and maybe even change themselves. They use it as a tool for supplementing and enriching their "real" life.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

- Developmental stages of mailing lists
- Making virtual communities work
- Early history of an online community
- Unique groups in cyberspace
- The Geezer Brigade: Steps in studying an online group
- The Palace Study

From Conception to Toddlerhood

A History of the First Year (or so) of The Palace

(a multimedia chat community)

Why write a history of Palace now? It's only a little over a year old.

This is what a few people said to me when I mentioned my plans for this chapter. Part of me thought they might be right. After all, in the grand scheme of things, how much can happen in only one year? But other Palatians were excited about the idea, and when I began reminiscing with them, it quickly became obvious that a great deal indeed had happened. In a tad over a year, Palace went from nascent stage software that Jim Bumgardner pitched to Time-Warner Interactive, to an independent corporation (TPI) responsible for a complex string of multimedia chat communities that are sprouting up all over the internet like enthusiastic mushrooms.

Everyone knows that computers and the internet never stand still. Change comes fast. The Palace is moving right along with the cyberspace revolution - and that first year may be its most critical period. It's a lot like human development. As any parent will tell you, those initial twelve months fly like lightning and the change is almost miraculous. The PalaceChild has grown by leaps and bounds. It's been challenged, stressed, even bruised a few times. In it's attempts to adapt, Palace has evolved habits in thinking and feeling that will shape its future development. Overall, like the human child, it's become a lot smarter and more socially complex. It's also developed a sense of self... a unique identity.

I. In the Womb

Before any entity is born into its world, many fundamental issues must be resolved. First of all, what is this thing? What is its potential? What will it become? Nature, in its infinite wisdom, works out these issues quite efficiently and, well, naturally. When humans create things, the process is a bit more bumpy and uncertain.

Is Palace a Game or What?

Early on, when Time-Warner gave Jim Bumgardner the option of working on either the Palace or "Catacombs of Fear" (a Doom-like game later to be called "Basement"), Bumgardner opted for the latter. Catacombs was more technically challenging and more likely to survive the budget ax, because it was more clearly the kind of recognizable "game" that Time-Warner was used to producing. Apparently, Palace was Bumgardner's true love - and his true destiny - for he soon returned to this project. But the game concept carried over. The "Game Palace," as it was referred to in those early days, was intended to resemble a large mansion or casino in cyberspace where players could meet to play traditional card, board, and table games, chat, flirt, and engage in a legal form of gambling. Basement, as well as other add-on features, could be launched from it. Some of the games in the Palace casino would be moderated (BlackJack, Bingo, Trivial Pursuit, etc.), and some unmoderated (Chess, Checkers, Poker, etc.). Fake "digital" dollars could be allotted and tracked by the program for use in the gambling. This environment was intended for a wide adult audience, and not for teenage computer geeks who wanted a virtual hangout. Essentially, Palace was a hybrid - a cross between an on-line chat area and a multi-player game server.

Against Bumgardner's better judgment, the game concept started to overshadow the idea of Palace as a social environment. One viewpoint at Time-Warner was to create specific fictional characters and storylines to inject into the Palace experience. The characters would appear intermittently and contact with them would immerse users into a Myst-like adventure. For example, one character, "The King," would have been a former Palace janitor who loved to impersonate Elvis. After accidentally poisoning himself by drinking cleaning fluid, he disappeared and was presumed dead - although Palace legend claims that he sporadically reappears, talking and singing, then mysteriously vanishes again. In this imaginary Palace world, users would also assume a persona or fictional identity that they could act out in the fictional plots of the Palace Game.

Bumgardner resisted this attempt to imitate Myst. Instead, he envisioned Palace as a complex networking system that would allow users the freedom to "make of it what they will" rather than impose a specific

plot or game upon them. It should be a mirror reflecting the self-image of the user and not a predetermined scenario that forced users to adapt themselves to it. He also envisioned it as a "virtual bar" where singles could meet and socialize in various entertaining ways, essentially a place for dating and flirting - the kind of focus that he felt was underexploited by other software systems.

In the end, Bumgardner's vision prevailed. The Palace became, and still is, primarily a chat world - a SOCIAL world where human relationships are the main attraction. As a result, it works well as an adult environment where flirting and cyberdating is a common experience. Yet the game dimension is still there. People play chess and Geektionary. People play tricks on each other. Reminiscent of the "imaginary world" concept, users do assume fictional identities via the avatars they wear. Unfortunately, in a kind of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny, newbie guests assume Palace *is* a fictional, Doom-like game where they can vent their pent-up frustrations by sexually and aggressively annoying other people.... at least until a wizard steps in to either correct their deviant ways or send them along the path of The King - dissipation. But this battle of good versus evil is part of the "game" too. It's just another component of that intriguing game we call "human relationships."

Should Palace be Naughty?

The tendency towards naughty, acting-out, and sometimes outright deviant behaviors on Palace has its roots in Bumgardner's early Palace philosophy. Although he avoided the Myst-like game features, he did emphasize that Palace be "cartoony" - which creates a fantasy-driven, "this isn't really real so let's play" feeling. He also insisted that Palace promotes anonymity, or "masking." With their true identity concealed and disguised, people would behave more loosely - an ideal condition for pranks and flirting (and, unfortunately, other more harmful behaviors). Bumgardner predicted that the eventual addition of voice communications would adversely affect the level of anonymity, and probably cause people to be more inhibited. Instead, digital signal processing could make voices sound like a cartoon voice, which would be fun as well as help maintain the anonymity level.

For several months Bumgardner pitched the idea to Time-Warner that "subversion" and "forbidden fruit" be used as a marketing tool for Palace. Users would feel like they were "getting away with something" because the Palace guaranteed anonymity (even the super-user couldn't spy on you or tell who you were). He wanted it to be a product that workers at large corporations would sneak into their office and run on the local network as inter-office goofing around with friends. He tinkered with the idea that lower employee levels could be covertly seeded with the program. He even considered the possible benefits from the publicity of someone suing for sexual harassment on the Palace. If it got to the point where companies banned its use, then Bumgardner felt he would have done his job well.

The potentially naughty and subversive qualities of Palace does indeed make it attractive to fun-loving adults. But yin always accompanies yang. The built-in genetic features that encourage uninhibited behavior also have resulted in some social difficulties. As we will see later in Palace history, a primary force behind the creation of the Wizards was the need to control excessive naughtiness and acting out.

Where will Palace Live?

In the early days at Time-Warner, Bumgardner's team was shying away from the idea of placing Palace on the internet and instead focused on it as a home/office/university chat environment for modems and LANs. They expected the office version to be the most successful, especially since the media at that time was filled with stories about entertainment software policies on office computer networks. A follow-up package for schools, with an education-oriented focus, was also considered. Although it was easy to make Palace work with the Internet, Bumgardner didn't think it would meet with success there due to stiff competition from the "free" software movement. A secondary release phase of the Palace was planned for wide area networks like CompuServe, America Online, Genie, and the World Wide Web. In this phase, Palace would be placed on one or more networks which people could access via modem from their home PC's.

As it turned out, the secondary release phase became the primary mission. The sparkling debut and final home for Palace was on the internet. In fact, an early version of Palace called "Sparky" (which is now the name attached to the smiley face) was first tested as a parasite program on IRC. The decision later to

open on the web proved to be a good one. It was the perfect nurturing environment for Palace to flourish. The masses were coming to cyberspace. They wanted chat. They wanted graphics. Palace gave them both. And on the internet, the vision of Palace as a networking social environment could be more fully realized than ever possible in an office setting.

Can Palace Survive?

Palace is not an only child in the world of GMUKs. There was competition from its cousins - as there is always competition in the fast-paced arena of computer software. The Time-Warner team predicted that WorldsAway would be its main rival. It was most similar to Palace in its sophistication, but there were several important differences. WorldsAway required a CompuServe subscription and thus a fee for access time, whereas Palace was free to access and required payment only for the registered software. WorldsAway used a network of powerful servers (CompuServe) to create a single large world, whereas Palace consisted of many, small interconnected worlds, each one at a different internet address. WorldsAway had it's own play money that was used to buy new rooms and props, whereas Palace was a "free" system without restricted economics (the concept of digital gambling dollars was abandoned). Last, but not least, the WorldsAway universe didn't allow you to draw your own heads, props and rooms, or create your own independent sites. Palace did.

All in all, the Palace design gave more power and freedom to the users to "make what they will" of the Palace experience. It gave them the power and freedom to create themselves, and, if they so desired, their own worlds. With such flexibility and adaptability, Palace had an intrinsically high potential to survive by changing and evolving.

But what would it evolve into?

II. The Early Days at Main

The Palace Main site (also called "Mansion") opened to the public in November of 1995. The first to arrive tended to be immigrants and explorers from other virtual communities, such as the AOL chat rooms, WorldsChat, and Echo. Some had grown tired of the large, impersonal, and snertish chat environments. Some simply wanted to explore new territory. When they first arrived at Palace, they often felt a bit disoriented, or experienced culture shock, since they found themselves coming from much large, usually text-only chat environments into this very small, intimate, and GRAPHICAL world. The visuals were quite overwhelming for some people. They also had a whole new set of keyboard commands to master. The beta-testers, wizards, and the Gods themselves cheerfully greeted the new arrivals and showed them the ropes.

Once they adapted, many of them felt captivated by what they had discovered. They marveled at how the props, avatars, and graphical space provided an enticing new avenue for communicating and expressing oneself (Arctic Frost's hand-made props rarely failed to impress and inspire). They were excited by the idea that they were participating in the pioneering of an entirely new type of virtual community. Most importantly, they were making new friends. People eagerly registered to become members and spent as much time as possible in their new virtual home. Some stayed up almost all night in order to hang out with their Palace chums. Here's how one old-timer described those days:

> In the beginning, I was unable to see someone else use my computer; I needed to be online all the time. The same people were in the bar when I came, FO, PH, Chrissy, SJ, Storm, Sleepy and so many others. When I got in the bar, people said hi, joked with you and spoke about things, none too serious. I was in heaven!! In my day to day real life, there is stress, here there was none, just friendship, acceptance and mindlessness. The Palace was the ultimate in companionship, ready and waiting any time of the day or night. Nights when I couldn't sleep, I didn't have to listen to the sound of my own voice playing off into the night. I could come on line and find something else to think about than the work day world.

Many old-timers now sentimentally look back on those first few months as the "good old days." The community was very small (the group "cheered" when the user list hit 40). Everyone knew everyone else. People were friendly, playful, and intimacy developed quickly. With such a small group, the server hummed away happily with very little lag clogging the chat. Jbum and other designers of Palace were around a lot, which made people feel connected to the original creative source of it all.

Some of the old-timers even pine for those good old days. With the rapid growth in the population that would come within the next few months - the "smiley boom," as some call it - much of the intimacy, fun, and excitement evaporated for these old-timers. Although part of the excitement in those early months was the feeling of camaraderie about recruiting new members and building a new world, this pioneering effort had it's down side. Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it. Expanding the community brought more lag, less coziness, and a waning of the feeling that this was a brand new experience. "Were we really prepared for what it has become?" one old-timer asked. "Sometimes it seemed as though we were virtual babysitters for nonexistent parents." He was referring to another unavoidable problem that accompanied the expansion of the population - the surge of immature (often, but not always, young) people who wanted to use Palace to vent their sexual and aggressive frustrations.

One early historic incident highlighted the snert problem and was an omen of things to come. Some referred to it as "the Rape of Quentin." A female user named Quentin was sexually harassed when another user whispered and spoke out loud obscenities to her, as well as put words into her mouth with the spoofing command. Her strong complaints about the incident, especially on the Palace Community Standards newsgroup, triggered a barrage of postings debating the social, technical and political implications of the incident. Some blamed the rising population of snerts; some blamed the Palace designers for giving too much power and anonymity to guests; some blamed users like Quentin for being thin-skinned and taking virtual experiences too personally and too literally. Should more control be exercised over foul language and behavior - like scripts that filter out obscene words? There were protests against anarchy and words defending the right to freedom of speech and expression. There were debates about "real" versus virtual rape, decency laws on the internet, sexism, and whether Palace was meant only for adults.

Palace officials intervened. In postings to the newsgroup, Mark Jeffrey and Jim Bumgardner expressed their concerns about the incident. Jim also admitted that there was a security problem with guests having too much anonymity. Previously, guests were identified only as "guests," but now distinct ID numbers would be assigned to each new arrival so that it would be possible to keep track of their behavior (especially spoofing) so unruly guests could be identified and disciplined. Guests' ability to spoof was also curtailed, as well as their access to some rooms.

The rape of Quentin was a milestone event. It did lead to software changes that helped control the snert problem, but it's effect was more global. It brought to the surface of public discussion a wide variety of social and technical issues that are still being debated today. Although conflicts sprung up in these discussions, the overall effect of coping with this early developmental crisis was a unifying of the community. The incident motivated people to understand what the Palace experience was about. It motivated them to demonstrate their commitment to improving the community.

III. Coping with the Masses: Social Differentiation

Beginning in the second trimester of Palace history, the population started to expand. 50, 60, 100 people were signing on to Main in the evening hours. Eventually, over 200 people occupied the server each night. The small, intimate community from the early days was being washed over with smiley guests and unfamiliar avatars manned by new members.

In any growing population - be it virtual or "real" - people struggle to find their place among the masses. People want to feel that they belong to a distinct group, and they also want their unique identity recognized within that group. They want to feel that they are contributing to the community - making their "mark" on it. Within the mix of sundry people, they want to acquire some measure of status, position, and power - especially if they've been around a while. They want these things not necessarily to control or dominate others, but rather to feel a sense of personal value and importance. They want to BE

SOMEBODY, and not just anybody.

At the expanding Palace, with avs and smileys clogging every room and balloons popping all over the screen, it was a challenge to establish one's place. A fad developed in which people placed copyright, registered, and trademark symbols next to their username in order to "protect" the sanctity of their identity. Soon people were placing a variety of unusual keyboard characters next to their name, as if wearing "badges" to signify some kind of imaginary status or position, or as a way to identify their membership to a particular clique. At the main site, where most Palatians preferred to hang out, a variety of cliques formed to create that intimacy and sense of belonging that is unique to small groups. Often a particular room became their unofficial territory. Some of these subgroups acquired a specific identity - such as the small group of females who hung out on "Women's Beach." One function of this group was to establish a sense of camaraderie among women as a distinctive and valued contingent of the Palace community. Rumor has it that (jealous and/or curious) males in drag attempted to crash their parties.

In the second half of Palace's first year, the subgroupings and social hierarchies became even more complex as the population grew. There would be wizards, PUGsters, and Magi. There would be the colonization of off-main sites. At the top level, the power structure would change giving birth to TPI. And at the "lowest" level, there would be "bad guys" and gangsters.

The Inner Circle: Wizards and Gods

The group of wizards and gods are the oldest and most stable group in the Palace culture. The group existed from the very beginning. At first it consisted of only a handful of people, mostly the team at Time-Warner. During beta-testing, some of the volunteers were asked to join the group. It had a strong impact on the other users:

> During the beta, Digital mentioned that Spingo had been made a wizard. I was amazed! I knew by then that some wizards existed, but I assumed them all to be Time-Warner employees. I had visions of this big machine working away in California, making this awesomely cool software. Little did I know that there were a handful of underpaid people struggling to make this cool software a viable, marketable reality. The group had accomplished so much, so I was surprised to discover they were so small and insignificant in TW's big picture. I had visions of grandeur for these wonderful people, which I still pray comes to pass.

Being asked to become a wizard often is a powerful experience for a user. It is an acceptance into an inner circle of the Palace community. It fulfills that need for status, power, identity, and feeling that one belongs. Making wizard meant that you were special and stood out. It meant that your skills and knowledge were both valued and needed in the service of the community. The core of old-timer wizards are those who were selected very early in the history of Palace:

> My most memorable early Palace moment was when jbum asked me if I wanted to be a wizard. I was overwhelmed. I remember my heart beating faster, and getting flushed. Wow! Of course I said yes, and he told me that I would be initiated, and when. I was amazed.... I'll never forget my initiation. I was so terribly excited that day, as I waited for the appointed hour to meet jbum on Main. I went to the cafe as instructed, and was totally confused. Where was everyone? Then Spingo came in and whispered to me to utter an incantation and I was magically transported to a room I didn't know existed! It was a hidden room, Murmoorerer, a copy of the Moor. My whole family crowded around the monitor to watch, and I was so excited I could barely type!... As I remember, Coyote, jbum, Digital, Spingo, Sleepy and dChurch were the only ones there that night. Because of the top secret nature of the Wizard Induction Ceremony, I cannot divulge what occurred after that to the general Palace public. Needless to say, it was thrilling, enchanting and hysterically funny!

As the population grew, making wizard became an even more distinctive achievement because one was being selected out of the masses. Wizardship became an important motivating factor for some users. It encouraged them to spend more time Palacing, befriending wizards, and making some contribution to the community that would distinguish them from everyone else.

Making wizard brought about three important changes in a member's Palatial life. The wizards acted as a kind of consulting group to the Time-Warner (and later TPI) team, suggesting changes in software and social policies. Armed with the wizard password, they had the power to change some of the features of the Palace environment (like altering doors or adding automated messages). And wizards had the power to KILL.

Discipling snerts is part of the daily routine of the wizard and a very visible one to the general population. In the early days, when the wizard group and Palace community were small, each kill was discussed. Concerned about power and corruption, the wizards wanted to keep each other in check so they would not overstep their role. However, with the masses arriving at Palace, it became harder to devote such careful thought and discussion to their actions. Snerts appeared in bunches and had to be dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible. It became apparent that the wizard kill command was not enough. More refined tools were needed - so pin, gag, mute, hide, and the ability to track users were added. Some of these features (mute, hide) empowered the non-wizard member. Other commands, like pin and gag, enabled the wizard to more subtly discipline snerts without having to kill them. Despite these efforts to underplay the wizard's power, some people in the community began to view the wizards as primarily a police force - as authority figures, disciplinarians, parents. A few perceived the wizards as abusive and openly expressed contempt for them. No doubt, some of these reactions were over-reactions, or what psychoanalysts call "transference." But there were discussions even among the wizards about how some of their colleagues - perhaps a few newbie wizards - might indeed be getting a bit over enthusiastic with their kill button.

An attempt was made to recruit women for wizardship in the hopes that they would be less power-hungry and trigger-happy than male members. More importantly, a few wizards and gods (like jbum and Sleepy) wanted to encourage women in general to join the Palace community. Female wizards might help them feel more welcome and appreciated as members. Having an even mix of gender might also dilute the heavy testosterone levels that plagued other chat environments and were threatening to damage Palace. "I'm not sure any of that was true," observed FO in retrospect. "And in the end, the power balance still ended up being heavily male. I think too many truly talented women blend too easily into the background, so are not nominated [to wizardship] as much. And the idea that women would kill less then men has probably been disproven many times over."

The rising snert problem challenged a fundamental element of the Palace philosophy. How much leeway should be given to users "making what they will" of Palace? Where should the lines be drawn in controlling and governing the community? These questions applied not just to aggressive antics, but also sexual ones. Spurred by the Valentines Party in 1996, seductive and partially nude props started to propagate like eager bunnies. What went on behind the locked doors of the guests rooms was one thing, but scantily clad forms in the open public of Harry's Bar and at Gate were another issue entirely. Partial nudity (and even brief moments of complete nudity before one was quickly killed) posed an even greater public relations problem as the crowds grew and the media started visiting the Palace.

Another basic premise of the Palace philosophy was being tested. It was intended to be naughty. It was designed as primarily an adult environment... but HOW naughty and HOW adult? The "propgag" command was created to help wizards strip users of their indecent avatars. But it didn't help solve the more basic problem of defining exactly WHAT is indecent. Supreme court justices have a hard time splitting these hairs. The wizards established some general guidelines (i.e., no visible breasts), but they continue to debate the more subtle issues of what is unacceptable and when to propgag or kill.

Similar debates arose over "hate props" such as Nazi symbols. Should they be banned, or would that be a violation of freedom of speech? Even more slippery was the issue of foul language. Which tainted words like f*** should be automatically blanked out with astericks? Would adults be annoyed with such restrictions? A general rule of thumb followed the often quoted motto of Randy Farmer, a pioneer in GMUK development and an honorary wizard at Palace. "Push the power down." If you're going to restrict what the user sees, hears, or can do, try to build those options into the client software so the user can decide for him or herself (or for his or her children). "Have it your way." Click a button and you no longer will see or hear f*** or have to look at that swastika. Some of these options, like a "propgag" command for members, still do not exist, but other options for filtering one's experience do. Of course, in the trenches, some people won't know about such commands as `mute and `hide, so someone - often an overworked wizard - will have to explain it.

With these challenges resulting from the rising population, being a wizard wasn't as much fun as it used to be. It was WORK - and for most, without pay. Being "on call" to respond to pages - which usually meant someone wanted to be rescued from a snert - pulled you away from your own socializing. Lots of people had questions they expected you to answer - sometimes dumb questions or ones that the user manual already answered. Because you were perceived as an authority figure, people brought their personal problems to you - problems you couldn't solve or maybe didn't want to hear. Some people brown-nosed you, and others regarded you with suspicion and scorn.

To cope with the growing population, the size of wizard group had to be increased. It went from a cozy dozen in the early days to more than 50 a year later. As is true of any working group that increases in size, a whole new set of changes faced the wizards. Factions appeared in their group. Arguments ensued, which sometimes led to the resolution of important problems, and sometimes simply created hard feelings. The wizard group also started to differentiate (officially and unofficially) into levels and types. There were newbie wizards, old-timers, gods, and paid employees of TPI. There were TPI "advisors" to the wizard group and a "wiz chair" who acted as overseer to the group and as liaison to TPI. There were wizards who were skilled at technical tasks; wizards who were good with social challenges, like talking down a snert or alleviating inter-wizard conflicts ("socio-emotional leaders"); wizards who were good organizers and "task leaders"; wizards who showed talent in verbalizing the philosophical aspects of Palace. Some were multi-talented in these areas.

Wizards experimented with automating their tasks in order to lighten their work with the masses. An automated help center was created, as well as an automated tour of Palace. Wizards created scripts that could display pre-written signs containing instructions or warnings for members with questions or attitude problems. Some wizards tinkered with scripts that could kill upon detecting an obscene word, or that would nudge a blocker off its victim. A bot was created that would sit at the Members site, wait for someone to page a wizard, and then report the page to the wizards at Main (where most of them hung out). Some of these changes were necessary and helpful. All of them placed automation in front of the user rather than personal contact with a wizard. The charm of the small, intimate Palace from the early days was wearing off. Knowing who WAS a wizard became more difficult, so the wizards experimented with placing an asterisk badge (*) next to their username in order to help users identify them. Most wizards preferred not to do this. Status hungry members then copied the badge, forcing the Palace designers to change the software so only wizards could don the asterisk. "If you think someone is deceiving you about being a wizard," users were warned, "ask them to add an asterisk to their name."

To counteract the "institutional" feel that was evolving, efforts were also made to rekindle the personal touch. A technical support room, staffed by real-live wizards, was opened. A few dedicated wizards went out of their way to personally nurture the newbies who popped up at the Gate at the Main and Welcome Palaces. And Bumgardner's rule of thumb rarely wavered: use talk rather than scripts. In early 1997, TPI instituted a monetary incentive program for wizards who helped guests and encouraged them to register. Ideally, personal contact would recruit new members more effectively than automated information or simply letting newcomers wander around on their own. But there was a small price to pay for the new policy. While some wizards assisted and socialized with newbies simply because they wanted to, now there was a financial reward for doing so. In the eyes of some suspicious guests, a friendly wizard represented not simply a benign helper or a potential friend, but rather a business strategy.

The history of the wizards is essentially the history of a balancing or juggling act. It's a self-correcting process of steering a middle course between the original Palace philosophy and the necessities of accommodating a growing community and the business behind it. "Let them make of it what they will" versus "Stop them from abusing each other!" "Let them be naughty" versus "Let's not violate public standards." "Let's be friends" versus "How can we deal with all these tennis balls?"

Despite the confusions and conflicts that arise when grappling with these polarities, the wizard group continues to prevail as an essential organizing nucleus of the community. Within the ever-changing, somewhat chaotic population at Main, it is the most stable subgroup with the widest knowledge of Palace life and the longest memory for Palace history. As such, it provides continuity and unity for the community. The creation of the wizard e-mail list and the wizard paging system enhanced the group's unifying influence. Off the Palace, the wizards "gather" on the list to discuss technical and social issues, to support each other, and simply to hang out. At the Palace, wizards anywhere on the site can communicate with all other wizards through the paging system. Other users can also send messages into the system, but cannot see anything the wizards type. Even though the users are scattered through the various rooms

of the site, doing their own things, there is a hidden, behind-the-scenes overlay of "wizard-awareness" that helps unify the site.

The problems, challenges and changes experienced by the wizards was not unique to their group. As the Palace population grew, what happened to the wizards reflected what was happening in the community as a whole.

For an even more in-depth discussion of the wizards at the Main site, see the article about the Palace Wizards.

PUGsters Unite: The Palace User Group

In the summer of 1996, the Palace User Group was created by Myotis and a handful of his fellow Palatians, including Carol, Drover, Skeezil, River, Finchy, Blondie and Mila. In its earliest stage, the group had a grass-roots, revolutionary spirit. There were problems at Palace and the early PUGsters took it upon themselves to organize and address those problems. One member described an air of "secrecy and paranoia" that surrounded the group. They were not sure how the wizards and gods would react to their mission. When one meeting was crashed by a stranger, they thought they had been "caught." Occasionally they even changed their usernames.

Shortly thereafter, when some of the founders of the group were invited to be wizards at Main, the group became a bit destabilized. They reexamined their goals and rallied as a vehicle to serve and unify the entire Palace population. It's mission was to create a mailing list (listserv) where users could more easily share ideas and discuss issues than is possible in the rather cumbersome balloon-popping chat environment. It also planned to conduct monthly "real-time" meetings at the Palace. As such, the PUG was the first attempt at an organized group of non-wizard Palatians. For those who weren't wizards, it was a place to belong and to feel some sense of efficacy. Here's how Myotis summarized the beginning of the PUG:

> We were fed up with the problems that the palace had then, and not being wizards we had no real way of dealing with them, so we started to meet and discuss, and before we knew it we were beginning to organize. Finchy came up with the idea of a listserver, and we voted on it. I approached jbum and was met with great support for the project. Shortly after that, a lot of us made wizards at main, and there was a lot of feeling from some that we had achieved our goals, that there was no need for the group anymore. The group split into factions for about a week, and then through (once again) group discussion we reaffirmed that making wizard was perhaps some of the personal goals, but the group needed to have a higher calling, to represent the Palace populace as a whole. That is what formed the large group we now know of as PUG.

The monthly "real-time" meetings of the PUG were well-attended and successful. In the first few weeks, the listserv also ran smoothly and enthusiasm ran high. Then the problems started. As the number of subscribers sky-rocketed, the list became flooded with postings. People started complaining about having to download all the spams, personal communications, and irrelevant messages. People started arguing. What was the purpose of the list? What was the purpose of Palace? Intellectual duels flared up, especially about anti-social behavior at the Palace and the perceived abuse of power by wizards. People attacked each other, the wizards, and TPI. The boundaries of the PUG became unclear because some people assumed it was a natural extension of TPI. It wasn't, in their eyes, a grass-roots user group, but just another organ of the establishment - probably because they saw wizards from Main in charge of the PUG. Out of that need to establish a place, voice, and sense of influence for oneself apart from the masses, people drew lines in the sand and hopped on bandwagons in an "us" versus "them" struggle. Once started, it seemed almost impossible to put out the flame wars. The list needed a lot of "mothering" (moderating) which severely strained the time and energy of the PUG officers, who were a handful of volunteers who never planned on having to referee a free-for-all.

The PUG leaders addressed the list's problems from several angles. A digest was made available, which made it easier for subscribers to download and read numerous messages. More efforts were made to moderate the list. In the most drastic move, the leaders created two separate spin-off lists - the Deep-Thoughts and Palace Announcements. These additions helped siphon off some of the numerous postings.

In the case of Deep-Thoughts, it also diverted and isolated some of the intellectual discussions that tended to generate lengthy messages and heated arguments. Deep-Thinkers were also encouraged to post their messages on the Palace Community Standards newsgroup rather than to the PUG list. The attempt to move intellectual debates off the list may indeed have reduced the flame wars; it may also have dampened the community's awareness of basic issues and controversies in the Palace philosophy.

By January of 1997, the number of messages and flames on the PUG list subsided considerably. Some of the users who had thrown up their hands in disgust and unsubscribed eventually rejoined the list. The PUG also became a bit more bureaucratized, with a published charter that outlined election procedures for PUG administrators, rules for behaving on the listserv, sanctions, and appeal procedures. No doubt, the social chaos that had erupted on the list was one factor that had inspired the officers to inject more structure into the PUG experience.

The PUG continues as the single most important forum for collective communication within the general population of the Palace - including members from all Palace sites across the internet. It helps satisfy that need for a sense of community among all Palatians, as well as unifies the consciousness of the Palace community.

The changes experienced by the PUG list resemble those seen in many listservs - seen, in fact, in almost any ongoing group, including the Palace community itself. There is an initial enthusiasm and evangelistic urges to recruit more people. Newcomers are greeted with generosity and patience. Then the group grows in size and diversity to the point where opinions differ, cliques develop, and people start stepping on each others toes. In this "storming and norming" stage, as social psychologists call it, the group's conflicts center on differences of opinion and the search for agreed upon rules about how to behave. Eventually, if the group reaches the mature, fully functional stage of development, it is flexible enough to accept diversity and work through any new conflicts that arise.

Disneyland Opens: The Magus

About the same time that the PUG was forming, Arctic Frost, Dr. Xenu, Wizzard, and Peter were debating Palace politics on the Community Standards Newgroup. One thread focused on whether the wizards were too powerful and elite. With only a handful of people being invited to the wizard group every few months, many talented and dedicated Palatians felt they were being overlooked and under-empowered. In another thread about the purpose of Palace, Dr. Xenu suggested that it is like Disneyland - an entertainment center where people come to enjoy themselves. Each user selects his or her own preferred form of entertainment, and Palace provides the flexible setting. It was an idea reminiscent of the original concept of the Palace Casino where a variety of games were available.

Arctic Frost put the ideas from these two threads together and founded the "Magus." She had always wanted the wizards to sponsor entertainment activities, but they were preoccupied with helping new users and monitoring the rooms. She also recognized that many people were dissatisfied with the wizards because they wished, openly or secretly, that they were wizards too even though there was very little chance they would ever be selected. The Magus, an alternative to wizardship, could be a distinctive volunteer organization that assumed responsibility for organizing Palace activities rather than complain about the "establishment" not providing any. It was an attempt to empower the populace and shape the Palace environment:

> So keeping in the defines of the 'DisneyLand' theory, I wondered why not set up a group that created what it wanted in it's own "booth" at "DisneyLand". Those that liked DisneyLand as it was could ignore the booth. But those that wanted more from DisneyLand could have the option of getting it at this booth. This booth being responsible for itself, thus relieving the Wizards of having to create something that the majority of people had no need for.

Arctic Frost anticipated that the group might succumb to the same fate she had witnessed in other online worlds. The Magus might be a fad that would die out, or dissatisfied Magi might split off to form their own groups, resulting in a handful of factions. "But that didn't happen," Arctic stated, "Instead I stumbled onto something wonderful." The group became quite cohesive and organized a number of very successful events. For the "Link Parties," the Magus set up links on Main that automatically transported users to

special events at other (non-TPI) sites, the first being WWNS. For the first time in Palace history, the effort to draw significant numbers of people off the highly popular Main site and onto other sites succeeded. The live "rock concerts" - the first, again, being at WWNS - were particularly successful. When off-stage, the performing musicians would socialize with fans at the Palace. These concerts were then topped by the historic "24 Hours on the Palace," originally suggested by Kent Starr. For the 24 Hours, the Magus created a complex set of links, tours, and events that networked a variety of Palace sites from around the world. It was an undertaking unparalleled in the history of Palace social events and required the coordination of dozens of volunteer workers.

The Magus attracted to its ranks a number of very talented and motivated Palatians. People were eager to join and submit their ideas for new events. It's membership reached a 100. It became one of the major forces behind the colonization of off-main sites.

Similar to the PUG, however, problems arose. When TPI hired from the ranks of the Magus volunteers, the group became destabilized. Not everyone could be paid to work for Palace. Apparently, miscommuncations between TPI and the Magus may have contributed to the hard feelings that developed amongst the Magus members. Later, Arctic Frost herself was hired by TPI - but not to run the Magus, which discouraged some top Magus members who then left the group. As Arctic Frost explained, the big events that the Magus attempted also were turning out to be more than the Magus could handle.

> Unfortunately, as wonderful as the 24 Hours idea was, it also served to nearly kill the group. These professional activities, though important and needed for the successful colonization of off main sites, also called for professional work. The whole concept of having normal people doing extraordinary things was unraveling. These ideas were just way too big for the Magus set up. I had a handful of people having to do way too much work. So I closed down to restructure. The new structure now allows volunteers of every level to be involved. Not just the mega-talented. So far it is evolving and going slowly as I had foreseen. I am extremely satisfied with the new structure. Albeit we do not get the limelight like we used to, this is how it should be.

The Magus did not escape criticism from other Palace members felt that the creation of the Magus intensified the trend towards a class system. They believed that the Magus - by forming a distinct group and placing a "badge" placed in front of their username (the ? symbol) - encouraged others to do the same. Intergroup competitions and conflicts were the result. FO clearly summarized this view:

> You see, up until then, there was really only two classes of Palatians (though some would dispute this): Members and Guests. Yes, there were Wizards, but we were primarily members who were given some added gun power to help monitor the halls. Most of us did not wear any special symbol or names to distinguish ourselves from Members. In fact, probably most of the population didn't even know who the Wizards were (this may still be true). Heck, even after Jbum massaged the software so only Wizards could wear the "*", most Wizards go without. The initial result of Magus was an eruption of other groups that created turf wars across TPI Palaces. There was the ?Magus, the anti-Magus group, the Legion, and a host of other folks who started plopping symbols on their names or wearing special props (parrot heads, for example) to stand out as a "class" of Palace users (some for the good of palace, others representing the evil corrupt side of Palace).

Some supporters of this viewpoint did not see the PUG in the same light. Quietly, behind the scenes, the PUG simply encouraged all users to communicate with and help each other. The Magi, according to this viewpoint, wore special symbols and announced their membership to make themselves feel that they belonged to a "special" group - "special" often implying "better," which leads to competition and conflicts. As such, critics of this aspect of the Magus felt that the formation of such groups, though probably inevitable, should not be encouraged by TPI officials, including TPI-site wizards who are extensions of the company. While acknowledging that the Magus in many other ways has made highly positive contributions to community, FO added this observation about human nature:

In the end, humans are too vastly egotistical to ever truly live in a class-less society (even in an online environment). Most folks want to "belong" to that special class that is a notch above others or allows them to stand out in some other way. In that light, Magus obviously fills a void many people seem to be missing as just a plain-vanilla member.

If members are allowed to "make what they will" of Palace - as the original philosophy suggested - then these kinds of "egotistical" strivings surely will surface for some users, in some way, shape, or form. It *is* human nature.

The Colonization of Off-Main Sites

Once the masses started to arrive, they crowded together mostly at Main, with relatively few migrating to the other Palace sites that were being created. The large population there was partly due to the fact that Main was the default connection setting in the software, so guests automatically were deposited there when they first signed on. But sites-savvy members also liked to hang out at Main, and trying attract anyone to other sites proved to be an especially difficult task.

Why didn't they want to leave Main? The horrendous lag from the over-crowding often made conversing tedious, or impossible. The place was overrun with the "tennis balls" that some members viewed as annoying, clueless, second class citizens. A few reporters from the media - overwhelmed by the crowds, the lag, and the buzzing confusion of text balloons popping all around them - concluded that Palace was interesting and entertaining, but serious conversations and the development of friendships looked impossible in such an "impersonal" environment. Surely, other new arrivals came to the same conclusion.... And yet, the population grew and very few wanted to move off to other sites.

A variety of factors may have contributed to the Main mania. As its name implied, Main developed the rock solid reputation as being the "main" site. It was the center of the Palace community, the original Palace, the "happening" place where EVERYONE hung out. Crowds draw crowds. It's a positive feedback loop. If you liked a large party atmosphere, as opposed to the much more intimate gatherings of other sites, Main was the place to be. Some people DO enjoy Times Square on New Years Eve. If you wanted to meet new people, Main had a much larger, more diverse group to browse. If you wanted simply to be around other people, but remain anonymous while relating somewhat superficially to others, Main provided that opportunity too. It's feels much less socially awkward to quietly slip in and out of a room at crowded Main than at other smaller sites. For those who hung around longer, and talked to people, they slowly realized that this place indeed wasn't superficial or impersonal at all. There were friendships, romances, conflicts, and quite a few other interpersonal dramas going on here. Beneath the confusion and crowds, there was a complex community to explore. Surely, that enticed some users to stay around. They wanted to find out more, maybe even establish their presence and make their own mark on this community.

The other TPI sponsored sites included Members (for registered users only), Haunted (a haunted house theme), and, Welcome, which was created almost a year after the opening of Palace and intended for new users. Haunted was almost always a ghost town, here and there visited by one or two wandering souls who would pop in for a few minutes, then disappear. Welcome also remained empty, until it became the default connection setting in the client software.

Members was intended to be an alternative site for users who wanted to avoid the crowds and guests of Main. But in the first few months, it also remained nearly vacant. To tempt some people over, a unique feature was added - the ability to create one's own room, complete with a name and a graphic backdrop of one's choice. Theoretically, this feature should have tempted many Palatians, who generally love graphics as a way to express their individuality. The status and power of having control over one's own room also should have been very enticing. Yet only a handful of people took advantage of the opportunity, resulting in small, often fleeting, enclaves of subgroups at the site. The attraction of Main was still too great. If you wanted a graphic backdrop for your room other than the standard Palace pics, you also had to SEND it to people so they could see it when they visited. It was a bit too inconvenient for many people. Even when software changes made it possibly to automatically download the graphics upon visiting a room, the number of private rooms didn't increase significantly. Another inhibiting factor must have been operating - perhaps the fact that you had to sit in your newly created room and wait for people to come visit you. If you disconnected from the site, your room would vanish like Shangrila. This too was a drawback. For many people, the attraction of Palace was that you could pop in at almost any time and find people to hang out with. Prearranged meetings were not the norm.

Eventually, small, very cohesive groups did develop at Members - like the Family. A small Palace subculture developed. Some of these groups claimed particular rooms as their territory, such as the Red Room. Guests who serendipitously stumbled on these intimate gatherings usually were greeted warmly. As a result of this friendly reception, some stayed and claimed Members as their home, rather than going to Main. When groups such as the Family disbanded or moved to other sites, thus removing a social nucleus to attract new users, the population at Members once again would drop, leaving behind a few very small groups. Some of these groups had a rather cultist, xenophobic, or "outcast" quality. They would wear counter-culture props or quickly boot visitors out of the room. When a few members gave obscene names to their rooms, the wizards began discussing how members seemed to be slipping into the category of "lost cause." One way to salvage the place, the wizards thought, would be to take it over and turn it into a Wizard Palace, much like the Magus had its own Palace.

The only TPI site to rival Main in population size was Welcome. Initially intended to serve as a gathering place for new users, it attracted only a few visitors. That changed when the Palace client software was altered so that Welcome became the default connection setting, rather than Main. Now guests showed up in droves. With the constant stream of new people arriving, some decided to stay and make Welcome their home. A new community developed. The Magus saw this as an opportunity and focused its efforts on cultivating this new blood. Arctic Frost believed they had potential as "worldly" Palatians who would call Welcome their home, but would also be willing to visit other non-TPI sites:

> I can give up on Main and my desires to get them off Main for good reason. We now have Welcome. There we started anew. On Welcome it's population freely visits other sites. They do not soley play on Welcome and find the joy of bouncing from one site to another. I constantly run into them everywhere. Main, Welcome and off-main sites. They are so worldly, I love seeing it. Yet, it hasn't turned into a jump off point. Welcome is constantly populated with a community of it's own.

As a result of their link parties and sponsoring of special events, the Magus succeeded in stimulating the growth of some non-TPI sites. Over time, their mission changed slightly. Arctic Frost's philosophy became more Darwinian. She believed that the non-TPI world must shape its own destiny: strong and determined sites would survive, while inherently weak sites "must die for the good of the whole." Rather than artificially (and futilely) propping up a weak site by their outside efforts - which might weaken other sites - the Magus instead provided information and resources to help site developers help themselves. This was the purpose of the Magus Palace. Visitors are free to try out and "steal" scripts for their own sites - and many do. Wizards at the Magus Palace are chosen not for the purpose of monitoring snerts, but rather for their skills at building a site or their willingness to learn how. "We also are trying to get sites to recognize they will not get their populations from Main," Arctic Frost explained,"Main is Main and you will not grow a good site by using it's population to fashion your own."

In the second half of the first year of Palace, several popular non-TPI communities began to solidify and thrive - some before the existence of the Magus and without much outside assistance. Most sites grew by word of mouth communication among friends. Some of the earliest were the Finch Nest (opening in December of 1995) and Cybertown. Later, others appeared, such as Mexchat and the Hideout. At the one year anniversary of Palace, in November of 1996, there were dozens of Palace sites and more appearing each week. The sites vary widely in their graphical theme, culture, and norms about acceptable and unacceptable behavior - some with a stable community, some just a hangout just for a few friends, some vacant, some commercial, some privately owned, some with a specific mission or hobbyist focus, some just social taverns. Almost all of these sites have a daily attendance much lower than Main, which recaptures the small, intimate atmosphere of the early days at the Palace. Although not all of these small communities will necessarily welcome newcomers, users (including old-timers) who have grown weary with the crowds, unruly behavior, or "impersonal" feel at Main can experience (or reexperience) the "good old days" at these other sites.

With the colonization of off-Main sites, Main must redefine its own identity. Ph's Horse described the different philosophies on this issue. Some view Main as a "melting pot" for various factions of the Palace community, which means it should provide a variety of interesting experiences (scripts, props) that will appeal to as many people as possible. A quite different philosophy is that Main should serve as a jumping-off point to other sites, which might work best if the site is a "plain vanilla" flavor that encourages users to migrate elsewhere. A third possibility, which is the course Main seems to be steering,

falls somewhere between these two views.

If Palace is to survive, non-TPI sites must continue to develop. Everyone in an expanding community cannot live on the same block. Old-timers have speculated about a variety of ways to improve the community-wide growth of Palace. Newbies connecting for the first time could be directed to different sites, although excluding them completely from Main might turn its population homogeneous and stale. Members need the ability to locate and communicate with people/friends across sites and servers. Transportation links between sites need to be more extensive and easy to use, especially linking abilities built right into the client software rather than located on servers.

Palace is at a critical stage in its development. The software does intrinsically shape many of the elements of the Palace atmosphere, so that there indeed is a basic universal Palace language and experience. But the software is also very flexible. Site developers can "make of it what they will." Down the road, will Palace evolve into a collection of disparate communities with little contact among them? Or will the creation of a comprehensive infrastructure of interconnectivity among sites result in a overarching meta-community?

Snerts and Gangstaz

As the masses arrived at Palace, the need to establish one's own identity, and to feel that one had some kind of power or influence, was not limited to good-doers. Snertdom also is an attempt to be unique and exert control. Bad boys (and girls) want to be somebody too, and they achieve that goal by being bad. Playing the role of the alienated rebel and the antagonistic underdog can feel very special and powerful. Being around large, fluctuating crowds while having only a number for a name makes guests especially vulnerable to snertdom as an identity-seeking tactic. Their anonymity creates the identity frustration that leads them to acting out, as well as disinhibits them to misbehave. The fact that some members treat them as second class citizens only makes matters worse. One guest, frustrated by the prejudice he perceived among members, verbally lashed out against them while attempting to rally his fellow guests. Here's a log excerpt, complete with the guest's shouting caps:

> !MY FELLOW GUESTS IF YOU WANNA JOIN THE ANTI MEMBER ORGANIZATION AND ONE OF THE FASTEST GROWING GROUPS ON THE PALACE WITH OVER 40 MEMBERS THE PRA PALACE REFORMATION ASSOCIATION THEN PRIVATE MESSAGE ME...!MY FELLOW GUESTS IF YOUR TIRED OF MEMBERS HARRASING AND THREATING YOU AND PUTTIN UP STUPID IGNORANT PET GUEST AVATARS THEN JOINT THE PRA!!!.. !GUESTS LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD ON THE PALACE DONT LET THESE MEMBERS PUSH YOU AROUND JOIN THE PRA AND YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND HEY ITS GOOD MONEY!!!!...!GUESTS THE TYPICAL PAYMENT FOR A NEW PRA MEMBER IS FREE INTERNET ACCESS THE MORE YOU CONTRIBUT THE MORE YOU GET REWARDED!!

As distasteful as this fellow was, he did have a point. There was a growing tendency to treat the guests as hated lower class citizens, which reflected the need of such members to feel important, special, and powerful (a very common dynamic in the "real" world of racism and social class struggles). The prejudice ranged from mildly derogatory or dehumanizing terms for guests ("guesties" and "tennis balls") to blatant expressions of hostility (a prop consisting of an ax buried in the head of a bloody smiley). Eventually, TPI and the wizards clamped down on such prejudice. It wasn't good for business. It wasn't humane.

In other words, members can be snerts too. In fact, snertish members are more likely to succeed in their efforts to establish a presence and feeling of power by ORGANIZING. Gangs, or "ganstaz" as Dr. Xenu calls them, are yet another symptom of the expanding Palace community. A classic example was the "Legion." With an abstruse character symbol placed next to their username (their "colors"), they attempted to create havoc by verbally abusing members, bombarding people with nonsense whispers, and forcing lag by flooding the server. There was much debate among the wizards about the outbreak of this social malady. Should Legion members be killed at sight and banned, or would that only turn them into vindictive martyrs? Should more efforts be made to reason with them, maybe even invite them to do something constructive for the community so they could feel like they belonged? Were they just a bunch of bored kids who were simply a nuisance, or were they serious hackers who could harm the Palace? Was there anyway to encourage snerts to go elsewhere?.

The wizards entertained two different viewpoints. There was the "Nazi" position, which advocated the "kill on sight" tactic. Then there was the "Bleeding Hearts" approach, which took a more sympathetic, nurturing turn. The two viewpoints revert back to those same basic elements of Palace philosophy. Just how much should users be allowed to "make what they will" of Palace? And just how naughty should they be?

For a very comprehensive discussion of deviant behavior at the Main site and the wizards strategies for managing it, see the article entitled The Bad Boys of Cyberspace.

Revolution at the Top: The Creation of TPI

Business wise, the increase in the Palace population was a good thing. On July 1, 1996, The Palace, Inc. announced its formation as a new private corporation, with Mike Maerz named as president and chief executive officer, Jim Bumgardner as chief technology officer, and Mark Jeffrey as director of commercial marketing. Investors in the company were Intel, Softbank, and Warner Music Group - although no company had a controlling interest. Now no longer a small component of the Time-Warner giant, the Palace team could exercise more independence and freedom in pursuing its vision.

The transition would bring some difficulties, though. As is true of any organization, stressful changes at the top tend to reverberate downward through the organization. And this was happening at a period in the Palace history when the social structures for handling the increasing population were already strained, resulting in a bit of social chaos. The community needed a guiding hand, or at the very least the feeling of security in knowing that the higher ups were hearing their concerns. The TPI officials, extremely busy trying to get their company flying, did their best to respond to those concerns, but complaints about their failure to post messages to the PUG list were frequent and bitter. The wizards and the Magus also did their best to run intercept between the community and TPI, but they were a bit overwhelmed by the masses too, and they were limited in what social and technical changes they could make. Permission from TPI, usually Jim Bumgardner, was the final "go ahead" - but communications from TPI via the wizard mailing list were also fading. To the people "below," the people at the "top" seemed less available and less in touch with what was going on in the community.

The breakdown in communication between TPI officials and the community resulted in some unfortunate incidents. A good example was the "Red Dog Incident." When the release of a new version of the Palace software was announced, Red Dog - a user known to quite a few members - posted a message to the PUG list in which he suggested that everyone should flood the Palace server. Supporters of Red Dog took his comment to mean that he was enthusiastic about getting the new software and wanted to encourage everyone to download it. But one Palace official, alarmed by the possibility that people may indeed flood and crash the server, temporarily banned Red Dog from the PUG list. A very lengthy and angry debate broke out on the list. Some people were outraged at what they perceived to be the insensitive, power-wielding tactics of an overly protective and out-of-touch authority structure. Others felt the ban was understandable. Some saw the community taking sides in a vehement "us" versus "them" battle. Throwing up their hands in disgust, they dropped off the PUG list.

The Red Dog incident was a symptom of Palace's growing pains. TPI officials were over-worked and unable to be as attentive to the community as they would have liked. The community was also frustrated and feeling a bit helpless in the face of all the changes ensuing from the rising population. Members had some legitimate complaints, but they also needed an avenue for displacing their frustrations. The seemingly distant and uncaring TPI - the "bad parent" - became a logical target.

Another difficulty involved TPI's hiring from the ranks. Skilled, dedicated wizards and Magus workers did catch the attention of the TPI staff, and they wanted such people to join their team - for PAY. They painstakingly considered each invitation they made, fretting over how the Magus and wizards would react to the choice. Unfortunately, hard feelings and conflicts did erupt when the announcements were made. Some members also were concerned about conflicts of interest. Could TPI staff - especially newly hired TPI staff - remain loyal to both TPI and the community? The underlying assumption, of course, was that the business and the community did not always have compatible interests and goals.

It's an interesting and important assumption to examine. Mark Jeffrey once stated that it's hard to balance business with community. "Without biz, there would be no Palace community; without Palace community there is no biz." How TPI juggles that balance - and how the community reacts - will decide the future of the Palace.

Despite the difficulties associated with the creation of TPI, the development of the Palace community continues to move forward. In fact, as in human development, it is the challenge of such obstacles that provides the impetus for productive change. That which doesn't kill Palace makes Palace stronger. Credit goes to TPI. Credit, as Mark Jeffrey pointed out, goes to the wizards and Magus members who provided the "social glue" that held the community together during the stressful transition. Credit goes also to the community of dedicated members who stayed with and contributed to Palace despite the problems.

IV. Extra-Palatial Encounters

The primary focus or "hot spot" of the Palace community is the Palace itself - a visual chat environment where people converse and play with graphics, scripts, and sounds. However, over the course of its development, the community has spilled over into other realms of the internet, and even beyond the internet. These supplemental forms of communication enrich the community. In fact, it's very possible that a virtual community might even stagnate and eventually die without these other pathways to share information and develop relationships. Synchronous communication on the internet, as in text-driven chat environments, is captivating because everyone is "there" at the same time. The disadvantage is that there is a definite limit to how many words and ideas can be pumped through real-time typed text. In its evolution, the Palace overcame this limitation in a variety of ways.

Newsgroups

Newsgroups appeared very early in the history of Palace, with more coming online over time. By the end of the first year, the groups included the Palace Design Forum (for architects of Palace sites), Palace Announcements (where users posted announcements about events), Palace Tech Support, Palace Iptscrae Language (for discussions of scripting), Palace Pserver Operators (for issues related to the server software), and Palace Community Standards. The Community Standards group is especially interesting concerning the social history of Palace. On the TPI web site, it was defined as:

> ... a forum for expressing viewpoints on what constitutes acceptable and non-acceptable behavior in social cyberspace. What is offensive? How should it be handled? Should it BE handled? WHO should handle it? Here is where you can come together and define what the rules of intra-Palace-server behavior should be.

When it first appeared, shortly after the opening of Palace in November 1996, there was flurry of postings about a wide variety of social and technical issues. After the "Rape of Quentin" incident, the group overflowed with discussions about abusive behavior, what to do about it, and the overall purpose of Palace. Once these discussions died down, the newsgroups postings dropped off dramatically, with long stretches of time with almost no postings at all. Activity once again resurged in the summer of 1996 when the "deep-thinkers" on the PUG list were encouraged to take their debates about Palace philosophy - especially what to do about anti-social behavior at the Palace - off of the list. After a flurry of exchanges, the newsgroup activity once again waned.

Were user's interests in social and philosophical issues simply periodic flashes in the pan? Probably not. Many of the newsgroups experienced low, sporadic traffic, which may be attributed to the intrinsic nature of a newsgroup. Accessing a newsgroup means that the person has to know how to use a newsgroup reader, either a separate program or one bundled into a web browser. It's extra software to learn, extra buttons to click, extra internet locations to find, and therefore a barrier - albeit rather simple - to diving into the postings. But the barrier is also psychological. Even when the newsgroups were made easily available via the Palace web site, activity was still slow. People have to shuffle continually back and forth TO a newsgroup to read and post. It's not a synchronous exchange of conversation, as in chat. Nor does

the word come right to your door, as in e-mail. Compared to chat and e-mail, conversing by pinning notes to a bulletin board feels awkward... and lackluster.

Palace Web Sites

Websites devoted to Palace-related topics also appeared shortly after the Palace opened and blossomed over the coming months. Some of the most visited sites, and therefore a "nucleus" of the Palace web, are those created by TPI, the Magus (along with its Palace Newsletter), and the PUG. A variety of other sites also were created by enthusiastic members who wanted to contribute to and make their mark on the Palace world: (1) archives of Palace resources, like avatars, sounds, MIDI files, and scripts; (2) "how to" sites describing methods for creating and using avatars, sounds, MIDI files, and scripts; (3) pages devoted to a particular Palace site, describing its culture, people, and purpose; (4) pages that described specific Palace events, such as the Palace Parties and the death of Robin; (5) bio pages where Palatians would describe themselves and their life at the Palace; (5) various other articles and handbooks about living at the Palace.

These web sites provide something that is not possible in a chat environment - the efficient communication of detailed and/or lengthy information. If Palace chat servers are the taverns of the Palace community, then web sites are the libraries.

Mailing Lists

Mailing lists (listservs) were one of the most powerful extra-palatial communication tools. They became major building blocks of the community. Lists for the wizards, Palace site operators, and iptscrae scripters were created shortly after Palace opened, in early December 1996. According to Finchy, one of the creators of these lists, "It was a major breakthrough, as it really helped to solidify our community and to serve as a record of our trials and tribulations, which there have been a few." The wizard list at first was small, with an intimate group of ten subscribers. A year later, it consisted of almost 60. With that increase in size came the tendency towards schisms, debates, and flaming which are typical in the developmental course of a listserv. The unique aspect of this list is that the subscribers don't merely exchange information, or socialize, or "shoot the breeze" about their opinions and ideas - which are the typical activities of most lists. The wizard list is a WORKING list. The wizards must work together in overseeing and modifying the social and technical realms of Palace. That common bond and necessity of performing a task together helps the group endure and, in its best moments, learn from the conflicts that arise on the list.

Occasionally there have been requests to limit the types of messages posted to the wizard list. No personal bantering. No one-liner jokes. No flames or spam. But in the long run the list remains mostly "free." Bumgardner, who was instrumental in its creation, prefers that the wizards use the list in any way they deem fit. Jokes, flames, and spam are all part of the group process and all potentially solidify the group when openly expressed and discussed. Conflicts are inevitable, as they are in any group, but it is far better to discuss them than it is to suppress their expression, which forces them underground and then to resurface in a much more insidious path.

The wizard list also serves as an important vehicle for the wizards to communicate with the TPI officials, who also subscribe. With the increasing demand on their time, the TPI staff's participation faded on the list, sometimes leaving the wizards wondering whether they were "home alone" without the feedback and guidance they were used to. A wizard chairperson was elected to serve as liaison between the list and TPI officials. Although TPI's presence on the list can enhance communication and productive decision-making, it's growing distance from the list did reflect a basic quality of the list. It is a free-form, independent, non-authoritarian, and trusted (by TPI) forum for the wizards to meet on a level playing field in order to socialize, exchange ideas, hash it all out, and make decisions. These qualities of the list reflect the qualities of the wizard group itself.

The importance of the wizard list as a centrally organizing "mind" of the Palace community is paralleled only by the PUG list, which was created midway through the first year of Palace's history. While the

wizard list provides a central point for the "inner circle" to gather as a cohesive group, the PUG provides the same function for the entire membership. Much larger than the wizard list, the PUG listserv at first was difficult to manage. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it became necessary to actively moderate the list, publish guidelines for it in the PUG Charter, and at one point split the list into subsidiary lists in order to control the number of postings and heated debates.

Some people attributed the problems that developed on the PUG list to the intrinsic nature of a mailing list. Unlike chat, people aren't "face to face" with each other on a list. You can click on "send" and not have to deal with the other's reaction until later. In mail you also can say (type) everything that's on your mind. As one PUGster stated, "Its just too damn easy to attack, defame or otherwise flame someone via email.... things are said on a mail list that most would never have the balls to say to someone's face." Some members described how they had seen similar problems develop in other chat worlds that created a mailing list for its users, such as WorldsChat:

> ... we had great fun there [in the chat environment] for quite a while. And then, when the message board came along, it seemed to change the feeling of the place. It seemed that the flames, the bickering, and the out and out fights that erupted on the board inevitably spilled over to the environment. Many survived this, but many of us also became disenchanted, or maybe even disgruntled and left. I know for a fact that many of us that lived through those times directly attribute the loss of WorldsChat's sparkle to the wars and/or soap opera that broke out on the message board. This is what I see the Palace PUG migrating towards (and more recently, the Deep Thoughts board).

While it's entirely possible that the list problems spill over and contaminate the chat environment, it's also possible that the reverse is true. Although discussion is limited in chat due to the restrictions of type-text communication, chat is nevertheless a powerful social environment. People get juiced up emotionally. In fact, the restricted and as a result AMBIGUOUS communication may enhance the psychological drama. When people aren't exactly sure what you mean, they fill in the gaps with their own fantasies. However, very little of this can be openly discussed due to the limitations of chat. When mailing lists are created, they may open the floodgates for all the backed-up emotions and opinions to surge forward. Ideally, the list may provide the necessary opportunity for more freely discussing and working through these emotional issues. With a whole group of people participating, a variety of opinions and perspectives can be shared - which helps immeasurably with "reality testing."

The storm and stress phase of the PUG list tapered off considerably by January of 1997. But the list continued to be active and productive. Although some may users may be left with hard feelings. the overall effect of the list on the community was positive. At the very least, it acted as a "safety value" for pent up emotions and frustrations. At best, some of the misunderstandings and conflicts spilling over from chat were resolved.

Private E-mail

E-mail reigns as the single most important method for developing relationships online. It is a private communication that allows as much expression as the person cares to put into it. When a relationship grows in a chat world, at some point the pair begins to communicate via e-mail. You have to go out of your way to send an e-mail. It's a personal touch. Compared to chat, people can more efficiently convey information, as well as more easily express themselves. Beneath any chat world, there is an extremely complex network of private e-mail relationships. In that network, people explain, vent, share, decide, plan, and deepen their contact with others. While the Palace may be the conscious focus of this chat community, the underlying infrastructure of e-mail relationships provides nourishment that helps the community thrive.

Real Life Encounters: The Palace Parties

In the development of online relationships, people often reach the point where they want more than an online relationship. They want contact in the "face-to-face" world. Like e-mail, telephone calls and in-personal rendezvous create a complex interpersonal network that enhances the Palace community - except such "real life" contact can be more powerful than e-mail in its ability to help people feel closer

and fortify their relationship.

In addition to informal contacts, the Palace community also organized several "Palace Parties" which were held every few months during the first year. In New York, Las Vegas, and then Atlanta, several dozen Palatians would gather for a weekend of socializing and comparing notes on their Palace experiences. The attenders were people who had easy geographical access to the party and dedicated Palace users who were willing to travel to get there. A mailing list was created for the party attenders, as well as a web site where descriptions and photos of the gathering were posted for anyone in the community who was interested in the "recap" of the event.

The number of people attending the parties were relatively small compared to the total population of Palace users. However, the impact of the parties on the community is large. Many of the people who attend these events are dedicated Palatians who spend a great deal of time online and invest much effort in the progress of the Palace civilization. They are the nucleus and social "glue" of the community. At the parties, they have the opportunity to compare their online perceptions of each other to their face-to-face perceptions. They fill out their understanding of each other, in some cases become much closer. The net result is the strengthening of that social nucleus.

V. Where to? Community or Game?

The first year or so has shown a dramatic change in that virtual experience called "Palace." Where that development will head in the future is an open question. In its second year of existence, the Palace community continues to grow, but that progress is not guaranteed forever. There are dangers within and without. Communities are highly complex organisms that can go awry without appropriate guidance that gives them identity and purpose. Palace could expand into a widespread nation-state of sites with mutually enriching commerce, or decay into a feudal system of isolated, stagnant fiefdoms... or something inbetween. The internal design of the software combined with the internal management of the community will decide that fate. From without, there are other, perhaps even more powerful forces at work. The world of the internet is highly competitive and constantly in flux. Software comes and goes. Virtual communities come and go. Only the fittest will survive. Only those communities that provide what people WANT in a virtual community will survive.

What DO people want? What does TPI think people want? What do TPI and Bumgardner want? The creators and the inhabitants might choose to develop all of the complex political, economic, and social infra-structures that make up a thriving community. But that's a tall order that goes beyond software engineering. Maybe it's not even what will interest the masses. As Palace grows in popularity, there may be a shift towards games, entertainment and feature events as the major attractions. In the winter of 1997, the addition of major add-on features like Auditorium and Shockwave seems to lean Palace in that direction.

So is Palace destined to be a community.... a game.... a mixture of both? The distinction might be irrelevant. The intrinsic beauty of Palace is its design as an open social environment where personal and group identity can draw on fantasy as much as reality. It's an alternative community where people can mix their real and imagined selves to their hearts content. Along the way, all sorts of social, political, and psychological dramas will unfold - as this history of Palace demonstrates. But that's all part of the game.... The community *is* the "game."

VI. Historical Moments in Early Palace History

1. The Day the Palace Changed

That's what several old-timers call the Valentine's Day Party in 1996. The celebration was a special event for several reasons. It was one of the first publicly announced, well-attended parties at the Main site. Most importantly, the Valentine's Party was the first whole site activity that took advantage of Palace's claim to fame - AVATARS. Almost everyone dressed up for the occasion. SEXY props were the order of

the day, with scantily clad forms traipsing all over the Mansion. From that point onward, seductive props profligated. Prior to the Valentine's Party, those kinds of props rarely were paraded in public.

CYBERSPACE LESSON LEARNED? Users indeed enjoyed Palace as an adult-oriented, "naughty" place. The Valentine's Party was a convenient trigger for some inclinations that were just waiting to blossom. Some people even think "the history of Palace is the history of sex."

2. Skeezil Fools the Establishment

Skeezil was a well respected, talented, and devoted member of the Palace community. He was invited to be wizard at some Palace sites and even placed in the position of Vice Chairperson of the newly formed Palace User Group. Much to the surprise and dismay of some adult members, Skeezil turned out NOT to be a 26 year old computer programmer, but rather a 14 year old dishwasher/busboy with lots of computer time on his hands.

Major arguments broke out at the Palace and on the PUG list. Was it right that Skeezil had deceived the establishment? Was he pretending to be mature, or was he really mature? Should he be forced to resign from his position in the establishment? Did it matter how chronologically old he was? To some people, even some TPI officials, it didn't matter. But many of these issues are still being debated.

CYBERSPACE LESSON LEARNED? Cyberspace is a great level playing ground where appearance and status from the "real" world falls to the wayside. "Unimportant" people can be heard and recognized, just like the "important" people. Yet, in cyberspace, people are not always whom they seem to be... Or are they?

3. Dodge City: Boom and Bust

Dodge City was created as a social experiment. At this TPI sponsored site, there were no wizards, no rules, no holds barred. You could do anything you wanted without the establishment looking over your shoulder. A haven for naughtiness and snertdom. Maybe even a way to dissociate and contain the snert problem.

Snerts indeed gathered there. Unfortunately, they were not content with a kingdom of their own. They used Dodge City as a staging area to launch raids on Main, where they made as much a nuisance of themselves as possible.

The experiment ended. Dodge City was closed down.

CYBERSPACE LESSON LEARNED? Acting out is indeed acting OUT. Anti-social people will never be content with themselves. They need a more "normal" social structure to act against, thereby defining themselves. No matter what territory you yield to them, there will always be barbarians at the gate.

4. The Death of Robin

The news of Robin's death was announced on the PUG list. She was a regular at the Palace. Many people knew and liked her. However, before her death, many people did not know that she suffered from a very a painful and destructive version of MS - so much so that she enlisted the services of Dr. Kavorkian. A touch of national publicity, and grief, entered the Palace community. Some people wished they had known more about her condition. They wished they could have helped. A memorial service was held at one of the Palace sites and a web page describing her life was posted. At the Main Mansion site, Robin's Garden was erected in her memory.

CYBERSPACE LESSON LEARNED? Disabilities are not always visible online. In some ways, that may be a good thing. In some ways, perhaps not... Another lesson - Palace is a community like any real world community, with all the same triumphs and losses.

VII. Why is this Thing Eating My Live: Is Palace Addictive?

Even during the early days of Palace, a curious thing happens whenever you mention the word "Palace" at the Main Mansion site. For instance, if an unsuspecting user types "Where can I get the new version for Palace?", he may be quite perplexed by what actually appears on the screen: "Where can I get the new version of *this thing that is eating my life*?" When the user finally figures out that the Palace program itself is making this silly little substitution of words, his confusion may turn to delight, and then, perhaps, to a self-conscious, even worrisome realization. This thing really IS eating my life! Just hang around the Palace for a little while and you will hear the jokes:

> "How often do you come here ZeroGravity?"
>
> "Too often."
>
> "Hey, Tippy! You still here? Get a life!"
>
> "I don't have one, Gyro!"
>
> "Hiya Smokey! You back again? I saw you this morning."
>
> "I needed another fix!.... LOL!"

Or, as one member simply told me, "I practically live here."

Early in the development of the Palace software, Jim Bumgardner, it's creator, discovered that users found the program quite addictive. The humorous substitution of words reminds us of this fact, should we even mention the name of this thing that has cast the spell over us. The question is: WHY is it so addicting? The substitution joke suggests that we don't even have a word to label it. The power that addicts us is an unnameable THING! While hanging out at the Palace, I've often tossed out this very question to the group, "So why do you think this place is so addictive?" Often, the reply is "I dunno." Can it really be that we don't understand this thing that threatens to gobble up huge chunks of our existence, like some insatiable but mystifying creature beneath our beds?

We psychologists have long thought about why people become obsessed. There are a variety of theories on the topic. One common denominator is the idea that people become preoccupied with a thing, person, or activity because it satisfies a NEED. Humans are complex beings, and so the needs that fuel their behavior are complex and many. In the 1960s, Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, charted the wide variety of human needs according to a hierarchy ranging from very fundamental, biological needs to higher order ones of an aesthetic and self-actualizing nature. When a person is able to satisfy needs at one level, she is then prepared to move upward to the next. Perhaps, to answer the riddle posed by the Palace substitution script, we should take a similar path. By starting at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy and working our way up, we can attempt to place some words around and onto that PalaceThing that can be so captivating, consuming, and delightful (BTW, I should add that some of these explanations apply to MANY chat, newsgroup, and MOO environments on the net).

And They Laughed at Freud!

One afternoon when I asked the group at Harry's Bar why they thought the Palace was addictive, someone gave a simple, one word reply that I hadn't heard before.... "SEX." I had to LOL. Of course! A hundred years ago Freud claimed that sex was the primary human motive. And Maslow placed it at the bottom level of his hierarchical pyramid (along with other essentials like the need for food, water, warmth, shelter, and physical safety). It's a basic biological need that commands attention. While most people at the Palace are not out to bed someone, some people definitely are. If you take a quick look at the list of rooms, often you will find that some of the "guest rooms" are "closed" - i.e., the door is locked so no one else can get in. The list will also tell you how many people are in the room. If it's two (and sometimes even three), you can be pretty certain what they are up to.

Exactly what goes on behind those closed doors is a topic for another whole article. In fact, many of those articles are already out there for the taking. Nowadays cybersex is a hot topic in the media precisely because sex IS one of those basic biological needs that commands everyone's attention. I prefer not to dwell on this topic right here and now because I think the prevailing attitude among many uninformed people ("the internet is nothing but pornography and cybersex") is simply a defense against underlying feelings of ignorance, inadequacy, and FEAR concerning the internet. I'd rather not encourage that distorted attitude which hides this cyber and techno phobia.

But let me say this about cybersex at the Palace or anywhere on the internet. When people get preoccupied with it, they do so for the same reasons people get obsessed with sex in any context. Sure, cybersex is very accessible if you have the technical know-how, it can be very anonymous and therefore emotionally safe, you can act out all sorts of fantasies by altering your identity and gender, you easily can bail out of an encounter and try again later, it's about as "safe sex" in the medical sense as you can get... and at the highly visual Palace, you have the added goodie of being able to display "props" (avatars, or simple "avs") to suit any of your desires, as long as you know how to create those props. All of this makes cybersex attractive. But the underlying needs being satisfied are the same as in the real world. Some people are enticed by the opportunity to not just satisfy but also experiment with their sexual appetite - and that may be perfectly healthy. Others are driven to cybersex out of loneliness, dependency, anger, or a deep insatiable emptiness that demands to be filled.

Most cybersex at the Palace doesn't even involve flashing pornographic icons or lewd language that sounds like it came from the Penthouse Letters or a cheap adult novel. Maybe the word "cybersex" doesn't even apply to most of the "sexual" activity taking place there. The good old fashioned word "flirting" is much more appropriate. The Palace often feels and looks like an ongoing cocktail party - and like any good party, there is a hefty dose of natural, playful flirting. Some of it is a prelude to sneaking up to one of the guest rooms. Much of it is just normal fun that doesn't progress to anything more sexually intimate. What makes it even more delightful than real world flirting are the same features that makes cybersex attractive. It's relatively anonymous and safe, so you can be a bit more open, bold, and experimental than you would at the real world office party. The highly visual/auditory Palace program also lets you do things that you usually can't do in pure text chat rooms. You can "play" with someone's personal space, you can snuggle up next to or mount yourself on top of a flirtee, you can blow him and her an auditory kiss, you can wiggle and "dance" together by maneuvering your props or running macros. Most alluring of all, you can enter a playful little pas de deux where you tease and court each other by displaying avatars that reveal your mood, intentions, likes and dislikes. In fact, the prop you wear can be a clear expression of whether you are in the mood to flirt or not. Most of the time this is all done rather tastefully. Sometimes not.... just like the real world.

Like at any party, this flirting can be a lot of fun and quite addictive. It also points to needs that go beyond the simple satisfaction of biological sex drive. It points to interpersonal needs. Here is where we move on to the next level in the hierarchy.

Where Everyone Knows Your Name

When I ask people why they keep coming back to the Palace, the most common response is "I like the people here." The addictive power of the Palace goes far beyond that of a video game because it has something that video games never will. There are people. And people need people. On the second level of Maslow's hierarchy is the need for interpersonal contact, social recognition, and a sense of belonging. As a human, you instinctively want to go to a place where everyone knows your name.

Another stereotype in the minds of the uninformed public is that the internet is populated mostly by misfits and socially inadequate people. They can't form "real" relationships, so they resort to safe, superficial contact offered through the cold wires and glass monitor screens of cyberspace. Once again, this stereotyped thinking is more a defensive reaction to the internet than an accurate reflection of reality. Sure, some shy, interpersonally anxious, and downright pathologically schizoid people may be drawn to cyberspace relationships. They may even become "addicted" to such relationships (and who's to say that is "bad"?). However, many users are perfectly normal social beings who use the internet to find people who share similar interests and lifestyles - the kinds of people who may not be available in their immediate, real-world environment.

At the Palace users automatically have something in common with everyone else. They are USERS! They share an interest in computer technology and the internet, which offers the strong possibility of instantaneous camaraderie and a sense of belonging. Jokes about being "addicted" may be half serious, but they also boost this feeling that "we are all in this together." This is true of almost all online environments, but what makes the Palace unique is that it is a NEW technical and social environment. Unlike other places on the internet, it is a highly visual, spatial, and physical habitat. The software, the behaviors, and the social norms associated with this environment are brand new and evolving quickly. People at the Palace take great pleasure in sharing ideas about this. Many feel that they are participating in the birth of a new generation of online community. They feel like pioneers who, together, are settling new territory. It's a very addictive feeling of "belonging" to a creative process.

What makes the territory so new and challenging is that the visual/spatial qualities of the Palace have dramatically enhanced the way people can satisfy that very basic human need for social recognition and exchange. You aren't limited to text-only communication. In addition to talking, you have at your disposal the subtlety and poetry of non-verbal communication. While these non-verbals can be conveyed through action-statements in text-only environments ("Starman pats Lily on the back"), it doesn't have quite the same subtle power as a pure nonverbal behavior. At the Palace, you can run to greet friends when they enter the room. You can sit next to, above, below, or on top of people to express your mood towards them. You can place yourself into the corner of the room, float above the room, get down onto the carpet with the others, hop into a pool or a bathtub, use a chair, a table, tree, statue, or any of the other numerous objects in the environment - all as ways of showing your intentions and feelings towards others. With "thought balloons" you can express what you are thinking without expecting a reply, and with "excited balloons" you can add zip to something you want to say. Most important of all, you have props as powerful tools to express your attitudes and feelings towards others, and as social tokens to exchange with others. Add all of these visual features to the ability to "whisper" privately to others (a feature common to many chat environments) as well as the ability to write scripts to automate behavior - and you have an almost infinite array of methods to interact with others. Experimenting with these methods is quite addictive.

There is also something very captivating about the feeling that many Palace sites are like an ongoing party. Almost everyone loves a party, especially one where you can leave easily. Almost everyone can relate to the delightful nuances and complexities of hanging out and wandering through a house full of people. This social climate offers everything from casual chit-chat and goofing around to very intimate, meaningful conversation (and, of course, cybersex). A whole range of social needs can be fulfilled. While the uninformed public may claim that cyber-relationships are superficial, every experienced online user will tell you otherwise. People feel that they have made good friends, and, in some cases, lovers.

When you think about it, what's are the differences between a real relationship and one at the Palace? At the Palace you can communicate by talking and sounds, you can "do" things with people (like go for a walk), you can see them via their avatars. Words, sounds, physical actions, sights....what basic expressive dimension is left out? Well, you can't (yet) hear a person's voice or (yet) see their physical body in motion. Communication is limited by how good you are at typing and writing. But then in the real world you can't express yourself as quickly or symbolically as you can through props. And it's a well known fact that people tend to be more open and honest in cyberspace, probably BECAUSE people usually don't see or hear you.

There are indeed pros and cons to both real and cyber interactions, which simply makes them DIFFERENT. The Palace is so captivating because it is a unique ALTERNATIVE, and not necessarily a poor substitute, for satisfying social needs.... with one major exception. In cyberspace, you will never be able to touch another person. While we don't do this with just anyone in our real world lives, it IS a very important component of our closest relationships. Human physical contact is an extremely powerful need - so powerful that it also extends down into the first level of the hierarchy. Babies sink into depression and die without it. When adults are chronically deprived of it, they feel a pervasive sense of loss and longing.

There are other potentially frustrating aspects of Palace socializing. One of these frustrations can, paradoxically, foster addiction in some people. Because Palace feels like a new, pioneering territory with lots of potential rewards, a land rush has set in. Lots of new users are showing up. Among the increasing flood of people, if you want to develop and maintain friends... if you want people to know your name... you HAVE to keep coming back. The more time you spend there, the more people get to know you, the

more you are considered a member who is "one of us." If you haven't signed on for a few days or longer, you may feel like you are losing ground, that you will be forgotten. You don't want those relationships you developed to fade out. So you feel compelled to go back and reestablish those ties. For many people, it is precisely those social ties that keep you coming back. Without them, the Palace would be just another video game addiction that would quickly wear off.

Hey! Look at My New Av!

On the next level of Maslow's hierarchy is the need for learning, accomplishment, mastery of the environment, and the self-esteem that arises from one's achievements. Operant theory in psychology adds that learning is most powerful when small units of accomplishment are quickly reinforced. Computers in general are so addictive because they do all of this in a highly efficient and rewarding fashion. You confront a problem or an unfamiliar computer function, you investigate, you try solutions, you finally figure it out - and the computer does something specific and concrete for you that it never did before. Challenge, experimentation, mastery, SUCCESS! It's a very addictive cycle that makes you want to learn and do more.

The Palace, being a complex technical and social environment, poses few limits on how much a person can experiment and learn. New members take great pleasure in learning the basics of how to talk, use props, play standard scripts, and navigate through the rather complex maze of rooms. Creating NEW props is a very popular hobby that requires both technical and artistic skills. Indeed, some members have refined it to an art form. For those who really want to stretch their technical prowess, there lies the challenge of learning the rather arcane computer language for writing scripts - known as "iptscrae." For those people who are not attracted to the technical side of Palace, there is the challenge of learning its social culture, i.e., discovering its people, norms, social structure, history and legends, and participating in the shaping of its future. Exploring and mastering the many levels of Palace can be a never-ending satisfier of curiosity, and a never-ending source of self-esteem. Like the cyberworld at large, it is not a static environment. New technical and social features are always appearing. To stay on top of things, you must be like a shark... you must keep moving.

For the most part, attempting to master the technical and/or social environment is a very normal, healthy process. However, for people driven to compensate for deep-seated feelings of failure, inadequacy, and helplessness, or to overcome desperate needs for acknowledge, admiration, and love - the obsession with cyberspace accomplishments can become a true addiction that never fully gratifies.

The ultimate badge of prestige at the Palace is to be chosen as "wizard." Wizards possess special abilities that ordinary members don't (like being able to kill, gag, and pin misbehaving users). They also participate in decision-making about new policies for the community. Many members, secretly or not, wish they could attain the social recognition, power, and self-esteem achieved through this promotion. To get it, one must demonstrate commitment to the community, which includes spending a considerable amount of time there. Wizardship can become a very enticing carrot that stimulates addictive attendance. For those few who do attain that position, it is a powerful reinforcer of one's efforts and further bolsters one's loyalty and devotion to Palace life. Even though the position does not include a salary, many wizards see it as a job to which they are responsible. The wizard now has a viable reason for being so "addicted." As one user stated the day after receiving his surprise promotion, "I WORK here."

Is This the Real Me?

At the top of Maslow's hierarchy lies the need for "self-actualization." This need subsumes many of those from the lower levels - the need for fulfilling interpersonal relationships, to express oneself, to satisfy one's intellectual and artistic needs by successfully engaging the world around us. The key to self-actualization, though, is that it specifically involves the striving towards the development of oneself as a unique individual. It is the ongoing process of realizing and cultivating one's inner potentials. It is the flowering of the "true" self.... Not everyone reaches this level of Maslow's pyramid.

Are users self-actualizing at the Palace? People feel they are developing fulfilling relationships with others. They express their intellectual potentials by exploring the technical and social dimensions of Palace. Using the variety of communication tools available, ESPECIALLY props, people are perhaps even

realizing inner interests, attitudes, and aspects of their personality that were previously hidden. Are people then truly moving towards the cultivation of themselves as unique, creative individuals?

I've heard quite a few people say that at the Palace they feel they are MORE like their true selves than in real life. They are more open, expressive, warm, witty, friendly. Once again, partial anonymity (not being seen or heard in person) allows people to be less inhibited. In some ways it's not unlike the poet, writer, or artist who through their work learn to fully express themselves - without fully being in the presence of others.

One other important aspect of self-actualization, according to Maslow, is the development of one's spirituality. This raises a fascinating question. Are people discovering their spiritual life in cyberspace? At first glance, this may seem an absurd idea to some people. But for some users - and these users are probably in the minority - cyberspace does pose some mysteries about the nature of consciousness, reality, and self. As I move through cyberspace, where is my mind? Where am "I"? Am I really just in my body, or is the essence of me somewhere "out there" mingling with the consciousness of others, merging with that larger consciousness that is the "internet." Is this consciousness less REAL than what I experience in "real" life - or more so? If the internet encapsulates the evolution of a world-mind and world-self into a universal Whole, and I am part of that Whole, then where is it leading? Is "God" somewhere out there in all those wires and microchips?... What could be more captivating and addictive to a user than the search for God?

But is It an Addiction?

"Addictions" can be healthy, unhealthy, or a mixture of both. If you are fascinated by a hobby, feel devoted to it, would like to spend as much time as possible pursuing it - this could be an outlet for learning, creativity, and self-expression. Even in some unhealthy addictions you can find these positive features embedded within the problem. But in truly pathological addictions, the scale has tipped. The bad outweights the good, resulting in serious disturbances in one's ability to function in the "real" world. I have to admit that, so far, I have been a bit guilty of waxing the poetic about cyberspace and the Palace. So let's get down to the brass tacks. Is it a sickness or not? If this thing is eating people's lives, aren't they truly addicted to it? Isn't there something wrong?

People get addicted to all sorts of things - drugs, eating, gambling, exercising, spending, sex, etc. You name it, someone out there is obsessed with it. Looking at it from a clinical perspective, pathological addictions usually have their origin early in a person's life, where they can be traced to severe deprivations and conflicts at the first two levels of Maslow's hierarchy. I have seen a few people at the Palace who, unfortunately, are indeed addicted because of these types of problems. On a more practical level, problematic addiction can be defined as anything that never really satisfies your needs, that in the long run makes you unhappy - THAT DISRUPTS YOUR LIFE. Here are some questions that psychologists offer to people who are trying to determine if they are indeed addicted:

- Are you neglecting important things in your life because of this behavior? Is this behavior disrupting your relationships with important people in your life? Do important people in your life get annoyed or disappointed with you about this behavior? Do you get defensive or irritable when people criticize this behavior? Do you ever feel guilty or anxious about what you are doing? Have you ever found yourself being secretive about or trying to "cover up" this behavior? Have you ever tried to cut down, but were unable to?
- If you were honest with yourself, do you feel there is a another hidden need that drives this behavior?

An affirmative reply to one or two of these responses may not mean anything. An affirmative reply to many of them means trouble. It may be a variation of what psychologists are calling the "Internet Addiction Disorder."

The fact that Palatians frequently joke with each other about their "addiction" may be a good sign. They have some perspective, some self-awareness about what they are doing. One common feature of hardcore addiction is an almost unrelenting, rock-solid denial that there is a problem. *If* these Palatians do indeed suffer from a problematic addiction, then at least they recognize the problem. And that's a good start.

One final note about cyberspace, how well it satisfies the range of human needs, and exactly how much of our life we are willing to devote to it. Ask yourself these two questions. Do you want to spend all your time sitting at a computer monitor? Do you want your child to? Answer these questions, and you will better understand when cyberspace is maliciously eating your life, and when it is nourishing it.

VIII. The Other Worlds

Palace is but one of many chat environments on the internet. When I first studied the Palace community, comparing it to these other worlds was an important step in understanding its unique features as well as the universal features of many, if not all, online communities. Unfortunately, my knowledge of these other environments was limited. So I welcomed visitors to this page to send me their impressions of how Palace compared and contrasted to other communities. On this page, I have posted interesting excerpts. Since the publishing of this article in 1997, some of these online communities have disappeared, while new ones have emerged. One of the most popular of the more recent avatar worlds has been Second Life.

Red text are my comments. They are intended to introduce or highlight ideas that are being discussed by the contributors to this page.

> In what follows, Cyndi Pock (FO), an old-timer Palatian and experienced cyberspace traveler, describes her impressions of the various chat worlds she has explored and how they compare to Palace.

AOL Chat Rooms

My experience is, Palace is no more sophisticated than AOL chat rooms, just different. Certainly, the use of props allows more expansive expression, but quite honestly, the chat is all pretty much the same. I don't see social interaction being more or less sophisticated on Palace than other places. Because the population on AOL is so huge, it takes longer to meet good people you can have fun with and enjoy. However, they do exist there and I'm still close to friends I initially met there. Palace is getting more difficult, I think, for new folks to meet "good people." The snert factor exists unilaterally across the net.

Of course, I spent two years living on AOL chat rooms and even became a host there. I met folks there I'm still very close to. They host RL parties too, and some of my friends get together regularly from there. So, if RL relationships is how one measures the sophistication of an online community, then despite the problems with AOL, it still is a great place to meet new friends and interesting people. Like Palace, you have to wade through the snerts to get to the gems.

Worlds Chat

A lot like Palace (in fact, it was created before Palace). But it is a 3D environment. They run a 1st person view to sort of imitate RL. But, I actually find this more difficult to work with because you can't see what is going on behind, above, below you, etc... I don't like the 3-D environments. They all tend to be 1st person views which actually hamper social interaction.

> Palace is a two dimensional visual world with a third person view. Other worlds, like Worlds Chat, are 3D with a first person view. The 2D, third person view results in a "stepping" back from scene where one can observe the social interaction - including one's own behavior. For some users it might encourage a dissociating or distancing of oneself from the scene. For others it might result in a less restrained or "boxed in" feeling as in 3D, first person views. One sits back and takes in the big picture. It might even encourage what psychoanalytic theory calls a "healthy observing ego."

Meridian 59

An RPG community. Nice graphics, and some a really great email feature! I love it! The email only works on conjunction with Meridian, but it was a wonderful feature. I left Meridian because it seemed to be primarily young male teens....so it had somewhat of a "Lord of the Flies" feel to it. lol! Again, it is 3D and 1st person view of the world.

The Realm

Another RPG. I LOVE this place! Graphically, it is similar to palace in that it is 2D and 3rd-person view, so very comfortable chat environment. Mix of ages and genders. It is nice to have more to do than just chat. I like hunting monsters, working on building my level, etc. It is a monetary based society, so we have lots of thieves! But, I think humans naturally like "owning" things and tend to create their own value-system. At Palace, props and identity are valuable, so those are the things that get stolen instead of money. Anyway, lots to do... you can just chat or hunt. Doesn't matter. In game environments like Realms, the politics seem less, and I like that part. In some ways, people take Palace far too seriously. The entire name and prop registration controversy for example. I see the SAME names on these other programs and wonder, how far do you take such "ownership" issues? What is interesting to watch, on both programs, is the value system. Realms is deliberately geared on a monetary system. You get gold for killing monsters. You can steal gold (thieves are looked down upon). You can sell or buy items, etc. When certain items got taken out of circulation, I witnessed huge inflation for those items. I myself kept many gems, troll hides, etc., that no longer exist in the game.

But, not having a monetary system on Palace doesn't stop people from creating their own value system. I think that is why the name and prop issue is so much more intense on Palace. I've never EVER seen such heated debate over that issue before! Certainly nobody on AOL, or here in Realms discusses such things. They accept that if someone else has their name, they have to choose another. But on Palace, it is a huge issue. Ironically, jbum deliberately created an environment where people could have far more freedom in choosing names. Like with AOL, on Realms I'm limited to the number of names I can have at a given time and if I change it, I have to delete my character (which means losing all those levels...lol!!)

I doubt the freedom to be anonymous and change your name on a whim will survive. People are too programmed to "own" things. And when they don't have money, they create something else to "own." For some reason, "owning" your own palace isn't as appealing to people. Guess our ego's are too huge :)

> Palace differs from other worlds in two important respects. First, it does not revolve around any specific game - although the politics and intricate variety of social dramas that parallel real life may be considered the "game" (the game of life). Palace also does not have an economic/monetary system. However, issues of ownership, status, and power do arise over who created/uses what props and what names, and over who belongs to what social group. These issues point to a more basic need that must be satisfied in any online community - the need for a unique, effective identity.

Onlive Traveler

I don't have a microphone! lol! Have to get one. Graphics are WAY cool. Again, 3D, 1st person view though. Like Palace, you can create your own server and environment. Oddly, I wish they had a chat-log option. lol! It is a novelty right now. Still awkward to use. And, in some ways, I don't like hearing the voices. Sometimes, imagination is better :)

> Some online communities, through video and audio technology, will move towards ever more realistic imitations of "real world" (face-to-face) encounters. Other communities, like Palace, will improve the multimedia power of a FANTASY-BASED environment... because people will always want an imaginative alternative to real-world encounters. Still other worlds may avoid multimedia technology altogether in order to allow the imagination to do all the walking.

CU-See-Me

Again, I've only used this to chat with people I know. Didn't like going into rooms of strangers. But some people LOVE this program. And in many ways, it is more sophisticated as a social environment because people enter it without a mask. They are brave enough to be themselves. I admire that in folks who use CU. In some ways, I think people who have been on chat a long time graduate to a CU environment. They no longer need to be anonymous.

> In what follows, Passion from Worlds Away compares her world to Palace. She focused on ideas about deviance that I discuss in my article on avatar behavior at the Palace.

Mischievous Pranks

Avatars in WA also commit mischievous pranks. And they do try to 'get away with something' but not by playing jokes, mostly by hacking, stealing or scamming. There is no 'msay' or 'spoofing' in WA because that ability is not built into the software.

Hacking

Hacking is a major problem for the WA Oracles. Many instances of hacking have occurred in the lifespan of the service. In order to keep all users point of view current, the WA server frequently gives 'remote updates' where new objects, abilities, etc. are downloaded to the user's hard drive. These updates are stored under a directory called the 'mag' directory. In that directory are '.dat' files. Hackers decompile these .dat files and are at times able to alter the way their client behaves. Altering these files can sometimes give an avatar an ability that has not been introduced to the avatar by the Oracles, or is an ability that is present but not in use and planned for the future. When the hacker finds a successful hack, they distribute the altered .dat file to other users so that those users with the hack can use the new ability. Most of the time, the hacks can only be seen only on a user's screen or by those who also have the same hack who are also on screen. This is because the server is programmed 'not to trust the client'. So for everyone to see the new ability, it has to be given a server permission for all to see the change.

These hacks have become more sophisticated with time and the rumors of what these hacked .dat files can do are mostly hearsay but some of them have risen above the server's programing 'to not trust the client' and somehow slip thru server permissions. For example, there was a 'sit patch' that was distributed to many users. Only the users who had this 'sit patch' installed on their hard drive could see themselves sit on screen. Later on, another 'sit patch' was distributed where in all could see the avatar sit, whether or not the users had the patch, and the server was fooled.

> Online communities are technological communities. So hacking the system will always be one deviant method for users to establish their power, acquire status and fame, act out against authority figures, and/or vent their hostilities. Similar motives underlie the other anti-social behaviors, such as stealing, scamming, flooding, and blocking. Being the "bad boy" (or girl) is one way to establish an identity.

Stealing

An avatar can hold an object in their hand and pass it to someone if they so choose. If the avatar places the object on the ground, it's up for the taking and usually is taken. If the avatar trusts the other avatars in a full locale and places the item on the ground, most likely it will stay for a period of time. However, if an avatar crashes or leaves the locale, this leaves a space and opportunity for another avatar come down who may not be so honest and go for the goods on the ground.

Stealing can also occur in a 'turf' or avatar apartment/dwelling. The system has a default name for a turf when an avatar rents one with the automated building manager. There are 4 rental plans, 1-room, 2-room, 3-room, and 4-room turfs. The more rooms in the turf, the more expensive. The default name is

'Chez (avatarname)' Thieves know this, so new and naive avatars rent a turf and accept the default name instead of giving it a name that is unique and hard to guess. The thieves stand by the elevator with their back to the screen (anti-social behavior here) and click on all avatars who pass into the region to use the elevator, hoping that the avatar was naive enough to accept the default name. The thieves click on each avatar coming in and attempt to 'follow' behind an avatar who may have used the default name which is painfully obvious to the thief. The thief arrives in the turf and steals all they can. Savvy avatars know the turf security controls, naive and new avatars have not yet had the chance to familiarize themselves with security and it is too late, the thief gets in and robs them blind.

Stealing also often occurs in public locales during large gatherings. Avatars have no security features in a public locale, only in their turf of which they are an owner (avatars can also 'share' a turf). The only security available is keeping the locale full (6 avs maximum) so that potential thieves can not materialize. Usually, when these large and highly publicized events take place, the ghost count is very high. Therefore Thieves clamor to these events so that when they steal, they are seen by many people who will be upset that they are stealing or perhaps page an acolyte. My hypothesis is that the thieves know of what is called 'the void' a cloned, blank locale that you cannot leave unless and Oracle transports you out. Most thieves who have never seen it 'want' to go there so that they can have brag to others that they have been there. If they go to an event where there are many present, the exposure rate skyrockets their potential of being sent to the void. The more the community is outraged, the better chance of a trip to the void for them. Of course when they get there they scream to get out for days. They find it is not the little extra world for thieves as they had thought.

If an item is stolen, the avatar usually considers it gone as the thief has to willingly give it back which rarely happens. Community pressure and shunning the thief at times is effective. This depends on how much the thieving avatar can take being shunned by the society. He/She can either rehabilitate themselves or continue their anti-social behavior and ultimately be sent to 'the void' for their deeds. Users are usually outraged at the amount of time that an avatar is allowed to continue thieving before some action is taken.

Scamming

Scamming is also very common in WA. Some scams are considered 'small-time' where as others can be elaborate malicious schemes that usually get pulled off. It depends on the savviness of the users and most 'small-time' scams usually only work on newbies and do not work on avatars who have 'been around the block'.

A small time scam can occur in 2 forms:

(1) An avatar may approach an unsuspecting newbie with the promise of a new 'head' or 'avatar customization' in exchange for the newbie's default head. The newbie not knowing any better hands over his head and it is therefore stolen. The default head is quite ugly an the first thing a person wants to do is obtain a better one but you need tokens for that. So false promises of tokens or a better head usually do the newbie in all the time. This scam can occur within in minutes of a newbie arriving in WA as scammers wait and prey on newbies as they first enter the world.

(2) Sale of items occur all the time between avatars. Some items are extremely rare and most oldtimers know the value of specific items. When two avatars decide they would like to sell something to each other, usually the avatar with the item for sale asks for the money to be passed first from the buyer. The seller receives the money, counts it, then puts the money away. At this point it is expected that the seller will then pass the item to the buyer. However, it does not always happen that way. Dishonest avatars ask for the money to be passed first, then run off with the money. Or a dishonest avatar who is the buyer can ask for the item first, then run off with the item without paying for it.

The community is full of trustworthy avatars who are not acolytes. At times this collection of trustworthy individuals will act as a 'mediary' to the sale or act as a 'middle-man'. The Mediary will hold onto the money while the seller passes the item to the buyer. When the seller has counted the money to be sure it is the correct amount agreed, the mediary passes the item for sale to the buyer. Most of the time, avatars page acolytes for this sort of mediation. If an acolyte is not on duty, then a trusted avatar is used. Trusted avatars are usually those who host weekly events, own successful businesses, or are just known to be trusted especially if they are extremely well-known and have no reason to steal.

Scams can become even more sophisticated. The sophisticated scam is usually targeted towards, wealthy, and well-known avatars. When these situations occur, the community usually responds with 'well you should have known better.' or they 'take up a collection' or 'try to acquire a replacement item for the victim.'

The sophisticated scam can be many different ways. Usually the avatar popularity is a basis for how the scam would be orchestrated. For example, a wealthy avatar usually hangs out with other wealthy avatars. So therefore it is general knowledge of who this targeted avatar hangs out with and is close with. A scammer can 'assume' an identity of a trust friend of this targeted avatar and name themselves a variation of this friend and therefore ask innocently to 'try on their head' and the target will hand it over thinking this is their long time trusted friend. If the target does not click on his 'friend' to ID the person first and hands it over they may realize when it's too late that this is not who they thought and are therefore a victim.

Flooding

WA avatars have what is called 'emoticons' available to them. They can add an f3 command into their speech entry which will make their avatar smile at the time a happy statement is made. At times an avatar will place a full line of 'emoticons' in their speech entry and send it to the server making them jump or wave many times. This is viewed as a 'disruption' to a locale. At times, other avatars in the same locale can crash or lag behind the others. Acolytes may be paged for this sort of disruption and it is taken care of.

Another equivalent to Flooding is what is known in WA as the 'ESP-Bomb' Esp is a form of private sends. You can ESP another avatar with a private thought that only the receiver and sender can see it. Many events are based on ESP because ghosted users communicate with the host thru ESP. A disrupter can 'flood' the hosts ESP with gibberish or rapid succession of sends making the victims screen scroll at a very fast rate. The Host cannot read what is said because their screen is being flooded with an esp bomb. Usually this brings the event to a screeching halt and an acolyte is paged. The acolyte can mute the offender or the victim can turn off esp to block the bomb. If an avatar turns off esp he cannot receive esp at all which may not be feasible during an event that needs ESP to be functional. In my experience of Hosting events, I found that if you ignored the offender's espbomb they usually left me alone and went to bother someone else. Others panic, call an acolyte, and the offender gets the attention they sought. If the offender sees they are not going to get this attention, they give up and move on.

Blocking

Blocking is not really considered a social faux pas in WA. If an avatar places themselves in front of your avatar, you can easily move out of their way or leave the locale completely. You most likely will not crash from the system. Blocking is more annoying than an offense that usually does not require an acolyte to the scene. An acolyte will not act on a blocking offense.

Sleeping

The equivalent to 'sleeping' is 'parking.' Avatars receive 60 tokens per hour in their ATM account (automatic token machine). These earned tokens are automatically placed in everyone's ATM account. Avatars who's operators have sponsored accounts or lots of CIS dollars to burn, 'park' their avatar so that it earns tokens without the operator necessarily being at the keyboard. At first parkers could park all they wanted but the oracles instituted a 'timeout' feature to the software so that parkers would be automatically disconnected from the system if there was inactivity for 12 minutes. Rebellious Parkers instituted 'parking hacks' so that they somehow program their avatar to remain connected despite the time-out feature. There is no feature to let others know you are parking like a BRB sign. Most parkers have their back to the screen in a public locale or they park in their turf.

Eavesdropping

Ghosts can view the avatars on screen and see what they are saying. The only way for an avatar to know who is ghosted above is if the ghost ESPs them to let them know they are above. A ghost cannot see private ESPs between avatars. So if avatars want privacy they either ESP each other or go to a private turf. Anything said outloud can be seen by all, ghost or avatar.

Flashing

This ability is not possible in WA. All avatars are fully clothed and the user cannot remove the clothes. The only naughty deeds observed like this would be for some avatars to engage publicly in graphic cybersex using outloud speech instead of ESP or going to a turf for privacy. Acolytes get paged for this all the time and usually mute the offenders if they cannot be reasoned with.

Prop Dropping

This also is not possible in WA. All of the objects in world are clean and not obscene in anyway. An avatar can drop an object and run but nothing will happen to the avatar except he has relived himself of a object for someone else to come alone and obtain.

Impostors

Impostoring is one of the number one problems in WA. There are many groups and 'cliques' in WA. Some of these groups host events and help new people. There specific initiations and inductions into the groups but after the leader of the group has officially inducted or initiated an avatar, the avatar usually puts a series of initials that represent the group in their name. For example, a name before the induction to the Golden Knights may have been simply 'Peter'. No one else can use the name Peter except the person who chose it, saving it to the system. The name is 'in use' and cannot be taken. However after initiation, Peter will change his name to perhaps, 'Peter- GK, 'Peter, GK', 'Peter - Golden Knight', 'Golden Knight Peter', 'GK Peter' and so on. Impostors can create an identity based on this variable of how the groups express their members. Peter is probably a trustworthy nice avatar if he has been inducted to the Golden Knights who help people and have numerous events. But now that he has changed his name, he is open to impostors who can chose a variation on this name and ruin Peter's reputation. They can also just use these initials and misrepresent themselves as Golden Knights and scam those who were under the impression that Golden Knights are trusted individuals.

Individuals used to be able to impersonate oracles and acolytes. Oracles have a different appearance than the normal avatar and are dressed in robes. Acolytes look like normal avatars but possess an acolyte book where they get their powers from. Impostors in the past have used a special 'l' character because attempting to name yourself acolyte or oracle anything is rejected by the system. However if this 'fake l' is used, an individual can change their name. An avatar who tries to impersonate an Oracle is rarely given any thought since all oracles look very different from normal avatars. Those who impersonate acolytes with the 'fake l' can misrepresent themselves as the official Oracle helper and scam new people. The system no longer accepts the 'fake l' and there have not been any acolyte/oracle impostors in quite some time.

Identity Disruption

At times you can get to know a person no matter what appearance or name they have chosen. It's an acquired ability from either knowing the person very well or knowing their reputation. It all depends on how good the user is in concealing their true identity. WA avatars can act out their turmoil by using the angry expression, disrupting an event, harassing other avatars, etc. Depending on the heads available they can also use certain types of heads to portray their turmoil such as a 'Skull_Head' or a 'Vampire_Head', etc. The system allows name changes but they become increasingly more expensive as the user changes their name. The amount starts at 10 tokens and doubles in amount each time the name is changed. The user is more reluctant to change a name when they know in advance that their name change is going to be expensive. Name changes are mostly used by thieves after they steal so that the 'alleged thief' is no longer existent. As in The Palace, if you don't stick to a specific look or name, you won't be recognized.

See also in the Psychology of Cyberspace:

Addiction to Computers and Cyberspace
Healthy and Pathological Internet Use

Second Life, Second Chance

Since my days as a member of the Palace and as a cyberpsychologist studying that community, more than a decade ago, I haven't paid much attention to the newer avatar/graphical worlds that have come, and in many cases, gone.

Recently some colleagues and journalists have been encouraging me to take a look at Second Life. My reaction, even after I visited the SL web site, was similar to how I responded in the past: been there, done that. However, noticing all the media publicity SL is receiving, and hearing how a million people have joined it, I thought I'd give the idea of visiting it a second chance.

So I downloaded the program and dragged myself through the registration process. Fortunately the install and registration posed no technical problems for me and my Mac. Thank you Linden Labs. Optimistic, I even provided my credit card info so I could collect my free $250 Linden dollars - the equivalent, I discovered later, of about one US dollar. I promised myself I wouldn't spend it all in one place.

Spotting Newbies by How They Walk

Before logging on, I mentally prepared myself for the possibility that I would, at first, feel like a completely awkward newbie in this unfamiliar virtual world. It was a good idea I did. It took me several minutes just to figure out how to move my avatar, and then I was literally walking into walls and trees. I spent most of the first day learning how to move about without looking like a complete idiot, how to visually survey and interact with the environment, and, most fun of all, how to fly like superman. The controls for navigating one's avatar are much more sophisticated than they used to be

at the Palace, This posed a rather interesting challenge. Even after several hours, when I thought I was doing reasonably well, a more experienced user who I met in the SL version of Amsterdam commented on me being a newbie. When I asked how she knew, she replied, "By how you walk."

At that point I took my own advice that I've written about in various articles: Don't be afraid to be a newbie. Embrace it graciously and with humor. Ask for help. And don't be surprised or dismayed if people ignore you or make fun of you because you're a newbie, which happened often to me in SL.

Lookin' Good, or Not: The Avatar

After getting a grip on how to move about, I tackled the task of customizing my avatar. Again, the features are more sophisticated than in the days of Palace, especially in designing the body type, hairstyle, clothing, and facial features of a human-like body. After my initial experimentations, I still looked like such a newbie nerd that my wife insisted I continue to work on modifying my clothing.

Eventually, as you can see in that picture, I created an avatar that looks something like me, although a bit more trim and wearing a hat that I never wear. It wasn't until later on that I figured out how to take the hat off. Although in the past I've assumed imaginary identities in cyberspace, I now usually choose to be myself, using my real name - and, in SL, an avatar that is based on reality rather than fantasy. Not that highly imaginary avatars are a bad thing. It's just that as a cyberpsychologist exploring this world, I prefer to be straightforward about who I am. Even my username reflects my real name, except that in the registration process I was required to choose a last name from a list, as if being forced to join a clan.

Quickly it became clear that people take their avatars very seriously. Users spend a great deal of time, effort, and money designing them. As was true of Palace, how you look is important not only in your ability to attract people, but in demonstrating your technical skill. Unlike Palace, almost all the avatars are human forms, although how people use, think, and feel about their avatars is very similar to what I discovered at Palace.

What Can I Do Here?

Once you create your avatar and get the hang of moving about, you ask yourself "Now what do I do?" Second Life contains a lot of features, much more so than in Palace, so I could easily have spent a great deal of time reading about and experimenting with them. But that got boring after a while. I wanted to go places. But where?

That wasn't as simple as I thought it might be. I found the maps confusing and unhelpful. The search engine offers a list of popular spots, but almost all of them were rated "mature" and involved sexual content of one type or another. Or they were places to party. People were dancing at Sanctuary Rock, which was fascinating to watch, and I found a variety of shops where people can buy avatar supplies, including quite a few shops devoted to sexual items, services, and avatar bodies. Sex always sells, in real or virtual life.

I tried to find people like me – professors, psychologists, mental health professionals. Some were listed in the directory, but I couldn't find them. When I teleported to their location, a few other people were there, looking around, appearing disoriented like me, asking questions like, "What can I do here?" I went to Reuters, hoping I might meet some journalists, but that building too was mostly deserted. In Amsterdam some people were roaming the streets, chatting with a friend, or just standing there, surveying the streets while trying to figure out what to do next, just like me. It's possible the users may not even have been "in" those motionless avatars, but rather letting their virtual bodies stand idly while they were doing something else on their computer. You never can tell whether a still avatar is sentient or not.

At one point I even tried flying on and on in one direction, through misty clouds and blue skies, feeling a tiny bit anxious about getting lost, but expecting I might run into something interesting... I didn't. Just more sky and mist. After I while, I wasn't even sure I was moving anymore. Dropping to the ground, I tried to place a "landmark," not really knowing what that is, but figuring I might as well leave a marker indicating JohnSuler Yue had been here, as if I were exploring the moon.... It didn't' work... This was not a good way to explore SL.

In the half a dozen or so areas I visited, I chatted with people, those who were nice enough to talk for a bit with an obvious newbie. There was a vendor and jewelry designer who longed to buy his own shop. A smartly attired female who empathized with my newbie status said that "friends" were the reason why she liked SL. A young, busty, and scantily dressed avatar emphasized that "Everybody in SL wants more Lindens." There were quite a few people

speaking languages other than English. In French I told one person that I only speak French a little.

I also met people who design, construct, and manage their own environment. I mentioned that I am a cyberpsychologist who studies virtual worlds. At the Palace, the technical and company people who ran things rarely seemed interested in my work. These SL folks also seemed only mildly interested, but they are busy people. As one of them quickly excused himself from our conversation because he had "back code" to write, he told me that I should get permission from Linden Labs if I intended to do any professional research here. "There's information about it in the support section of the web site," he added before he walked into a wall, which made me smile, and then disappeared down a staircase.

As one of the old-timer cyberpsychologists who often has discussed and debated issues about online social science research, I was curious about what Linden Labs would have to say about people studying their world. As my avatar stood still, I called up my browser window and went to their website. The only information I found was a statement about the importance of adhering to ethical standards of online research, and a link to a Linden Lab document about doing research. The document wasn't there, but I did eventually find a link they offered to the ethical standards of an outside professional organization.

What's New Here?

Second Life is a fascinating, cutting edge virtual world with lots of features, places, activities, people, and subcultures to explore. Many people love it. As one emo-looking avatar said to me, "It's addicting."

During my explorations, I kept that comment in mind, while thinking back to how people at the Palace often said the same thing, which led to my very first cyberpsychology article that outlined the various reasons why people get addicted to these avatar worlds. In fact, while wandering around Second Life, I often had that feeling of déjà vu. Memories of people, events, and experiences from my days of the Palace starting coming back to me. As sophisticated and complex as Second Life is, as far forward as Linden Labs has pushed the envelop of visual virtual environments, the basic and essential elements of avatar worlds have not changed all that much.

With one very important exception. The economy and it's linkage to real world money. That's a big difference with very significant ramifications. The power of money, buying, and selling is another highly motivating factor that I could add to my list of reasons why people get "addicted" to online worlds. But as for me, economic issues are the reality of real world living that I would prefer to escape when joining a virtual community.

And so, as a cyberpsychologist, will I seriously study Second Life? Perhaps, although that would mean spending a lot of time exploring the various features and immersing myself deeper into the culture and subcultures. So many interesting things to do in cyberspace, so little time.

Setting aside my interests as a researcher, will I continue as a member of Second Life and give it a second chance just for the fun of it? Maybe. Despite all the fascinating features of this world, I have to agree with that one avatar about it being friends that really make the difference, and it takes time and effort to make new friends in a virtual community. Perhaps I might invite one of my own friends or colleagues to join me in SL. Or maybe I'll happen to be logged on at the same time and so will have a chance to meet that dream expert who responded to the IM message I left him.

I also still have those free Linden dollars to spend.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Psychology of avatars and graphical space

The Natural Life Cycle of Online Groups

Kat Nagel

Many online groups seem to go through the same cycle:

1. Initial enthusiasm (people introduce themselves, and gush a lot about how wonderful it is to find kindred souls).

2. Evangelism (people moan about how few folks are posting to the group, and brainstorm recruitment strategies).

3. Growth (more and more people join, more and more lengthy threads develop, occasional off-topic threads pop up).

4. Community (lots of threads, some more relevant than others; lots of information and advice is exchanged; experts help other experts as well as less experienced colleagues; friendships develop; people tease each other; newcomers are welcomed with generosity and patience; everyone -- newbie and expert alike -- feels comfortable asking questions, suggesting answers, and sharing opinions).

5. Discomfort with diversity (the number of messages increases dramatically; not every thread is fascinating to every reader; people start complaining about the signal-to-noise ratio; person 1 threatens to quit if *other* people don't limit discussion to person 1's pet topic; person 2 agrees with person 1; person 3 tells 1 & 2 to lighten up; more bandwidth is wasted complaining about off-topic threads than is used for the threads themselves; everyone gets annoyed).

6a. Smug complacency and stagnation (the purists flame everyone who asks an 'old' question or responds with humor to a serious post; newbies are rebuffed; traffic drops to a doze-producing level of a few minor issues; all interesting discussions happen by private email and are limited to a few participants; the purists spend lots of time self-righteously congratulating each other on keeping off-topic threads off the group).

OR

6b. Maturity (a few people quit in a huff; the rest of the participants stay near stage 4, with stage 5 popping up briefly every few weeks; many people wear out their second or third 'delete' key, but the group lives contentedly ever after).

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Extending a Work Group into Cyberspace
A Simple Decision-Making Method for E-mail Groups
How many mail group subscribers does it take to change a light bulb?

Making Virtual Communities Work

Entering a virtual community can be confusing for a new user. In his article "Nine Principles for Making Virtual Communities Work" Mike Godwin suggests "it's a bit like being dropped in the middle of Manhattan without a map or a guide and trying to find a place you want to live." The nine principles he outlines for maximizing the possibility that a virtual community will survive are:

Use software that promotes good discussions
Don't impose a length limitation on postings
Front-load your system with talkative, diverse people
Let the users resolve their own disputes
Provide institutional memory
Promote continuity
Be host to a particular interest group
Provide places for children
Confront the users with a crisis

Godwin's suggestions seem to focus on the use of newsgroup style postings as a means to communicate, rather than chat areas or mailing lists. Some of his ideas do apply to real-time online discussion groups. However, other principles could be suggested that pertain specifically to chat groups and mailing lists. For example, some guidelines for chat groups might include:

- make it easy to locate other users when they are online

- make it easy to locate groups that are in progress

- provide the option for users to save discussions

- provide the option for private messages among users in a group, and consider the pros and cons of enabling users to know that others are communicating privately - as, during in-person meetings, when people whisper to each other

- provide public meeting areas as well as private rooms that users can create themselves and perhaps even "lock" the door to prevent uninvited intrusions (what, in group dynamics terms, amounts to maintaining group "boundaries")

- encourage continuity through ongoing (weekly, or even daily) groups - including both topical discussion groups and especially groups devoted to self-help, personal support, and discussions concerning the welfare and development of the online community

- encourage the forming of new ongoing groups and the communication among different groups, especially communication among the founders or "facilitators" of the groups.

- don't try to over-control the community with too many regulations or imposed structures. Give it some space to develop spontaneously into what it needs to be.

Drawing on her own experience as well as interviews with several pioneers in building online worlds, Amy Jo Kim concluded that there are nine basic principles for creating a community:

1. Define the purpose of the community

2. Create distinct gathering places

3. Create member profiles that evolve over time

4. Promote effective leadership

5. Define a clear-yet-flexible code of conduct

6. Organize and promote cyclic events

7. Provide a range of roles that couple power with responsibility

8. Facilitate member-created subgroups

9. Integrate the online environment with the "real" world

I've highlighted principle #9 for a reason. I like to call this the "integration principle." For a community to be healthy and productive - for it to have "staying" power - its members must integrate their online lives with their in-person lives. What does that mean? On the simplest level, it means they talk about their online experiences with the people they know offline, which will give them a clearer understanding of those experiences - especially if the online world is an ambiguous text-only or fantasy/avatar environment, where it's very easy to misinterpret other people's moods and intentions. Without the reality testing offered by one's friends and family, it's too easy to loose perspective, act out, and find oneself in a hurtful rather than enjoyable situation. When that happens too often to many people, the community can be destroyed. "Integration" also means the members of a community contact each other offline, by telephone or meeting in-person. Face-to-face, they become familiar with each other's lives. Again, more reality testing and less acting out. As strong as online relationships can be, they are always made stronger when people meet in-person, when they commit to the intimacy of face-to-face encounters. While not everyone in the community can meet everyone else in-person, it is extremely helpful when there is a critical mass of people who have solidified their relationships offline. These people often become the stable, enduring core that hold the community together.

As a clinical psychologist who creates, facilitates, and consults to various online communities, I have my own Top Ten list of issues for understanding such communities. You can find that list in the article entitled "Maximizing the well-being of online groups."

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Maximizing the well-being of online groups: The clinical psychologist in virtual communities
Steps in studying an online group: The Geezer Brigade
Early history of an online community
Integrating online and offline living

Psychological Dynamics of Online Synchronous Conversations in Text-Driven Chat Environments

(now that's a mouthful)

In the beginning, there was TextTalk. And only TextTalk. Now that the internet has become multimedia, sounds and images also are whizzing by us. But even with the advent of video and audio streaming, typed text continues to reign supreme as the primary mode of conversing on the internet. This is especially true of "synchronous" modes of communication, as in the ever-popular IRC channels and chat rooms of AOL. Even in the multimedia chat communities, like Palace, where users communicate with avatars and sounds within a visual backdrop, typed text remains the front line method of "talking."

TextTalk in online chat environments has evolved into a fascinating style of communication. In some ways, it is strikingly similar to face-to-face (ftf) dialogue. In other ways, it is quite unique. Many of its unique qualities revolve around the fact that it is an austere mode of communication. There are no changes in voice, no facial expressions, no body language, no (or very little) visual/spatial environment as a context of meaning. There's just typed words. Some people find that experience too sparse. They feel disoriented, disembodied, adrift in that screen of silently scrolling dialogue. Other people love the minimalist style of TextTalk. They love to see how people creatively express themselves despite the limitations. They love to immerse themselves in the quiet flow of words that feels like a more direct, intimate connection between one's mind and the minds of others. Almost as if the other is inside one's head. Almost as if you are talking with a part of yourself. Without the distracting sights and sounds of the ftf world, TextTalk feels like a more pure communication of ideas and experiences. For some users (like many interested in cybersex), the bare quality of typed text allows for a greater flight of imagination and fantasy.

A Method in the Madness

Chat room banter can seem quite chaotic, especially when there are many people talking, or you have just entered a room and immediately dive into the ongoing flow of overlapping conversations. There are no visual cues indicating what pairs or groups of people are huddled together in conversation, so the lines of scrolling dialogue seem disjointed (visual chat environments, where users can move their avatars close to each other, have an advantage in this respect). You have to sit back and follow the flow of the text to decipher the themes of conversation and who is talking with whom. In almost all types of chat environments, you consciously and unconsciously set up mental filters and points of focus that help you screen out "noise" and zoom in your concentration on particular people or topics of discussion. Often, you become immersed in one or two strings of dialogue and filter out the others. With experience, you develop an eye for efficiently reading TextTalk. Some people may be better at this specific cognitive-perceptual task than others.

Let's pop you into an excerpt from an ongoing chat room conversation and see if you can figure out what's happening in this "buzzing confusion." Here are a few hints: there's an intellectual discussion between Symmetry and TipTop; the greeting of a user (YieldNot) whom people haven't seen in a while (they know his real-name initials, which means these people know each other pretty well); some mutual ribbing between Avenger and Barney; and a new user (Newbie) who's having a hard time edging his way into this conversation among more the experienced users.

Chill:	good to see JH back
TheBrat:	Why do ya ask...Chill?
Symmetry:	my life is really out of balance....this computer stuff is far to consuming....

Belle:	good i would hate to think you beecame a woman on me
YieldNot:	hehe
Bandit:	Its TheBrat!
Belle:	hi JH
YieldNot:	good to be back
Newbie:	hello everybody
Barney:	NO more crotch jokes, Avenger.
Chill:	good to have you back JH
TipTop:	we don't keep our sanity... that's the problem!!
TheBrat:	????????????????it made no sense...
Symmetry:	reading a book about humor and disabilities
Avenger:	I love you too Barney, not.
Chill:	that's yer sister calling
YieldNot:	thanks everyone!
Bandit:	Hah! Busted JH!
Newbie:	what's up everyone?
Chill:	I wondered that too :)
Symmetry:	my interest is sociology of time and space
TipTop:	interesting topics!
YieldNot:	hmmm...
TipTop:	I love that kind of stuff
TipTop:	and philosophy too
YieldNot:	Chill...gotta show you my server some time!
Symmetry:	i think it is interesting...how cultures think about time, particular, or even individuals and how that impacts on our behaviors
Chill:	having trouble with my typing and log

What's interesting about these types of log excerpts is that they often are more difficult to read and understand than actually "being there" at the time the chat is occurring. In part, this is due to the fact that during a post-hoc reading of a log, you read at the pace you usually read any written material - which is QUICKLY, but much too quickly to absorb TextTalk. While online, the lag created by people typing and by thousands of miles of busy internet wires forces the conversation into a slower pace. And so you sit back, read, wait, scan backwards and forwards in the dialogue (something you can't do in ftf conversation), and think about what to say next. There's more time for those perceptual/cognitive filters and lens to operate. There's also more time for a psychological/emotional context to evolve in your mind - a context that helps you follow and shape the nuances of meaning that are developing in the TextTalk.

To help you out a little bit, I've edited the other log excerpts that appear in this article. Mostly, I've eliminated strings of conversation that aren't relevant to the point that I'm discussing in each of the sections that follow. My editing is doing the job of those filters that operate automatically (almost unconsciously) while online.

What'dya Mean?

You would think that the lack of ftf cues and the buzzing confusion of TextTalk would result in many misunderstandings. If five different conversations are scrolling before your eyes, it would seem easy to lose track of what was said. And if you can't hear people's voices, or see their faces, you easily might misinterpret what they mean, wouldn't you? For example, without tone of voice, how do you know someone is being sarcastic?

After searching through my many megabytes of saved logs, I found no juicy examples of people being confused or misunderstanding what other people were saying. Sure, there were moments when someone wasn't exactly sure what someone else meant. Situations involving humor and sarcasm usually were the culprits, because that smile, chuckle, or wry tone of voice were missing. But these misunderstandings were always cleared up quickly. A quick explanation accompanied by a simple smiley :) or winky ;) efficiently resolves the confusion.

What's fascinating about TextTalk is that people mostly DO understand what others mean, despite the lack of visual and auditory cues.

Of course, some chat users may like to play games with the potential ambiguity of TextTalk. The excerpt that follows is an interesting example of how the lack of ftf cues can make it difficult to tell whether someone is intending humor or irony, and when they are being honest or sly. The use of the winky ;) and smiley :) are sometimes used to indicate irony or sarcasm, but in this excerpt the situation is perfectly ambiguous. The excerpt also illustrates how people play with the ambiguity of identity in chat environments. The illusive use of the smileys add to this ambiguity. BillyBob is trying to figure out if matt or Nuclear (DrZz) is really MrBig, a well known user in this community. Are Nuclear (DrZz) and matt simply playing head games with BillyBob? Are they at times being truthful? Are they at times TRYING to be truthful but unable to convey that as a result of the limitations of typed text. Without face-to-face visual cues, it's difficult to tell. Asterisks indicate a private communication (whispering) to and from BillyBob:

Nuclear:	matt: are you MrBig in disguise?
BillyBob:	MrBig doesn't hang out in disguise.... or does he?
Nuclear:	i think yes, BillyBob ;)
Nuclear:	BillyBob, you mind if im a doctor in here?
BillyBob:	not sure what you mean... r u a doctor?
matt:	or a quiz show host...............
Nuclear:	BillyBob: are you a BillyBob... in real life?
BillyBob:	I am what am I, and that's all that I am
Nuclear:	if you can be popeye, then i can be a doctor
	--- [Nuclear changes his name to DrZz) ---
BillyBob:	Matt, are you MrBig?
matt:	no ;)
BillyBob:	so how come DrZz thinks you are MrBig?
matt:	he is being entertaining in his own way :)
BillyBob:	Wait a minute, maybe Nuclear is MrBig in disguise! What do you think Matt?
DrZz:	BillyBob: he is thinking how not to be MrBig ;)
BillyBob:	So whatyda think Matt.... is DrZ the real MrBig?
matt:	BillyBob:YES... no doubt 'bout that
BillyBob:	How does one choose to define oneself at Palace... that's an interesting issue
DrZz:	The answer is ANY WAY ONE WANTS TO.

In and Out of Synch (crisscrossed messages and "leading")

Due to lag in network connections, messages do not appear on your screen at a steady pace, which causes temporal "hiccups" in the pacing of the conversation. People also may be fumbling with their typing, typing a long message, pausing to think... but you can't see that. It's not easy to know when to wait to see if someone will continue to talk, when to reply, or when to change the topic of discussion. A conversation may accidentally become crisscrossed until both partners get "in sync." Users skilled in online chat - and who have a talent for writing - will create incomplete sentences or ideas that lead the companion into the next message. To allow the other user to express a complex idea, you may need to sit back into a "listener" mode. Some users will even type "listening to Joe" to indicate this posture to others.

Mystic:	i think she's interested in me
NYGuy:	I've been wondering about that
Mystic:	i don't know what to do
NYGuy:	Are you interested in her?
Mystic:	i got to email you about it
	[...... long pause.......]
NYGuy:	you still thinking about moving?
Mystic:	no, I'm not interested. That's the problem
NYGuy:	ugh... a tough situation
Mystic:	still thinking about it... it's a big decision
NYGuy:	where would you move to?

Mystic:	you're telling me! I don't want to hurt her feelings
NYGuy:	you first.....
Mystic:	the thing is that because we're together at work a lot she's beginning to think that...
Mystic:	we're developing a relationship.
Mystic:	even other people see us together and are assuming...
Mystic:	we're an item. It's making me uncomfortable.
NYGuy:	I was in a situation like this once and I think the only thing you can do is
NYGuy:	talk to her and be as honest as you can,
NYGuy:	and try to be gentle about it.
Mystic:	You're right, but no matter how gentle I try to be, it will still boil down to one thing for her -
Mystic:	..... rejection

Staccato Speak

Text communication in a chat room or channel often assumes a staccato style. Most of the time people express what they have to say in a brief sentence or two, or in sentence fragments. This style works well when people are joking around and ribbing each other, often in what turns out to be a playful game of "can you top this." In these kinds of exchanges, it usually doesn't matter too much if the other users' messages arrive on your screen out of the order in which the users may have intended them (which happens often in chat rooms), since there is no specific logical sequence that is needed for the ideas. It is more of a group "free for all." The following example illustrates this - and also lends fuel to the hypothesis of some psychologists that computers serve as sexual symbols for some people.

Dragon:	next ur gonna say she has a 15 inch monitor, right?
Daisy:	20 inch, Dragon
THR:	geez and black and white haha
Mr. Tops:	17 in rotating
Daisy:	hahahahhahah
Tweety:	bigger is... bigger!
Dragon:	wow, no wonder you gals like macs so much
Daisy:	doesn't have to be bigger, just better
Daisy:	and rechargeable
Tweety:	or plugged in the wall...
Hawkeye:	what about bigger AND better?
Mr. Tops:	its not the size of the monitor, but the driver behind it
Tweety:	with loads of amps
Hawkeye:	as one of my friends like to say, "How hard is your big drive?"
Daisy:	lol!
Dragon:	more importantly, Hawkeye, is it compressed?
Daisy:	more importantly, is it unzipped
Hawkeye:	and how often do you optimize it?
Lola:	or is it backed up?
Dragon:	only in san francisco
Daisy:	LOL!

The staccato style of speaking is very apparent in a chat room or channel where people are meeting each other for the first time. Because none of the visual cues of face-to-face encounters are available, people feel the need to quickly test the waters to determine the qualities of the users around them and whom they want to engage. Questions that would be considered less than tactful in face-to-face encounters are a bit more socially acceptable here. Terse inquiries tossed out to a fellow user, or the entire room, might include "Age?", "M/F?", "Married?"

Staccato speak also includes a wide range of acronyms, like BRB (be right back), AFK (away from keyboard), IMHO (in my humble opinion), LTNS (long time no see), and LOL (laughing out loud). Different acronyms evolve in different online cultures, but the LOL is ubiquitous. So important is the need to express pleasure and laughter that a graduated series of such expressions have evolved. "Hehe" or "hehehe" indicates a giggle, or a polite/obligatory chuckle: the user

finds something humorous, but not humorous enough to deserve a LOL, ROFL (rolling on floor laughing) or LMAO (laughing my ass off).

To the Point

The terse style of talking in chat environments can result in either superficial chat, or a very honest and "to-the-point" discussion of personal issues. One doesn't have the verbose luxury of gradually leading the conversation to a serious topic, so self-disclosures sometimes are sudden and very revealing. The safe anonymity resulting from the lack of ftf contact - as well as people not knowing who you "really" are - also contributes to this honest and open attitude. In the following excerpt, both superficial and very personal conversations are occurring simultaneously. Dan and Diamond sense the seriousness of Helen's distress and try to address it. On the other hand, LostBoy tends to speak inappropriately because he is unable to detect the seriousness of this discussion - partly due to the fact that he can't see or hear Helen's depression, and partly due to his lack of interpersonal sensitivity (the lack of ftf cues probably amplifies the interpersonal insensitivity of some people). Arriving in the middle of the discussion, Yabada also cannot sense the serious atmosphere in the room - which, in the ftf world, most people would pick up almost immediately. He decides to leave - rather ungraciously abrupt by real-world standards, though acceptable in cyberspace - when he finally realizes what is happening in the room and what Helen wants and needs: an understanding stranger to listen to her anonymous self-disclosures about her problems. It's a need that brings some people to chat rooms.

Dan:	Helen, you sound depressed
Helen:	I am forever depressed
LostBoy:	If you traveled back in time and killed yourself, you wouldn't be alive now so you could go back in time to kill yourself. A paradox!
Diamond:	I was like that alot.... now I am doing better thanks to prosac
Dan:	Helen, why are you depressed?
Helen:	my heart hasn't healed from life yet
Diamond:	I have a family of depressed people
Yabada:	hi folks!!!
Diamond:	and .. like I said... am doing better
Yabada:	hi Diamond!
LostBoy:	Helen, I have almost no self confidence...but I never let it get me down.
Diamond:	hi Yabada
Yabada:	I pale to see myself typing this...but how old are you Helen?
LostBoy:	Yabada, are you hitting on poor Helen?
Dan:	Helen, did you just break up?
Helen:	no he's being very nice
LostBoy:	I have never officially had a girlfriend before.
Diamond:	I am in therapy now
Helen:	I have a psychiatrist
LostBoy:	Never been on a date. Never done the hunka chunka
Helen:	actually a good listner is all I need right now
Yabada:	Gotta go. See you all later.

Group Free-Association

When a whole room is focused on discussing a single topic, the conversation often takes the form of group free-association. Unlike face-to-face discussions, it's not clear who is reacting to whom because there is no eye contact. Any given user may be addressing a comment to one other particular user, or to the whole room. If people don't preface their message with the other user's name, it's not easy to tell who is reacting to whom, or if someone is indeed speaking to the whole group. Messages also appear on your monitor in an intermixed, slightly non-sequential order, unlike face-face-discussions where people typically respond to the idea that was just previously mentioned. The logical flow and transitions of face-to-face encounters are much less apparent. The net result is a group "free association" where ideas bounce off each other and the "owner" and "recipient" of the ideas become secondary. In the excerpt below, people are discussing internet romances.

Susan:	You can make the other person look anyway you want them to
polly:	mental love is powerful
Susan:	I think the internet is a very dangerous place for some marriages
Jen:	a few friends argue that cyberaffairs aren't a problem to their marriages
Jen:	i think they may be deluding themselves in some cases
polly:	if you are looking, you can find love anywhere
Jo:	some say cybersex isn't really adultery
Al:	give me ambiguity or give me something else
Wisk:	i don't think you can really love someone in cyberspace
Jen:	hmm is this the topic we started on?
Wisk:	until you've spent time with them in person
Jen:	can you say "infatuation"?

Just Between You and Me (public and private self)

Quite unlike face-to-face encounters, people can send private messages to another user in the room - a message that no one else in the room can see. There may be very few or no messages appearing on YOUR screen, but the room may not be quiet at all. There may be numerous private exchanges among the other people. In face-to-face encounters, the equivalent would be a silent room filled with telepaths!

If you are engaged in one of those private discussions, as well as conversing with people out loud, you are placed in the peculiar situation of carrying on dual social roles - an intimate you and a public you, simultaneously. Even more complex is when you attempt to conduct two (or more) private conversations, perhaps in addition to public ones. You may be joking privately with user A, conducting a serious personal discussion with user B, and engaging in simple chit-chat out loud with the rest of the room. This highly complex social maneuver requires a psychological mechanism called "dissociation" - the ability to separate out and direct the components of your mind in more than one direction at the same time (the same mechanism that becomes pathologically exaggerated in multiple personality disorders). It takes a great deal of online experience, mental concentration, and keyboarding skill (eye/hand coordination) to pull it off. There is no equivalent for this in face-to-face encounters, except perhaps having two or more people on different phone lines. But in that situation, your phone partners know you are dividing your efforts to other people, while the chat room users may have no idea of your social juggling.

In the excerpt below, Alloy skillfully maneuvers his private conversations with Ocean and Cowboy, while also carrying on a public exchange with Mr.X. Asterisks indicate a person who is sending a private message. This excerpt is hard to follow, so read it slowly. It's a good example of how "being there" - in contrast to reading a log excerpt - makes it much easier to understand what is going on:

Alloy:	Hey MrX... you got any good CUSeeme reflector lists!
Ocean:	hi again
MrX:	I just got CuSeeMe...and have no reflectors
Alloy:	almost every reflector I try doesn't work!!!
Ocean:	my daughter is giving me grief about online time
MrX:	it takes time Alloy... I'm sure we'll both get familiar with it :)
Alloy:	really?
Alloy:	my kids complain sometimes too
Alloy :	so ya got a camera MrX?
MrX:	yes :)
Cowboy:	Hey, ltns, Alloy. How're you doing?
Alloy:	MrX... can you TYPE text with CUseeme?
Alloy:	pretty good, Cowboy
MrX:	no Alloy, I can't...but I think PC users can
Alloy:	does your daughter REALLY get annoyed about the computer?
Cowboy:	how are things at work?
Ocean:	an exaggeration but she is annoyed.... feeling neglected
Alloy:	yeah... I feel guilty sometimes about being on the computer so much

Who Says Chat is Superficial?

The word "chat" surely connotes a superficial mode of relating. Indeed, conversation in a chat room often is less than "deep." But as we've seen in the log excerpts so far, the conversation sometimes is very meaningful. Despite the staccato style and the potential for buzzing confusion, discussions can be very fluid, sophisticated, and personal. In the excerpt below, the ideas are complex and the interactions subtle. It also illustrates the "leading" strategy. These three people are discussing whether Palace is a "real" community:

BigThink:	do you think Palace is a "community"?
Joan:	yes i do
BigThink:	question is... what is "community"
Balance:	there are some members that depend on it
BigThink:	but that doesn't necessarily mean it's a community
Joan:	hmmmm... interesting
Balance:	there are repeated interactions
Joan:	its a group of people with commonalities
Balance:	certain people care about each other...look for each other
BigThink:	is that community?
Joan:	as much as any other "community"
Balance:	or more so
Balance:	there are "relationships" which are beyond the sum of the individuals
BigThink:	if people hang out at a bar regularly... is that a community?
Joan:	this is not just a bar, BigThink
BigThink:	I'm playing the devil's advocate
Joan:	ah... and doing well at it ;)
BigThink:	hehe
Balance:	some people here call each other, see each other in "real life".... help each other
Balance:	so there are commitments to each other, and the group
Balance:	if that isn't a community, what is?

Icing

Humans are funny. Present them with a limit, and they find ways around it. Give them a seemingly simple and straightforward medium, and they find all sorts of ways to creatively fiddle with it. For example, in TextTalk, all you have are some letters to represent your identity. You create a word to represent you. Sure, that's enough in itself for people to invent all sorts of imaginative names for themselves. But people go beyond that. They elaborate and decorate their name with any variety of keyboard characters that your fingers can tap. Names may range from a highly ornate:

<div align="center">

^^^^UP'n'down....BoYy===

</div>

to a quasi-auditory:

<div align="center">

#$#%*!)&!)PISSSEDoFF!!!!

</div>

to a stark, abstract, preverbal:

<div align="center">

[___||___]

</div>

Because there are no visuals in TextTalk, body language is impossible... Or is it? "Parenthetical action" can convey any almost physical expression, some that even may be impossible in the ftf world. The parenthetical icing added to one's message can clarify or amplify the message, add subtlety to it, and sometimes even sarcastically contradict it:

- Ah, shucks... That was so nice of you to say! (blushing)
- That's fantastic news! (doing a backflip)
- I'm Mac. You're PC?... Sorry bout that (ducking in anticipation)
- Gee, aren't you just the sweetest thing I ever saw (gag)

A Dying Art?

Sooner or later, bandwidth is going to increase substantially. Video and audio streaming will make it much easier for people to chat with voices, and facial expressions, and body language - almost like "really" being there. When that happens, will text-only chat environments die out? Will TextTalk become an amusing bit of history in the fast-paced world of internet technology?

Perhaps not. Some people strongly prefer the minimalist style of TextTalk. They enjoy the anonymity, as well as the challenge of creatively expressing themselves given the barest bones possible. They see beauty in the clean, simple, quiet flow of scrolling words. Sights and sounds are but extraneous noise that clogs the pure expression of mind and soul. To these people, TextTalk is an art that must not die.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Communicative Subtlety in Multimedia Chat
Hypotheses about online text relationships
Email communication and relationships

A Simple Decision-Making Method
for E-mail Groups

Sometimes in the course of an e-mail list, the group needs to make a decision about some issue at hand. In a "working" list - where the group's explicit purpose is to carry out a task - this may happen on a regular basis. As many of us know, group decisions can be a very complex, emotional, and frustrating process. This may be especially true on e-mail lists, where discussions can be a bit confusing. The lack of face-to-face cues may make it more difficult to understand other people's meanings and intentions. Messages on a list also tend to be scrambled in sequence, so that several threads of conversations become intertwined and crisscrossed. Add this to the fact the people are coming from different time zones, and the list becomes a bit of a temporal jumble.

In this article, I'd like to propose a simple discussion/voting method that can help structure the decision-making process. This method assumes that decisions on the list are democratic. The process consists of 5 stages, with stages 2 through 4 having a specific, predetermined length. The role of "facilitator" for all decision-making may be a permanent position (the list owner or some other list member), or may alternate among members. The facilitator guides the group through the 5 stages and reports the outcome.

1. Setting the Process into Motion

The first step is to decide when a question or issue is important enough to set the wheels of the decision-making process into motion. In many cases it will be obvious because list members already have introduced and informally discussed the issue. At least several members of the list must agree to begin the Formal Discussion of the issue. One option is to begin the Formal Discussion after this possibility has been motioned and seconded. Another option is a simple "show of hands."

If there is sufficient interest in beginning the decision-making, the facilitator sends a "Decision Agenda Message" (DAM) to the list announcing that the process has begun. This message: (a) indicates that the Formal Discussion period has begun; (b) clearly states the issue being discussed (the issue should be expressed in the form of a yes/no question); (c) outlines the specific length and deadline (date and time) for each of the stages; (d) encourages the list members to avoid distracting the group by starting other discussion threads.

2. Formal Discussion

For a specific period of time as specified in the DAM, the list discusses the issue. The length of this period may vary according to the needs of the list and the particular issue at hand. Probably at least 2-3 days is necessary, in order to allow people in different time zones to participate. To avoid distractions, other discussion threads should be kept to a minimum. All members of the list should be encouraged to participate. It's very possible that the discussion may result in a change in the wording of the question. If there is general agreement about this change, the facilitator resends the DAM with the new wording of the issue. If there is general agreement, the time-frame for the decision-making stages may be altered in this resend of the DAM. During the Formal Discussion Stage, the facilitator may send one or two messages to the list reminding the group of the date/time for the end of the discussion and the beginning of voting. If the discussion fades out quickly, the facilitator may ask the group if anyone objects to proceeding immediately to the Voting Stage. If there are no objections, the facilitator sends a message to the list indicating that the Voting Stage has begun.

3. Voting

At the established date and time according to the DAM, the facilitator sends a message to the wizard list indicating that the formal discussion has ended and voting can begin. This message reiterates the date and time that all votes must be in. No votes are accepted after the deadline and no further discussions should occur during this voting stage. The facilitator tallies the votes and sends a Voting Tally Message (VTM) to list indicating the results. Another list member may volunteer to confirm to count. The final decision may be based upon a simple or 2/3 majority vote, or on a

consensus. Which of these three options is used should be determined before the decision-making begins. If consensus is the preferred choice, but a consensus is not attained after the votes are in, the facilitator sends a second DAM indicating that the group is returning to the Formal Discussion Stage. The group repeats the process until a consensus is reached.

4. Appeal

In the VTM, the facilitator also asks the group if there is anyone who calls for an appeal. In this Appeal Stage, the group discusses whether there were any violations of the decision-making process or unusual circumstances that may have disrupted the process. If no one calls for an appeal, the process moves to Stage 5. If someone does call for an appeal, the appeal discussion lasts for a predetermined period of time (2-3 days). The facilitator announces the end of the Appeal Stage and calls for a vote (simple or 2/3 majority decision) on whether the decision-making process should be restarted at Stage 2. If the discussion fades out before the predetermined deadline, the facilitator asks whether anyone objects to proceeding immediately to the vote.

5. Implementation and Evaluation

Once the decision has been reached, the group puts it into action. At some later point, when the effects of the implemented decision can be evaluated, the group should discuss how well the decision worked.

Keeping Records

Efficiently making decisions can build a sense of efficacy, purpose, and cohesion within the group. Keeping records of the decision-making sessions offers additional benefits. The VTMs can reveal who are the active members of the group and who are not, as well as the history of each member's positions on important issues The sequence of issues in the DTMs also provides a valuable outline of the history of the group.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The Natural Life Cycle of Mailing Lists
Extending a Work Group into Cyberspace
How many mail list subscribers does it take to change a light bulb?

Extending a Work Group into Cyberspace

Why Walk on the Virtual Side?
Some Practical Issues in Setting Up
Changes in Group Boundaries and Dynamics
Resistance to Being Online
Integrating Online with Offline

Why Walk on the Virtual Side?

Anyone who has participated often in a work group in business, education, or a volunteer organization has experienced the hassles of scheduling meetings, as well as the sometimes frustrating complexities in how small groups function. Extending the group into cyberspace can eliminate the discontinuity due to scheduling problems. In groups where people need to speak with each other more often or maintain contact during vacation, holiday, or summer breaks, an e-mail list can be the perfect solution. The "asynchronous" communication of e-mail allows members to participate in the ongoing virtual meeting at their own convenience and at their own pace. Some of the unique features of asynchronous, typed-text communication also may alter the interpersonal dynamics of the group, which offers the opportunity to better understand and improve how the group functions.

A group as well may use "message board" formats to meet online. Much of what I discuss in this article applies to that environment also. However, because people are more familiar with e-mail - and it's easier to set up an e-mail list than a message board - I'll focus on that style of communicating.

Some Practical Issues in Setting Up

When creating an e-mail list, obviously it's important to make sure that everyone has an e-mail account. Extending the group into cyberspace when some people don't use e-mail is a bad idea. It will encourage subgrouping, miscommunication, and perhaps conflict. Doing so may even be a symptom of preexisting conflict and an acting out of hostility against subgroups or individual scapegoats. It's equally important to assess how much people know about using e-mail in general and an e-mail list in particular. Some people may say that they use e-mail "a lot" (since it's fashionable) when in reality they may only be casual users who barely understand the basics. As a result, setting up the list may be a slow, sometimes frustrating process. On the positive side, that process can serve as an opportunity for people to familiarize themselves with e-mail lists before the actual online meeting begins.

It's a good idea to have a facilitator or "host" for the list - someone who can set up the list and has some technical understanding of how lists work, as well as some experience in the customs and social dynamics of a list. Here are some guidelines for that facilitator:

- Select list software that's easy to use: for example OneList (onelist.com) or "listserv" software that's available on many university servers.

- Expect problems in gathering and entering the members' e-mail addresses. It's very easy to make one small typing error resulting in mail that will bounce back.

- If people have more than one e-mail address, enter all of them into the list. This will maximize the possibility of mail reaching them. Some people may want to receive mail at home as well as at work. Others may not like this invasion on their personal territory. Check with people first.

- To maximize communication within the group, set the "reply" feature in the list software so that replies go to the whole list, rather than privately to the person who sent the previous message. This will build group cohesion, rather than encourage private ("backchannel") communication and subgrouping.

- Once the list is set up, send a short "Hello/Role Call" message to welcome everyone to the list. In that message, ask everyone to reply, indicating that they have received that first "hello" message. In turn, reply to their first message so they know for sure their mail is getting through (most list software distributes mail to everyone on the list, including the sender - which is another verification that one's mail is getting through). don't start any formal discussions until you verify that everyone can send and is receiving mail. You may have to prompt some people several times before they reply to the "role call." It may even be necessary to prompt some people via phone or face-to-face contact. If so, you already have advanced notification that such people may not be attending to their e-mail from the list. Not a good start for the e-mail group.

Once it is clear everyone is on board, send an introductory message containing some suggestions about how to use the list. don't assume that everyone understands the technical and social aspects of an e-mail group. Some experienced onliners may see the suggestions as old hat, but it's a good idea to make sure everyone is starting on the same page. That introductory message might look something like this:

Hello everyone! I think we're all on board now, so welcome to the list! I'm looking forward to our discussions and hope this ongoing virtual meeting will be enjoyable and productive for all of us. Here are some suggestions that I think could make this experience run more smoothly for us: - Remember that hitting "reply" will send your message to the whole group. So avoid the embarrassing mistake of hitting "reply" on a person's e-mail to the group and thinking that your message is a private communication to that person! - Reply to people, even if it's just a simple one-liner or an "I agree." On big lists with lots of traffic, some people get annoyed by such short messages, but it's good for our purposes. When people post to a list and don't get ANY reply, they tend to be reluctant about posting again. No one likes to be ignored! - Let us know when you're going to be away from your computer. That way we will know why you seem to be "quiet." - Because there are no face-to-face cues (voice, body language), it's easy to misread the tone and therefore the meaning of someone's message. So when in doubt, ask for clarification. - Remember that people use e-mail at different paces and that servers on the internet may deliver some mail late. Expect some delays in people responding and messages that arrive out of order. If you have any questions about how this list works - or other ideas and suggestions - why don't we discuss that now on the list.

E-mail can be a fascinating, subtle tool for communicating - different, in many respects, from talking. Some even consider it an art form. It might be a good idea to recommend some reading about e-mail to the group. For example, here's an article about e-mail communication and relationships that might be useful.

Changes in Group Boundaries and Dynamics

There are many practical uses for the list. On the most basic level, it can be used for announcements, scheduling in-person meetings, and generally serve as a substitute for hardcopy memos. However, limiting the list to this function alone - a kind of "memo mentality" - falls short of utilizing its full potential. Memo mentality ignores how the list can be a group MEETING with many other possible applications. It can be used in a collaborative effort to edit, revise, and approve a document. The group can prepare for and afterwards discuss an in-person meeting. Under ideal conditions, the list can be an effective alternative for in-person meetings by encouraging open discussions of issues and decision-making. To do this efficiently, some structure will be necessary. Adapting Roberts Rules is one possibility. I' ve also proposed a fairly simple discussion/voting procedure for e-mail lists.

Extending the group into cyberspace can have a double-edged effect. On the one hand, the exchange of messages via the list may draw out or highlight the preexisting interpersonal dynamics of the group. Typed text has a way of making things stand out in bold relief, sometimes "demonstrating the obvious" in a very eye-catching, rubbing-one's-nose-in-it fashion. On the other hand, an online meeting also may alter the dynamics of the group because it entails a change in the boundaries of time, place, and communication style. For example:

<u>Pacing</u>: Because e-mail involves asynchronous communication, people can speak to the group whenever they want and as frequently as they want. Avid e-mail users may have more input into the discussion than casual or inexperienced users, possibly altering in a dramatic way the usual in-person pattern of participation.

<u>Writing, not talking</u>: Typed-text usually forces people to be more concise and to-the-point, resulting in a filtering out of extraneous conversation that typically pads a face-to-face meeting. The e-mail discussion may feel more efficient to some people, or blunt to others. Some members may be frustrated by the tedium of having to type everything they want to say, feeling a f2f dialogue is easier and more thorough. Because e-mail involves writing and not speaking, those with superior writing skills will have a communicative advantage. They may not be the same people who have the verbal advantage in an in-person meeting. Those who are ignored, interrupted, or talked-over during a f2f meeting may have a stronger voice in cyberspace. Those who dominate an in-person meeting may lose some of their influence online.

<u>Disinhibition:</u> People can' t see you or hear your voice in an e-mail discussion, which results in a "masking" effect and psychological disinhibition. People may be more willing to express thoughts and feelings that they otherwise would keep to themselves during an in-person meeting. As a result, new ideas may pop up. Surprising opinions are expressed. Conflicts that were previously warded off now rise to the surface. In an ideal situation, this disinhibiting effect can jostle a group into new and productive lines of discussion. In unfortunate circumstances, the uncovering of hidden problems may destabilize the group, reducing it's ability to communicate and work effectively. In-person meetings will be needed to remedy that situation.

<u>Permanent Record:</u> Any member easily can save all the group's message to an archive. Everything that was said online can be preserved indefinitely. This permanent record can come in handy in reviewing who said what and when, how decisions were made, and for attaining a bird' s eye view of the course of a discussion. Without visual and verbal cues, it's sometimes easy to misread the meaning or emotion within someone's message - particularly if you happen to be having a bad day. Going back to read a message at a later date can help you see it in a fresh light, with a new mental set and a bit more objectivity.

Resistance to Being Online

Because e-mail meetings are very different than being in-person, some people may show resistance to participating. That resistance may manifest itself in several ways: infrequent messages sent to the list; brief or unsubstantial discussions; frequent pleas for in-person meetings; habitual private (backchannel) e-mail or private in-person discussions (rather than bringing issues to the list); critical comments about using a list; and other assorted direct and indirect expressions of hostility. In rare circumstances some people may staunchly refuse to participate, which can create considerable uneasiness and distrust in the group. There are a variety of possible reasons for resistance. Some change easily, others don' t:

- Being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with using computers, e-mail, or e-mail lists. Some people may need time and experience to adapt; a little bit of training could be helpful. Chronic "memo mentality" may be a stubborn mental set in its own right, or a symptom of some of the other reasons for resistance listed below.

- A fear of displaying one's writing abilities. It's very helpful to establish a norm where all writing styles are accepted - including being casual and making errors in spelling and grammar. Schoolmarm standards about "correct" writing will not be productive.

- A fear of "going public." People may worry that someone might save their messages and later use them as "ammunition" against them. This anxiety may coincide with the worry that people outside the group may have access to the list or may be given e-mail by a group member. Such concerns may be a low-level symptom of preexisting distrust within the group. From the get-go, emphasizing the importance of list confidentiality can help alleviate some of these worries.

- Angry withdrawal, indifference. These barriers are most likely a symptom of preexisting interpersonal dynamics within the group. The disinhibiting effect of e-mail communication may help people discuss and resolve these issues, but don't count on it.

There's no doubt in my mind that an e-mail list can enhance a work group. The determining factor is the group's motivation to use the list effectively. Strong resistance may indicate that the group is not ready to be extended into cyberspace.

Integrating Online with Offline

Because an e-mail list is a very different style of communicating than being in-person, the two channels may become disconnected or "dissociated" from each other. What is said in one domain may not be said in the other. In particular, the disinhibiting effect of e-mail could lead people to state things that they refrain from bringing to the in-person meeting. Sometimes the list discussions may even evolve into a kind of "subconscious" voicing of issues that are actively avoided in-person. It is possible to work through these issues on the list, allowing the beneficial effects to seep into the f2f meetings without openly discussing them in those meetings. However, the best approach is to head off the dissociation before it becomes too deeply embedded. Make an attempt to discuss important issues in both domains - and, if possible, try to understand the psychological barriers that might prevent people from doing that. Understanding those barriers will lead to valuable insights into the interpersonal dynamics of the group.

Under ideal conditions, in-person and e-mail discussions will complement and enrich each other. The group will come to recognize the pros and cons of each realm. It will learn to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of each. The degree of success is the degree to which the group can effectively integrate the two. When the group moves fluidly from one realm to the other, when both realms give expression to all important group functions - brainstorming, decision-making, problem-solving, socializing, conflict resolution - then the group has fully succeeded in extending itself into cyberspace.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

E-mail Communication and Relationships
The Basic Psychological Features of Cyberspace
A Simple Decision-making Method for E-mail Groups
The Final Showdown Between In-Person and Cyberspace Relationships
How Many Mail List Subscribers Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb? (author unknown)
Hypotheses about online text relationships
Conflict in Cyberspace: How to resolve conflict online
Bringing Online and Offline Living Together: The Integration Principle

Extending the Classroom into Cyberspace:

The Discussion Board

Around the world teachers are inviting students into cyberspace to enrich their learning experience. The tools and techniques of using online resources for teaching are as diverse as the Internet itself. In this article I will focus on the use of one of the oldest online communication environments - what used to be called bulletin boards or message boards, now often referred to as "forums" or "discussion boards."

The "bulletin board" metaphor captured the essence of how these systems work. You go to a specific location on the Internet and "post" a message consisting of a subject title and a message body. When other people read it, they can post a message in reply or post a different message using a different subject heading. Multiple posts referring to one particular subject title is called a "thread" of discussion. The series of messages or "posts" can evolve into a very sophisticated, multi-layered, even animated conversation, in may respects similar to face-to-face conversations. Hence the term "discussion board."

Teachers have invented all sorts of creative ways to use this communication space. The structure and purpose of discussion boards vary according to teaching style and course objectives. The features offered by the discussion board software also structure the environment, determining what can and can't happen. Here I will focus on strategies that have worked well in my undergraduate courses using Blackboard, which is one educational software system that includes discussion boards as well as a variety of other tools.

Mustering Motivation

When you create a discussion board, will students flock to it with enthusiastic post and reply mouse clicks? If you build it, will they come?..... Maybe, but maybe not.

If you have a class of motivated people who are familiar with discussion boards, you may find yourselves off to a strong start. In my smaller classes of 20 or less students, where class activities encourage discussion and getting to know each other, students tend to carry that desire to communicate into the discussion board. Those few students who rarely visit the forum start to feel "out of the loop" when interesting things happen online, which sometimes motivates them to join in.

In other cases you may have to encourage students, draw them out, ask questions, set an example - be a good "facilitator" as they call it in online communities. Some of the strategies I discuss in this article might help in that respect. In many but not all ways it's similar to moderating a face-to-face discussion.

In my larger classes, students often are reluctant to talk in front of the whole group. That same type of shyness can lead to a very quiet discussion board. Students might also neglect the online forum because, in their mind, it is something superfluous, not really the class per se, but rather some kind of separate, peripheral thing that can be ignored if they so chose. If the instructor tends to feel the same way, consciously or subconsciously, students will detect this attitude quickly. Although instructors might feel good about adding modern technology to their teaching repertoire, simply setting up a discussion board without effectively integrating it into the course, and without taking specific steps to generate motivation to use it, will most probably culminate in a trickle of posts that quickly fade to complete silence.

You may need to offer concrete incentives to motivate your students. Participation may determine part of the student's grade. You might offer extra credit. Of course, the bonus point system you use will depend on your grading structure. In those classes in which I adopt this strategy, I usually award half a point per post, with a cap on the number of bonus points possible. To qualify for extra credit, a post must consist of at least three sentences and must pertain, in some way, to the course content. It's a lenient rule.

Although we instructors would rather not have to use such a system to reinforce discussions, it does work quite well. Sometimes enthusiastic students will continue posting beyond the point of attaining the maximum number of bonus points. Usually, though, once they hit the cap, they stop posting.

Knowing our students have grown up squarely within the age of computers and the Internet, we might assume that they all take to it like a fish to water. That's not necessarily the case. Some students may feel uncomfortable with computers, or may not have much experience with online communication. Those who have spent a great deal of time online may be quite skilled at web browsing, email, and instant messaging, but may not have much experience with message boards. Each online environment is a bit different from others, requiring a different set of skills and knowledge. Some people like the challenge of experimenting with new software and new styles of online communication. Others may be more wary. These attitudes may persist throughout the semester, resulting in the online forum becoming a unique subgroup within the whole class, or even a "two classes in one" phenomenon in which the atmosphere of the classroom and forum diverge due to slightly different groups of students participating.

Setting up a separate area for pure socializing may encourage students to hang out in the online environment for the course, especially if students get the opportunity to hang out with the instructor too in this more casual atmosphere. The instructor may see opportunities to stir up a good discussion, which can then be carried over to the academic discussion board. In general, "social energy" generated in the casual atmosphere can spread throughout the online environment for the course.

I sometimes set up a separate forum for the purpose of playing a game of some sort, ideally one that's educational in nature and somehow enhances the course. In my group dynamics class, we play "word association" in which anyone is free to post in the title of a message a single word that is an association to the word appearing in the title of the message preceding it. Students enjoy the game, which also serves as a kind of projective test, a barometer of sorts, revealing interesting aspects of the group's dynamics and the personalities of the students.

Making Rules Clear

In the section of Blackboard that describes the discussion boards that are available within a course, I like to provide clear rules and guidelines. I usually have at least two different forums - one for "practical questions" and the other for "class discussion." I don't award bonus points for posts like "When is the next exam?" or "What chapter should we be reading?" So the description for the forum devoted to practical issues states that such questions belong there and not in the class discussion forum. Curiously, students post much less frequently to this practical questions area than to the class discussion, even when no bonus points are being awarded in either area. In the description for the class discussion board, I usually list the following items:

1. To count for extra credit, a post must be at least three sentences.

2. Irrelevant posts or pure socializing doesn't count (like "Hi there. How's it going?".... "I thought the movie Hannibal was great!")

3. Don't simply ask a question. Give some background or explanation.

4. Practical questions about the course should be placed in the Practical Questions area. Those kinds of messages placed in the Class Discussion Board will be removed.

5. Respond to what other students are saying or asking. I want you to talk to each other. Let's not slip into a "sage on stage" interaction where everyone relies on me to respond to questions and comments.

6. Be HELPFUL and friendly to each other.

7. If you mention people you know, remember to protect their anonymity. Never mention any specific information about people that might reveal who they are.

That last item is especially important for courses in which the material applies to the students' lives, as in the psychology courses I teach. Often students will want to discuss friends, roommates, or family. Protecting their confidentiality is important. I also strongly discourage any "gossiping" that might develop.

Sage on Stage?

As you probably noticed in the items above, I try to steer clear of a "sage on stage" style of interacting with students. Not only do I believe in the educational value of their actively sharing ideas with each other, but I also want to avoid spending many hours typing in answers to numerous questions that often arise from a need to passively absorb information, which is an all too common attitude on the Internet.

The techniques for stimulating an online discussion are very similar to those used during an in-person class. In a Socratic way, encourage students to reflect on their ideas and questions. Provide just enough information to get them thinking about deeper or broader answers. Encourage other students to respond to a question or idea from their classmate, especially if it's a question that, much to your dismay, is something you already discussed in class, perhaps at great length, so you can safely assume other students know the answer. Perhaps remind them about that class discussion. Post a link to a website that contains information related to a student's question or issue, then ask the student to report back to the group about what they learned from that site.

The nice thing about discussion boards is the "asynchronous" nature of the communication. You're not on the spot to immediately and cleverly facilitate the discussion. You can take your time to ponder an effective way to intervene with Socratic wisdom.

Most of the time I allow students to bring up whatever topics they wish to discuss. That unstructured atmosphere may inhibit some students, but I like to leave the door wide open for whatever might be on their minds, even if it's a topic that's not directly related to the course material. Sometimes I do seed the discussion board by creating a new thread. There might be an issue leftover from class that needs further exploration or clarification, or the forum might need a stimulus to help it out of a sluggish period.

Riding the Ebb and Flow

A message board discussion, like any discussion, ebbs and flows, sometimes in predictable patterns, sometimes not. At the beginning of the semester, you may find yourself clicking into the various discussion boards for your classes ("making the rounds," as I like to call it), looking for posts, but none appear. Students tend to be overwhelmed during those few two weeks, so it might take them some time to get to the forum. Silence tends to breed more silence, and not many students want to be the very first person to post. So it might help to post a few inviting, even humorous prompts , like "Hey where is everyone?" or "Come on in, the water is fine!" or "Tap.. Tap.... Is this thing working?"

I don't like to see a student post a message and then receive no response, especially if it's a quiet student or anyone who feels they might be sticking their neck out a bit by posing a question or suggesting an idea. Getting no reply at all feels like a "black hole experience" - one that makes you wonder why your post receives the silent treatment. It can stir up all sorts of anxieties and insecurities, thereby discouraging the person from posting again.

If I think this might be happening, I'll jump in and reply to the student myself.... But when? Sometimes it might take a day or two, or three, for someone else to reply. Because my responding first to a student bypasses a response from other students, or may bias the ensuing replies from other students, I like to wait those few days before saying anything. I'll mark it as "unread" to remind myself to reply if no one else does.

You might see bursts of activity just before and after an exam, when assignments are due, when students feel confused about something in the face-to-face class, or when something controversial or interesting comes up in class. Students may post more messages as well as longer, more complex messages that address a variety of important issues. If message titles are ambiguous and threads migrate to new issues that no longer relate to the original message titles, you might decide to change the titles or create new threads with new titles that highlight the different issues at hand.

When replying to someone's post that contains several important ideas, I like to cut and paste two or three key sentences from their message into my message, with my comments interjected between the quotes. This keyboarding technique can lead to an interesting interweaving, multi-layered dialogue.

Quiet spells may follow spurts of activity. I find that posts typically die down for a few days, then pick up again. Complete silence for a week or more may indicate a group that's dying out completely. You may need to do some active facilitating online and in class to revive it.

If necessary, I sometimes privately email a handful of students who typically do participate in discussions, or whom I know have good ideas, in order to let them know that I'm "counting" on them to share their thoughts and questions, and to get some discussion going. This strategy seems to work well, both in stimulating online and in-class discussions. I believe that contacting people with a new communication pathway - as in emailing someone whom you rarely or never emailed before - feels like a "special" communication to them, as if you are attempting to connect on a different level.

TextTalk

The absence of face-to-face cues has a major impact on how people communicate in message boards. You can't see other people's faces or hear them speak. All those subtle voice and body language cues are lost, which makes the nuances of communicating more difficult. But humans are creative beings. Over the years text communicators have develop all sorts of innovative strategies for expressing themselves through typed text - what I like to call "expressive or creative keyboarding," such as:

- *parenthetical expressions* that convey body language or "subvocal" thoughts and feelings (sigh, feeling unsure here)

- voice accentuation via the use of caps, asterisks, and other keyboard characters in order to place vocal *EMPHASIS* on a particular word or phrase

- *trailers* to indicate a pause in thinking.... or a transition in one's stream of thought.....

- emoticons like the smiley, winky, and frown, which are seemingly simple character sets that nevertheless capture very subtle nuances of meaning and emotion

- *LOL*, the acronym for "laughing out loud" which serves a handy tool for responding to something funny

These techniques enable a lively conversation that can simulate a face-to-face talk. Many students may not be aware of such techniques, so the instructor might model how they can be used effectively. Of course, if you want to emphasize the development of traditional grammar and composition, ignore what I just said :-)

Different students have different reactions to text discussion. Some may be frustrated by the tedium of having to type everything they want to say, feeling a face-to-face discussion is easier and more thorough. Those with superior writing skills have a communicative advantage. They may not be the same students who have the verbal advantage in the classroom. Those who are ignored or interrupted during class discussion may have a stronger voice in the discussion board. Those who dominate an in-person meeting may lose some of their influence online. The group dynamics in cyberspace may be very different than in-person.

The Online Disinhibition Effect

People say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. Without having to look at others eyeball to eyeball, they loosen up, express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the "disinhibition effect." It's a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share personal things about themselves, or express an interesting opinion that otherwise they would keep to themselves. However, the disinhibition effect is not always so benign. People act rude, critical, angry, even threatening. The disinhibition may indicate an attempt to understand and explore oneself, to work through ideas and personal issues - or it simply turns into a blind catharsis, an acting out of unsavory needs and wishes without any personal growth at all.

In some cases the ambiguity of texttalk creates a "transference reaction," which is the tendency to project your own expectations, wishes, and anxieties unto the ambiguous figure sitting at the other end of the online connection, or to misperceive that figure as being like someone else you know. Outside the discussion board, in private email or in-person, the instructor might need to mediate and help clarify the situation when transference reactions occur between students. A student's transference reactions to the instructor can help the instructor understand that student's behavior in the course.

I've never seen any extreme examples of the disinhibition effect in the discussion boards for my classes, but the effect is there nevertheless. Students tend to ask questions and express opinions that don't come up in class. They tend to

engage in more honest exchanges with each other. They more freely describe personal experiences related to the course material. Some students may be more willing to debate the instructor, including students who otherwise are very quiet in class. Students who are shy in-person may especially benefit from this disinhibition effect.

Although hostile remarks may surface, my rule about being helpful and friendly to each other - as well as my quickly moderating any frictions that break out - often succeed in preventing significant conflicts.

In Blackboard I always turn on the feature that allows students to modify their messages after posting them. Besides being able to correct composition errors or unclear writing, students also appreciate the chance to modify or delete the opinions, ideas, and feelings they express. I recommend the "24 hour" rule to students: If you feel any discomfort about a message you're about to post, don't post it right away. Save it in a separate file. Wait 24 hours, then read it again to decide it you want to post it, modify it, or delete it. "Sleeping on it" and rereading the message with the psychological perspective of a new day can make a big difference.

I also usually turn on the feature that allows anonymous posts. Giving students complete anonymity may result in things better left unsaid, but I find that students rarely use these feature - and when they do, their message tends to be valuable rather than deviant.

The online disinhibition effect also may lead to obtuse, confused, and vague questions - questions with obvious answers, that were already answered many times before, don't make sense, or require a book-length reply. It would be understandable for an instructor to feel annoyed when many of these questions start surfacing. On the other hand, they do give us a glimpse into what's happening, or not happening, in the minds of a subgroup of students.

Integration: Bringing Online and Offline Together

Because the discussion board and the classroom feel like different environments involving different styles of communicating, the two may become disconnected or "dissociated" from each other. What is said in one domain may not be said in the other. Although topics discussed in the classroom may easily carry over into the discussion board, the reverse isn't always true. Students may experience the forum as a separate entity, a subgroup of the class, something not truly connected to the course. What is said there stays there. In particular, the disinhibiting effect of texttalk could lead students to say things online that they actively refrain from bringing to the classroom.

The instructor may need to make special efforts to integrate the online discussions into the classroom. In class I mention important issues that came up in the discussion board, sometimes referring to the people who were involved in the forum discussion, sometimes encouraging students to continue the dialogue.

While online students may discuss topics that were covered in class many days or even weeks earlier. Ideas and questions have been lingering, the material is just beginning to sink in, or perhaps students simply are responding to old posts. Bringing these discussions back into the classroom may feel like an awkward digression or regression. A better strategy might involve facilitating these dialogues only in the forum, resulting in a compilation of asynchronous discussions that stretch across the range of the course, ideally culminating in an overlapping and synthesis of ideas that may not be possible in classroom teaching that typically follows a more linear temporal path.

In extreme cases, the discussion board evolves into a kind of subconscious voicing of problems that are actively avoided in-person - for example, differences of opinions or conflicts among students. It is possible to work through these issues in the forum, allowing the beneficial effects to seep into the classroom without openly discussing them in the class. However, the best approach is to head off the dissociation before it becomes too deeply embedded. In both domains, make an attempt to discuss potential problems before they become more intense.

Under ideal conditions, classroom and online discussions will complement and enrich each other. Students will recognize the pros and cons of each environment. They will learn to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of each. When the group moves fluidly from one realm to the other - when both environments combined give expression to a wider range of ideas and voices - then the class has succeeded in extending itself into cyberspace.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Extending a work group into cyberspace
Bringing online and offline living together: The integration principle

Games Avatars Play

**Entertaining and Educational
Games Using Avatars**

**Outing the Av
Av Free Association
Freeze Improvisation
Avatar Showdown
Full Circle
Line Me Up
Show and Tell
4 Facts and a Lie
Locate Yourself
Lend Me Your Av
Swarm
Group Drawing
Impostors**

Because you chose to link to this page, you probably already know what an avatar is. But just in case you don't, an avatar is an image or graphic that a person in an online multimedia community uses to represent him or herself. In some communities, like the Palace, that avatar could be anything... animal, vegetable or mineral; real or fictional. If you still don't quite know what I mean, check out that link to my Palace page, or step over to the article that I wrote about avatars. Then come on back here and these games will make a lot more sense.

The games designed here were designed mostly for environments like Palace where users have a third person view of the avatars in a room, and can change their av and name to anything they want at any time they want. But these games can be adapted for other types of multimedia communities. Some of these games are based on exercises I use in teaching my psychology courses. If you're interested, links will take you to descriptions of those exercises, which are located on my Teaching Clinical Psychology site.

Outing the Av

Everyone shows up to the site with a name and avatar that they think people have not seen before. Pick a name and avatar that are meaningful to you, rather than some random choice. As people arrive, everyone talks. Try to figure out who the other people are, but don't say anything if you think you know. And don't give away your own identity. Once the whole group is there, continue talking for a while, until the host announces to "Start Outing." If someone correctly identifies you, you are "outed" and must switch to the name and avatar by which everyone knows you. There are no specific rules about how you try to figure out who people are. The game is over when the last person is "outed." After all are outed, people talk about how they figured out who people were. Some people are outed very quickly. Others no one can figure out. It's interesting to talk about these differences.

Av Free Association

Someone volunteers to stand before the group to show her/his avatars, one av at a time. The person may start with her/his most usually worn avatars, and then proceed to other specialized or unique ones. Try to show the avatars that are meaningful to you, that express something about you. One by one, for each avatar the person shows, the group "free associates." Say whatever comes to mind when you see that avatar. What does it remind you of? Even just a single word or a simple phrase can be interesting - an adjective, verb, a feeling, a metaphor, a song lyric. Often the idea that pops spontaneously into your mind is valuable. After the first person feels finished showing her/his avatars, another volunteer takes his/her turn before the group. Then another volunteer, etc., until the group feels finished. Besides being fun, this game unravels what avatars reveal about an individual's personality. The results sometimes are surprising, even to the owner of the avatars.

Freeze Improvisation

This is a standard improvisation technique used in training actors. Only we get to do it with avatars! Two people volunteer to stand before the group. The group throws out possible ideas for an opening line to start an improvisation (e.g., "Say, there, Cybercitizen, you're looking mighty nice tonite"). The pair chooses one of the lines and one of them begins an improvisation starting with that opening line. The pair gets a conversation, a scenario going. It can be anything and go in any direction. They CHANGE AVATARS in any way they want to add to the theatrics. At any moment during the improvisation, anyone in the audience can yell "FREEZE" and take the place of one person in the pair. Do so by yelling "freeze" and positioning your av next to his/hers to indicate that you want to take his/her place. The replaced person joins the audience. The new person who entered the pair now resumes the improvisation by introducing a new line (and maybe a new avatar too!). It can be anything. With that new opening line, the person who stepped in can take the improvisation in any direction he/she wishes. At any point in the new improvisation, anyone in the audience can yell "freeze" again and step in to replace one of the pair. That newcomer introduces a new line (and maybe an avatar!) and the improvisation launches off in a different direction. Continue the process, with more people yelling "freeze" and stepping in to replace someone in the pair.

Not for the shy, this game works best when there is a fairly quick turnover of people yelling "freeze" in order to enter and alter the improvisation (see the exercises on my teaching site).

Avatar Showdown

Everyone gets into the center of the room, leaving enough space between avatars. Someone volunteers to be the "caller" and calls out, one by one, different categories of avatars. For example, "cartoon animal," "a heart," "a vehicle," "music," "sad," "Picasso," etc. It's best to start off with relatively common avatar categories and gradually proceed to more uncommon categories. Everyone must display an avatar that fits the category when the caller calls it out. If you don't have an avatar that fits the category, you are out of the game and should move off to the side of the room (or change your avatar to a generic form). The game ends when one person is left standing - i.e., the only person who had an avatar to fit every category. That winner is dubbed "Avatar Addict."

Full Circle

The group forms one large circle. Someone in the circle (doesn't matter who), starts the game by putting on an avatar of his/her choice. Clockwise, the next person in the circle must put on an avatar that somehow is conceptually similar to the first avatar. For example, if the first person put on an avatar of Whorf from Star Trek, the second person might put on an avatar of the Starship Enterprise. Moving clockwise again, the third person must put on an avatar that is conceptually similar to the second one. For example, in response to the Enterprise avatar, the third person might put on an avatar of the moon. This process continues clockwise around the circle. The person putting on the conceptually similar avatar cannot state what the conceptual similarity is. Other people in the group must state what the similarity is. If no one in the group understands and can state what the similarity is, that avatar doesn't count. The person must try another one.

In a competitive version of this game, a person is out (and must leave the circle) when he/she is unable to produce an avatar that is conceptually similar to the previous avatar. Remember, at least one person in the group (or on the sidelines) must be able to state what the conceptual similarity is. The game continues until all but one person is eliminated from the circle.

In a cooperative version of this game, the group continues the clockwise process of presenting conceptually similar avatars until the circle is complete from beginning to end. In other words, along the whole circle, there is a clear conceptual link from one avatar to it's adjacent avatar.

Line Me Up

One at a time, people volunteer to place five of their favorite avatars out into the room. Let's call this the person's avatar "set." Create three or four copies of this set. Three or four people (other than the volunteer) then take one set each and place those avatars in an order from left to right according to how much those avatars reveal about Joe's personality. They order the avatars according to which ones they think are "most expressive of Joe's personality" or "most like Joe"

(towards the left side) to "the least expressive of Joe's personality" or "least like Joe" (towards the right). After they finish lining up the avatars, each person stands next to the set he/she was ordering. Each person then discusses why they placed the avatars in that particular order. The results may reveal a lot about how people have different (or similar) perceptions of Joe.

This game requires some trust. Don't keep someone's avatar unless they say it's OK.

Show and Tell

Yes! This simple game is based on that kindergarten activity. People take turns displaying to the group an avatar that is meaningful to them - maybe their very first avatar, one that expresses something important about them, an av that someone special gave to them, etc. While displaying the av, the person talks about why it is meaningful to him/her. The group may respond by asking questions or offering other reactions to the av (see the exercise on my teaching site).

4 Facts and a Lie

People take turns placing five of their avatars out into the room for the group to see. Four of those avatars should say something truthful ("factual") about your personality, interests, and lifestyle. But one of the avatars should be a "lie" in that it portrays something that is NOT true about you (e.g., a baseball player av, even though you aren't interested in the game). The group tries to guess which av is the lie. To indicate their choice for the lie, they position themselves or some marker next to that avatar. The person and the group then discusses the results. Often there are interesting connections or patterns among the four "factual" avatars - connections or patterns about your personality that you may not fully realize yourself. It's also interesting to talk about the "lie" avatar. Even though a lie, it may reveal something about your personality and may be related, in some interesting way, to the "factual" avatars. Sometimes the "lie" avatar reflects a wish (see the exercise on my teaching site).

Locate Yourself

For this exercise, try to pick a room that most people like. Everyone places their avatar at a place in the room that feels "right" or "comfortable" for them. If you have an avatar that you like which is designed for that room or for a specific spot in the room (e.g., sitting, standing, hanging, avatars), try using that avatar. Once everyone settles in, each person takes a turn describing why they picked that particular avatar and that particular location in the room. Others may respond by saying what they think that avatar in that location reveals about the individual's personality.

In the next stage of this exercise, everyone places an avatar that feels uncomfortable to them in a location of the room that feels uncomfortable. Take turns saying why it feels uncomfortable and getting feedback from others about how they react to you positioned in that spot with that avatar (see the exercise on my teaching site).

Lend Me Your Av

Taking turns, people volunteer to be "dressed up" by the group. People offer avatars to the volunteer to wear. After putting on each avatar, the volunteer and the group talk about whether that av is or isn't "you." For added fun, the volunteer can alter his/her username according to the avatar being worn.

Swarm

This game works best in a crowded room. It probably will create lag, but that's OK. The lag actually can enhance the visual impact of the game. Start off by everyone spreading themselves out across the room. Then, when the moderator yells "Swarm," you place your avatar next to someone else's (it can be anyone you want) and change your avatar so that it matches that avatar in some way (theme, color, size, style). You could even clone that avatar (if you have that power). There may be several of you clustering together as a swarm. Maybe there's a swarm gathering elsewhere in the room. Maybe there are several swarms developing. At any point, feel free to move your avatar to join another swarm. Or, if you want, break off onto your own and present a new avatar in the hopes that you will become the seed of a new swarm. What's the purpose of this game?. There is none. Except, maybe, after everyone gets exhausted or hopelessly lagged out, to talk about what swarms developed and why.

Group Drawing

Everyone stands along the perimeter of the room. It's probably best to put on a generic-looking avatar, so as not to distract everyone's eye from the drawing that the group will make. Someone starts the drawing by placing an avatar (not the one you are wearing) into the center of the room. Going clockwise around the perimeter, people take turns adding an avatar to the drawing. It may evolve into an abstract drawing or a "scene" of some kind. When it's your turn, feel free to use a painting tool to add to the drawing, if you wish.

In another version of this game, people move to the perimeter, but when it's your turn you place YOURSELF into the drawing or scene. Pick any avatar you like when you enter the drawing or scene. You might also alter your username as another feature of the evolving work of art. Animated avatars add to the fun (see the exercise on my teaching site).

Impostors

Someone volunteers to be the "Genuine." The Genuine and two other volunteers leave the room and all come back wearing the same avatar and username (or very similar usernames, like Joe1, Joe2, Joe3). They are now the "Impostors." Three people who have volunteered to be the "Guessers" then take turns asking questions of the Impostors in order to determine who is the Genuine Joe. All the impostors do their best to prove that they are the Genuine. When it's a Guesser's turn, he/she can ask only one question to one of the three clones. People in the audience may whisper suggestions to the Impostors to help them answer the questions. After five rounds of questions, the Guessers must guess who the Genuine is.

One way to vary this game is by the types of questions asked by the Guessers. Questions based on personal facts and knowledge (how old are you, where do you live, do you remember the time that we....) may quickly reveal who the Genuine is. Hypothetical questions "What would you do if a snert called you a pinhead?" might make the game more intriguing and fun.

Another way to vary the game is to not have the whole group be the Guessers. When the Impostors enter the room, people in the group take turns asking questions of them. Others in the group may whisper possible answers to the impostor. Once everyone in the group gets a turn to ask a question, the group votes on whether they think Impostor 1, 2, or 3 is the Genuine.

This game is a fascinating way to explore who knows what about whom.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space
Avatar Psychotherapy

Online Photosharing Communities

Personal Identity and Relationships in Flickr

Images, Words, and Actions

Since the birth of the Internet, people have been gathering online to form groups and communities in order to share ideas, experiences, and resources. In the past, the primary method of communication in many of these groups was typed text. In fact, typed text via email, chat, instant messaging, discussion boards, social networks, and blogging has evolved into a highly sophisticated and unique form of dialogue.

However, with the increasing availability of high speed Internet connections, people are no longer communicating simply by text. Visual images have become increasing popular as a tool for self-expression, conveying ideas, and sharing experiences. For example, in virtual communities like *Second Life*, people are creating a complex visual world consisting of houses, streets, towns, and cities, complete with furnishings, landscaping, products, and icons called "avatars" to represent one's physical body. *YouTube* has skyrocketed to fame as a place where people share and discuss videos on almost any topic one can imagine. With the boom of digital photography and graphics, people also are

sharing their images in social networks and communities devoted specifically to photography, such as *Flickr* and *Webshots*.

This shift towards visual communication in cyberspace provides a unique opportunity for psychologists to study interpersonal interactions. At no point in human history has it been easier for people - and for groups of people from around the world - to communicate via visual images. Digital imaging and cyberspace have made imagistic communication easy, flexible, powerful, global, and intercultural because language differences are much less of an obstacle.

Psychological theory has long advocated a basic distinction between visualizations and language as two basic cognitive systems for managing memories, processing information, and self-expression. Whereas the language or verbal system tends to involve thinking that is more linear, conceptual, consciously controlled, and reality-based, the visual or mental imagery system tends to be more holistic, emotional, personal, imaginative, symbolic, and influenced by the unconscious. Most people rely on both the imagery and verbal systems for cognitive functioning, but researchers have postulated that some people may be better "visualizers" while others are better "verbalizers." This distinction between imagery and verbal functioning, as well as personal preferences and strengths in visual versus verbal thinking, can help explain why people choose online environments that emphasize visual communication, how people express themselves and interact in these environments, and the type of social psychological dynamics that evolve within the community.

A third category of online communication, in addition to image and text, would be an interpersonal *action*. A person may perform a specific act as an expression of interpersonal meaning, without relying on language or a visual image. While image and text would serve as overt vehicles for communication, the action might function as a more subtle interpersonal behavior.

The purpose of this research was to explore the interpersonal dynamics in a photo-sharing community, focusing on the processes of imagistic communication, as well as how text and action shape and enhance that imagistic communication. The research specifically examined Flickr, currently one of the most popular online photo-sharing communities. Three methods were employed in gathering observations about this community. In the tradition of participant-observation and ethnographic methodologies, I, as a member of Flickr for several years, immersed myself into the community, relying on an epistemological oscillation between an objective observation of social phenomena and my subjective experience of interpersonal dynamics – a methodology that I previously described in my research on the Palace multimedia chat community. I also conducted in-depth email interviews with volunteers from Flickr, as well as facilitated group discussions among visitors to my pages within Flickr. These discussions took place in reaction to images that I uploaded in order to illustrate ideas about photographs and photo-sharing. Because this research focused on imagistic communication, I felt it was important to use images to convey ideas and stimulate discussion, rather than rely on verbal discussions alone. I organized these images into two collections, also called "sets": The CyberPsychology of Flickr and Photographic Psychology.

Flickr describes itself as a community for sharing photography. However, not all images in the community are photographs in the strict sense. Some are scans of art originally created in other media, images constructed using computer software of various types, or images constructed digitally from other images. Nevertheless, in this article I will use the terms "image" and "photograph" interchangeably.

Establishing a Cyberpsychological Niche and Equilibrium

Before discussing the specific interpersonal dynamics of image, text, and action in Flickr, one must first appreciate the wider social psychological context of the community that inevitably shapes those dynamics. With millions of members, many millions of images, and thousands of groups devoted to various photography and community topics, Flickr confronts each member with an overwhelming ocean of visual stimulation and possibilities for interpersonal encounters. Although members, at least at first, may find these limitless possibilities exciting, they must at some point develop specific strategies for establishing their presence and identity, and for managing their interpersonal relationships.

As in many large online communities, some members find themselves in an initial stage of progressive immersion, viewing more and more images, establishing more and more relationships, until they discover that they must limit or cut back on the excessive time and energy they are devoting to Flickr. To maintain a rewarding participation in the community, members are challenged to a establish a *cyberpsychological niche* in which they, both consciously and unconsciously, regulate and define themselves as well as their relationships, with that niche and the corresponding self-definition being expressed in the members' behaviors regarding image, text, and action. That niche, in order to thrive and avoid stagnation, must reach a stage of ongoing dynamic synergy between experimentation and restraint – a

cyberpsychological equilibrium in which new opportunities for image, text, and action are tested, assimilated if successful, and discarded if not.

The niche one establishes is partly determined by the overarching purpose the member assigns to his or her participation in Flickr. People who join Flickr as a way to share, with family and friends, their life experiences via photographs have a predetermined niche. They may not progress any further into the larger Flickr community. However, if they find themselves becoming interested in the art and science of photography and visual design, they may be drawn into the wider culture of members who are photography and visual design students, aficionados, and professionals – members who are challenged to define the artistic, technical, and social dimensions of their niche. Some members establish their niche by joining groups devoted to topics that match their interests and interpersonal preferences. In more rare cases, members use their pages within Flickr as an online art gallery, without interacting substantially with anyone, resulting in a lowered impact of the community on their niche and a less synergistic equilibrium

Some members experience a conflict between different views about the purpose of Flickr. Is it a place to express oneself via images, to learn about photography, and/or socialize? Some members approach Flickr as a competitive "game" in which the quality or popularity of an image is determined by how many times it is viewed, how many people indicate it as a "favorite" (fav), its overall "interestingness" as determined by an undisclosed formula designed by the creators of Flickr, and, based on that interestingness rating, whether the image appears on *Explore*, which is a catalog of the most popular photos in Flickr. A member's cyberpsychological niche and equilibrium - including how one manages images, text, and actions - can be drastically influenced by one's commitment to the social, educational, artistic, or gaming activities of the community, and by a complex and sometimes awkward juggling of these various agendas. The fact that the population and culture of the entire community can shift significantly over time – as it did from its early days as a serious photography community to its current status a more social environment – will also affect a member's niche and equilibrium.

The Image as an Expression of Self

On its own, without elaboration by text or action, the image can be a powerful vehicle for self-expression. Many members, especially those invested in the artistic aspects of photography, describe how the visual aspects of the world are important to them and how they try to capture it in their photography. The image is a way to store memories of what is important in one's life, shape personal meaning, and give expression to ideas, experiences, and emotions that may not be easily verbalized. Although everyone does not consciously experience it as such, because people might say that they simply photographed something that was visually appealing to them, the image is an extension of one's identity, reflecting aspects of one's personality, relationships, and lifestyle – which is why the theft of one's image, as sometimes happens, feels like a violation not only of ownership, but of self. In some cases the image gives expression to the unconscious dimensions of one's character. It can become a creation, a representation that a person builds of oneself, not the actual self as usually experienced by the individual, but an experiment that gives expression to some underlying anxiety, wish, or ideal. The person then establishes a relationship to that image as a means to establish a relationship to some emerging aspect of one's identity. For all of these reasons, a person's photostream – the sequence of images uploaded to Flickr – acquires a specific visual and thematic style, distinct from those of other members, whether the person consciously intends this or not.

The uploading of the image to Flickr is an act of "going public" with this visual shaping of oneself. It is a process of making the intrapersonal interpersonal. Sharing one's photography potentially becomes a form of validation in which the person hopes others will find the personal meaning and facets of identity that the photographer created and discovered in the image. Knowing others can see the image gives it more emotional power. It can make it feel more "real." As in art therapy, the process of creating an image can be a therapeutic in itself – a process of self-insight, emotional catharsis, the working through of conflicts, and the affirmation of identity. Going public with the image may enhance that process. Flickr groups devoted to specific psychological problems – such as depression and bipolar disorders – exemplify these therapeutic qualities of image creation and sharing.

People's immediate reactions to the photography of other members reveal the impact of the image in and of itself. Due to the time restraints many people feel while visiting numerous photostreams, they quickly browse images with an eye open for those that catch their attention. It is a state of awareness and concentration reminiscent of "evenly hovering attention" as described by Freud. Members describe how some images instantaneously "grab" them, what some call the "WOW factor." They may feel speechless, unable to verbalize why or how the image affects them. They immediately sense a connection to the photograph, and, at least to some extent, the photographer. The image draws them in, encourages them to spend more time visually exploring it, while other images in the photostream go barely

noticed. A powerful image speaks for itself, although viewers also engage in a process of projecting their own personal meaning into the image, so that it becomes a type of non-verbal transitional space between the viewer and the photographer, with its meaning partly created by the viewer and partly by the photographer. Sometimes an image may shock, frighten, or disgust a viewer, causing that person immediately to leave the photostream and avoid it in the future.

The fact that each person develops a unique visual style in the creation of images is a complex topic worthy of study unto itself. An effective system for identifying the various elements of visual style would be valuable in such research, but needs to be versatile and comprehensive. Here I will propose four dimensions for such an identification system:

Subject:
Traditional categories in photography are useful to classify the basic types of subjects captured in an image, such as people, portraits, nature, landscapes, cityscapes, abstracts, architecture, sports, animals, fashion, and food. People tend to create images that fall within only a few categories, which reflects their lifestyle and personality.

Imaging tools and techniques:
Both the shooting and post-processing of an image, as determined by the equipment and techniques used, have a dramatic impact on visual style. The process of image creation includes camera type (e.g., film, digital, pinholes, "toy" cameras, etc.), lens type (which determines angle of view, perspective, depth of field, close-up capabilities, etc,), monochrome versus color types, shooting style, and a wide variety of image manipulation programs and techniques. People tend to rely on a specific set of imaging tools and techniques, which may reflect cognitive and perceptual preferences, as well as personality traits associated with those preferences.

Visual Elements: Imaging tools and techniques result in specific visual characteristics of an image. Such elements can be interpreted according to well-known psychological systems, such as Exner's principles for interpreting perceptual responses to the Rorschach inkblots, including form, movement, color, shading, texture, reflections, symmetry, vista, and the psychological significance of these elements.

Psychological/Emotional Content:
A specifically psychological dimension for identifying image type might revolve around the fundamental psychological issues portrayed by the image, such as self-concept, interpersonal relationships, childhood, achievement, conflict, spirituality, health and pathology. Of particular value would be the emotions depicted or stimulated by an image, as classified according to the seven basic emotions identified by Paul Ekman: anger, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, and happiness. Even images that don't include human subjects may nevertheless portray psychological and emotional content via symbolism, atmosphere, and anthropomorphic depictions.

Regarding imaging tools and techniques, one issue often discussed and debated in the Flickr community is the degree to which an image has been altered or manipulated using computer software programs such as Photoshop, a process often called "post-processing." Whereas some people hold the purist view that a true photograph accurately represents a scene by careful shooting techniques with as little post-processing as possible, others liberally modify an image to enhance color, contrast, shapes, and focus, or to add or delete visual elements, sometimes resulting in surrealistic effects. All images in film and digital photography are processed to some extent and therefore manipulated by the photographer. Nevertheless, the practice of altering a photograph does provide more opportunities to visually express oneself. It provides more opportunities to create rather than simply capture an image, to shape reality according to one's preferences, needs, and motivations.

Photostream: The Sequence of Images

We tend to think of a photograph as a moment captured and frozen in time in order to record a scene or express an idea, but rarely does anyone take just one photograph. Images, especially in online photo-sharing communities, occur in a sequence that reflects people's lives and changes in their perceptions, thoughts, and emotions over time. Members of Flickr can organize their images into sets and collections, which reflects their conscious realization of how to categorize the major subjects and techniques of their photography. While these patterns of organization also reflect the lifestyle and psychological dynamics of the individual, the sequence of images contains information that is more temporal and process-based.

After a shoot of a particular event, location, or subject, the resulting sequence of images reveals significant shifts in the perceptual and psychological preferences that dictated how the photographer approached the situation. What captured the person's attention, at first, then later? When did the person focus on color, texture, shapes, perspective, people, animals, objects, details, and the big picture? When people change the lens, shutter speed, ISO, color temperature, and

aperture settings, or shift to a different viewpoint, what changed in their conceptualization of the scene? Image sequence discloses patterns in the person's thoughts and feelings about the situation. What they overlook or forgot to shoot in a situation may reveal as much about their attitude as what they did shoot. The sequence of what and how one shoots – or forgets to shoot – is a reflection of how one's mind works.

These principles also hold true for images created over longer stretches of time, over the course of many shoots. When scholars study the periods of great artists, they discover how their artistic style, personality, and life changed over the years, as well as the essential defining aspects of the artists that remain constant. Similarly, regardless of whether they are artists or not, the way a person does photography now may be quite different than how she or he did it years ago. As people change, the images they create change. A photographer's personality becomes more clear in the sequence of images than in one image alone, or even than in the whole collection of images viewed out of sequence. Any particular image is best understood when viewed in the context of the images that came before and after it. In fact, the meaning of an image might be misunderstood or overlooked when viewed out of its position in the photostream.

A sequence of images resembles a stream of consciousness. It may change direction, pick up speed, slow down, run shallow or deep. But it is ongoing, with each image linked to those before and after it in psychological ways that may or may not be visible in the images themselves. The "spaces" between images are as important signifiers of psychological dynamics as the images themselves, pointing to underlying cognitions and affects that stimulated the transition. The human psyche itself consists of memories, ideas, sensations, and emotions, all linked to each other in complex chains of associations. A series of images in a photographer's collection is a glimpse into that intrapsychic world. The degree to which people explore different subjects and imaging techniques in their photostream, or the degree to which they explore in-depth a particular subject or technique, reflects the diversity, complexity, and points of focus in their intrapsychic world. Some people explicitly use their photostream as an ongoing visual journal to chronicle their lives, sometimes including many self-portraits or images of their environments and significant others; while other people present photographs of scenes that are visually pleasing to them, without that explicit link to their lives. Nevertheless, in all cases the sequence of images reflects the person's intrapsychic reality and how it changes over time.

Even though the image and image sequence are richly complex vehicles of communication and self-expression, not all members of Flickr attend to their nuances. Visual design and composition are non-verbal languages that some people understand better than others. An image may have a powerful impact because it masterfully applies the grammar of this language, but some people may not realize the skills involved. In the busy stop-and-go habit of visiting numerous photostreams, some members also may not notice the patterns that surface in the image sequence, nor have a sense of the photographer's ongoing visual style, the visual ideas being explored, and how these factors reflect the photographer's artistic sensibilities, personality, and life.

People with artistic ambitions in the Flickr community often lament these kinds of insensitivities among the visitors to their photostream. They may grow disappointed in the fact that their work seems under-appreciated or misunderstood, while some highly popular members draw a great deal of attention because their images very successfully apply the principles of composition to achieve a high visual impact, even though the images lack meaning and inspiration, what some people call "eye-candy." Disillusioned with the seemingly many members who are preoccupied with the gaming aspects of attaining Flickr popularity, while showing a sparse understanding of artistic and technical skills, some serious photographers and artists decide to leave the community. Those members who do remain - who do not feel unrecognized, alienated, or frustrated - typically have succeeded in developing at least a small group of contacts who regularly visit their photostream, understand and appreciate their visual style, and, most importantly, have become friends.

Image Titles, Descriptions, and Tags

Photos without titles or any accompanying descriptions encourage viewers to explore the image on their own without forcing any particular interpretation. It tosses the image into their laps and encourages them to project themselves into it, creating their own meaning. The untitled image might appear mysterious. It might tease, frustrate, challenge, or lure the viewer in. It is the presentation of the purely visible with no pretense of words. People might present their photography without any accompanying text as a way to maintain privacy and anonymity. In a strategy of compromise, the image reveals aspects of their identity, while the absence of text protects aspects of their identity.

However, only rarely do people upload images to Flickr without any accompanying text. Usually, at the very least, people create a title for the image. They may also add a description of one or two sentences, or, in some cases, several paragraphs, as well as "tags" that serve as keywords that help people locate the image using search functions. In a purely pragmatic approach, the person uses a title and tags simply to identity what the shot is - a kind of categorization that, in some cases, is an obvious text correlate of the image, but in other cases might be essential for viewers to

understand what the image entails, as in blurry, extreme close-up, or otherwise ambiguous images. The title of an image, even if obvious, also serves as a practical label when referring to and talking about an image, which becomes critical as people view and discuss dozens or hundreds of images each day.

Beyond serving this simple identifying function, an image title can be a creative component of the communication process. Text and image interact synergistically in a variety of ways to establish nuances and supplements of meaning. The title can add a layer of meaning that is not immediately obvious in the photo. It can be playful or provocative by contradicting the qualities of the image. If people want to convey a particular idea, especially if they prefer one of a variety of different possible interpretations of the image, they create a title that steers viewers in that direction. They might be attempting to prevent viewers from getting the "wrong" impression, even though the image could be interpreted that way. In some cases, the title elevates a technically poor or average photo to a higher level of psychological impact. It can be more powerful than the image itself, as when the photographer personalizes the image with emotional self-disclosures as titles. The effect of an outstanding image might be dampened by a bland, uninspired title. Titles containing questions – as in those that challenge viewers to solve some puzzle about the photo – are quite effective in drawing people into the image. Many Flickr members believe that a title "makes or breaks" an image.

For the photographer, creating a title can be a process of discovering new meanings in the image via an internalized dialogue with imagined viewers. "What do I want you, the viewer, to see in this image?" and "What does this image mean to me?" are questions that go hand-in-hand. When photographers know what they want to say and how they want others to react, a title may pop immediately into mind. In other cases, they may give careful thought to their titles. They know that they like a photo but not be sure why. Searching for a title might clarify this. It might help them uncover the subconscious feelings, memories, and fantasies that they associate with the image, and how (or whether) they wish viewers to react to these things. In a reciprocal interaction, determining a good title can provide the photographer with new ideas about how to post-process the image in order to enhance its ability to express the meaning discovered in the title. Both the photographer and the viewer remember effective titles, even after long periods of time have passed, because they are a powerful wedding of textual and imagistic meaning.

These processes of using text to identify, explain, and enrich the meaning of images also occur via the descriptions that people write to accompany their photos, as well as in the keyword tags that they create. Being more visible on the page that contains the image, the title tends to have a more immediate and influential impact. However, descriptions, especially detailed and well-written ones, can be quite powerful in providing more in-depth information about the image, often serving as a narrative about an event in one's life or an explanation of one's point of view on some subject, for which the image serves as an illustration. Tags, which are displayed in a rather inconspicuous sidebar on the photo page, are sometimes used not simply as keywords to categorize an image, but as an opportunity for the photographer to present a kind of subvocal metacomment on the image - a parenthetical thought, whisper, aside, digression, or even a "mumbling to oneself" that can provide additional insight, humor, emotion, and self-disclosure. Effective titles, descriptions, and tags entice the viewer into the image, and in some cases might even upstage the image.

Although images, in and of themselves, can have a powerful impact on people, it is the combination of the image with text descriptors that launches the potential for a relationship between photographers and their visitors. Photographers become more "real" as people via the accompanying text they offer. They use text to give visitors more information to work with when commenting on images. Text invites them to spend more time considering the image and show more commitment in understanding it and the photographer. For this reason, photographers feel a strong interpersonal disconnection from visitors who obviously have paid no attention to text descriptors, as when a viewer offers the comment "Beautiful Sunset!" on a photo entitled "Sunrise." The viewer's neglect in understanding the image, and the photographer, might even come across as callous or toxic when they offer comments indicating that they obviously overlooked the photographer's personal self-disclosures in the text descriptors. As in many types of online environments, communication and the relationships that develop from it tend to be more powerful when that communication encompasses a variety of modalities, such as text along with images.

Visitors' Comments on Photos

Beneath each photo, visitors to the photostream can comment on the image, as well as engage the photographer, and each other, in conversation. These dialogues form the basis for a deeper immersion into a collective appreciation and understanding of the image, and for the development of interpersonal relationships. Obviously, a person's skill and motivation for writing, as well the ability to communicate in languages other than one's own, will determine the person's participation in these conversations. Because Flickr is a photo-sharing community, some people, especially those who are primarily visual in their cognitive style, may be more invested in the imagistic experience than verbal dialogue. No doubt, the experience of Flickr is quite different for those who actively participate in the exchange of

comments as compared to those who do not, especially because text communication plays such an important role in the development of relationships.

In developing their cyberpsychological equilibrium, members face the challenge of managing the amount of time spent in commenting on other people's photos. Comments longer than a few sentences often indicate a strong positive or negative reaction to the photo, an ongoing relationship between the viewer and the photographer, or motivation to establish a relationship. People appreciate the time and effort others put into a detailed, thoughtful, or insightful comment. In fact, such comments are regarded as a precious commodity. They are reserved for friends, family and other important contacts; or they can become a form of social barter in which a person leaves one with the hope or expectation of getting one. Some members lament this "tit for tat" system of exchange, although most people will not continue commenting on someone else's photos if that person rarely or never reciprocates. To endure as a member of Flickr, many people form a thick skin to what could be perceived as a rejection, to the very likely possibility that their leaving a "good" comment in the hopes of developing a relationship, or at least reciprocity, results in no response from the other member.

Like the sequence of images that a person uploads to Flickr, the series of comments from visitors help shape the unique atmosphere of one's photostream. When a photostream thrives as a social entity - which does not happen in all cases because some photographers receive few comments – stability is attained in the people who visit and the kinds of comments they leave. By selectively responding to and therefore reinforcing certain types of comments, and, in some cases, by deleting comments that seem inappropriate, the photographer contributes to this molding of the distinctive character of his or her photostream. Comments tend to fall into these categories:

Terse Praise:
A very large number of comments are brief compliments about the photo, such as "Great capture" and "Beautiful colors." While photographers generally appreciate any type of comment, these brief remarks tend to be generic and in some ways unsatisfying, especially if the photographer put a great deal of work into the image and hopes those specific efforts will be noticed. Visitors may offer terse praise because they feel speechless about how much a powerful image has affected them, or they may lack the ability to verbalize what they like about photos. Usually, however, the preponderance of brief comments is the result of many people feeling that they don't have the time or energy to say more as they make their rounds in visiting many photostreams. Short, positive comments tend to be the norm. It's what most people do, and others follow suit. Social status in Flickr, the "interestingness" ratings for one's images, and a personal sense of worth revolve around how many comments one receives, so these brief compliments become a form of social currency. In the bartering system, one gives a terse compliment when one receives one.

The large number of complimentary comments does create an overall positive atmosphere within Flickr, considerably more so than in other online communities where disagreements, debates, and flame wars are common occurrences. This positive atmosphere might reflect a mutual, tacit agreement among members that photo-sharing should be respected as an activity that places people in a socially vulnerable position. Images are a form of self-disclosure, a way to present one's self and life to the community. Negative comments might be perceived as an inappropriately antagonistic attack on that vulnerability. For photographers with creative ambitions, a negative comment could be perceived as a criticism of one's "baby." For people who consciously or unconsciously offer an image as a representation of their identity, a negative comment is akin to criticizing the way someone looks or dresses. An implicit "Do Unto Others" creed contributes to the generally positive atmosphere in the community.

Critiques and Technical Remarks:
Members seeking to improve their photography may welcome critiques and other comments on the technical aspects of their shooting, post-processing, and composition. Some join groups where this kind of feedback is the stated agenda. Of course, the spirit behind such comments - where they fall on the range from empathic and constructive criticism to tactless negativity – determines whether the photographer appreciates them or not. Serious photographers usually value comments that indicate a recognition of their deliberate technical and artistic efforts, as well as comments that reveal something about the image that they did not consciously realize. They usually appreciate honesty, rather than terse generic praise, as long as that feedback helps them improve their skills, or, at least, gives them a better understanding of how people vary in their photography tastes. However, they typically do not enjoy criticisms or advice presented as objective truth rather than as a reflection of differences in style and taste, especially regarding the artistic design of the image. Receiving technical comments and critiques, even those that seem inappropriate, can help the photographer better understand his or her cyberpsychological niche in the community. People from radically different niches may not understand or appreciate each other's work.

Other members, particularly those who are not necessarily interested in improving their photography or who simply wish to "do their own thing" without interference, may not appreciate critiques or advice from their visitors. They may view such comments as an intrusion on their wish to simply share photos with family and friends. Some people also

believe that if you don't have something positive to say, don't say anything. The self-disclosures that occur in images and text, as well as the occasional inappropriately hostile comments, are evidence supporting the well-known online disinhibition effect; 9 however, the distinctly pleasant atmosphere in Flickr created by positive comments is a notable exception to the negative aspects of that disinhibition effect.

Personal Reactions:
Viewers often comment on what they personally like about an image, such as the colors, shapes, textures, the people or subjects in the shot, and the idea, feeling, or sensation that the image creates. They engage in a process of free association by describing what the image reminds them of, including events and people from their own lives. They may personalize the photo and project their own meaning into it by describing how it relates to themselves, or what it means to them on an emotional, social, or philosophical level. Some viewers may only leave a comment if they make such an emotional connection to the image. Rather than intended as an objective evaluation of the photograph, such comments serve more as an interpersonal bridge between the viewer and the photographer. If the image expresses unconscious meanings for the photographer, then the viewers' spontaneous expressions of how the image affects them may reflect their own unconscious connection to those meanings, which can lead to empathic attachment between the photographer and the viewer.

Interpretations of the Photographer:
Some viewers use the image as a vehicle for commenting on the mood, personality, or life of the photographer. The more the photographer deliberately creates and presents the image as an expression of self – most notably in self-portraits - the more likely visitors will make such comments. When self-disclosures embedded in the image are intended, photographers usually will appreciate accurate interpretations, while feeling misunderstood when the interpretations seem wrong. However, viewers sometimes interpret the image in ways the photographer did not consciously intend when creating it. Depending on the accuracy and intent of the interpretation, photographers might feel misunderstood, attacked, or delighted to discover something new about the image and themselves. People who design their photostream for the specific purpose of self-disclosing about their personality and life will typically appreciate, or at least take interest, in almost all of their visitors' interpretations because their photography serves the purpose of a "looking glass self" in which the process of self discovery relies on feedback from others. For some of these photographers, images become an ongoing stream of idealized, desired, feared, or realistic portrayals of their identity. To experiment with and develop their identity, they establish a relationship to these images as transformational objects that are partly self, not self, and potential self. Comments from their visitors assist them in this process of discovering what they are, what they are not, what they wish to be.

Topical Comments:
Images can stimulate comments about a wide range of political, philosophical, and intellectual topics. The conversations that emerge resemble the group dynamics of blogs and traditional discussion boards, with the image serving as a centerpiece or stabilizing reference point for the dialogue. When these conversations among visitors and the photographer become lengthy, especially when flame wars fuel and prolong the debates, the image may become incidental to the discussion that takes on a life of its own.

Questions:
Rather than offering a statement or opinion about an image, viewers might instead ask a question about its technical, artistic, or personal qualities. Unlike terse praise or other comments aimed specifically at the image, questions invite a dialogue and possibly a relationship between the viewer and the photographer. How or if photographers reply will depend on how many comments they receive, how much time and effort they are willing to put into their responses, and their motivation to discuss the technical and personal aspects of the image with particular visitors. Many photographers, especially those who receive a limited number of visitors, appreciate the interest implied by asking a question as well as the opportunity to discuss themselves and their photos.

Although members report that the combination of words and images can be especially powerful in the formation of relationships, they note that it is difficult to imagine a relationship developing without comments. Personally and in their photography, people may be significantly influenced by another person's images, and that influence may in some cases be reciprocal, yet without text communication their relationship exists in a purely preverbal, experiential realm that each of them may find difficult or ambiguous to confirm as a "relationship." Instead, in most cases, images serve as the starting point for the relationship, which then evolves via exchanged comments on photos and later perhaps via email, phone, and face-to-face contact. For some people, the socializing and social networking aspect of Flickr is as important, if not more important, than photo-sharing. Images serve as conversation pieces, as convenient vehicles for people to talk to each other about themselves and their lives.

Taking Action: The Fav

Behaviors that involve little if any text or imagistic communication also play an important role in interpersonal dynamics. Any given online environment might provide a variety of such actions that members use to develop their identity and participation in the community. In Flickr one such behavior is the "fav" - a button beneath a photo that visitors can click to indicate that they consider it one of their favorite images. Statistics that appear with an image include the number of times that image was viewed by visitors, how many comments were made on it, and how many favs it received. A list of the images that a person "fav'ed" also is available in his or her home area within Flickr and can be viewed by visitors. Even though the fav seems to be relatively simple type of action, it has acquired a variety of psychological and social functions, sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle:

Personal Impact:
People may fav an image when it has a strong emotional impact on them. That effect might arise from the meaning and/or the visual qualities of the image, although the meaning tends to be the more influential factor, rather than simply captivating visual qualities that result in "eye candy" images. Members describe such favs in terms of their immediate reaction to the image, its "Wow" factor, how beautiful and inspiring it is, how it made them laugh, its fascinating perplexities, how it speaks to them, resonates with them, or touched them on a deep level. These types of favs may help visitors express their appreciation of the photo when they feel its impact but are not sure why, or cannot adequately verbalize why. Members who only fav an image when it has a powerful effect on them tend to reserve such favs for special occasions, when photographers "earn" them.

Technical or Artistic Merit:
Viewers may offer a fav as an acknowledgment of the technical or artistic skill demonstrated in the photo. They might fav images that demonstrate excellent examples of their own style of photography, reveal technical and artistic ideas that are new to them, or illustrate admirable skills even though the image itself does not match the visitor's preferred tastes. They might be looking for affirmation of their own photography in others' images, or new ways of doing photography. When visitors wish to offer helpful feedback, the fav may not indicate that the photo is actually a favorite for them, but rather that this particular image is the photographer's best effort, in the eyes of the visitor. In some cases a process of social conformity emerges in which people give favs to an image because many other people have already given it favs.

Social Support:
A visitor might offer a fav to support and encourage other members when they are new at doing photography, attempting something different in their work, or taking a risk of some kind. As a type of non-verbal behavior, this type of fav serves as an acknowledging smile, a nod of the head, a pat on the back, or applause. Beginners appreciate such favs as a gesture of mentoring from more experienced photographers. While people who fav as an indication of personal impact and technical/artistic merit tend to do so selectively, those who offer favs for social support tend to be more liberal. Some members who start out in Flickr being very "stingy" about favs eventually use them more freely, most likely in the spirit of encouraging social support.

Friendship:
The fav can be a gesture of friendship. People give them to friends, or in hopes of establishing an amiable relationship. As a type of social grooming, offering a fav shows enthusiasm about a friend's performance, mostly because it is the friendship that is important and not necessarily the image. Some members feel more inclined to fav the photos of friends than those of acquaintances and strangers, probably because they think of the fav as a sign of intimacy and camaraderie.

Social Barter:
Similar to comments, favs can function as an item for bartering. When one receives a fav from a visitor, one gives a fav in return; or one may give a fav with the hope or expectation that the other member will reciprocate. The value of the fav rests not only in its being a sign of appreciation, but also in the fact that the number of favs for an image boosts its "interestingness" rating, the possibility that it might appear in *Explore* (the catalog of the most popular images in Flickr), and hence the status of the member in the community.

Efficient Communication:
The fav can serve as a substitute for leaving a comment on a photo when people can't find the words to describe why they liked it, when they don't have time to leave a comment, or when they lack facility in the photographer's language. It's a non-verbal way to indicate one's presence in the photographer's photostream and an appreciation of a particular image. In some cases people consider it rude when visitors leave a fav without an accompanying comment, especially when that visitor is regarded as a friend. However, other members are more apt to fav rather than comment if they view photography in terms of experiential or "gut" reactions rather than verbal analysis.

<u>Remembrances</u>:
Although some members rarely look at the images that are stored in their fav collection, others do return to these photos. Using these favs as reminders of the types of images they enjoyed, they may discover patterns in their preferences that lead to insights about the technical, artistic, and personal dimensions of their photography. They may wish to recapture some mood, idea, or inspiration that the image initially triggered, as in photos that cheered them up when they were depressed. As components of one's social network, stored favs also include links back to the image and the photostreams of those photographers, thereby serving not just as souvenirs or reminders of those people, but also as implicit interpersonal connections to them. In online communities that are large, complex, and potentially overwhelming, vehicles for remembering and reconnecting, such as the fav, are important interpersonal tools.

Conclusions: The Necessity of Text

Images can function as a powerful medium for personal expression and interpersonal relationships, especially in cyberspace where people can easily create, manipulate, and share them, and especially for people with cognitive styles that favor imagistic rather than verbal processes. For the viewer, an image may trigger an emotional resonance with the photographer that might motivate an attempt to establish a relationship. Images and text communication can then become a powerful synergistic combination in the development of that relationship.

However, despite the rich psychological meanings embedded in images and the compelling impact they have on other people, interpersonal relationships rarely form and develop by images alone. In photo-sharing communities, a member presents the image to everyone in the community, or to a group of people, as an expression of self. Only rarely is the image intended for someone in particular. Instead, it is exchange of words between members that establishes their mutually recognized presence to each other. It is the exchange of words that is critical in launching their relationship and in the joint understanding of shared meanings that advances the relationship. Images provide an undercurrent of emotion and ideas that enrich interpersonal dynamics, often on a level that is not fully conscious or capable of being verbalized; but text communication between two particular people provide the more deliberate social efforts to advance that particular relationship.

Actions that do not rely on detailed text communication or images add a supplemental level of complexity to this interpersonal behavior. This article explored the psychological dynamics of the fav, but other actions as well influence the Flickr member's experience of the community – for example, the simple act of looking at an image, which increases its view count, thereby letting photographers estimate the level of visitors' presence in their photostream as well as their level of presence in the community. The success of many contemporary online communities often rests on whether the design of the environment includes image, words, and actions, how well members can control them, and the degree to which these dimensions of interpersonal behavior are integrated with each other.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

- Psychology of avatars and graphical space
- Cyberspace as dream world

The Bad Boys of Cyberspace

Deviant Behavior in Online Multimedia Communities
and Strategies for Managing it

(1)

SNERT... That's what they call the real trouble-makers of cyberspace. Attributed by some to Kurt Vonnegut, the term stands for "snot-nosed Eros-ridden teenager." It concisely captures much of what many cyberspace deviants are all about. They thumb their impudent noses at authority figures and smear their ooze of discontent all over themselves and others. Frustrated drives seeking an outlet may fuel their misconduct - frustrated aggressive drives as well as sexual ones. They often are adolescents. If they aren't, then they are regressed adults acting like adolescents. In some communities, the term "snert" broadens to include any acting out, annoying, disruptive user.

The title of this article also suggests that they are males. Of course, there are bad girls in cyberspace too, but they do seem to be outnumbered by the males. Why? Maybe males - especially teenage males - have a more difficult time restraining or constructively expressing their Eros-ridden nature (i.e., they aren't as mature). Maybe they tend to be a bit lacking in the compassion and interpersonal sensitivity that's needed to realize how other users aren't Donkey Kong targets, but real people. Maybe there simply are more male users out there on the internet.

The purpose of this article is to explore deviant behavior in a multimedia chat community and strategies for dealing with that behavior. The observations here come from my early field research on the Palace communities (see the Palace Study) - especially the communities at the server sites that were run by The Palace Incorporated (TPI), which later merged with Electric Communities (EC). A very large majority of the people I've met there have been pleasant, thoughtful, and helpful. However, like all online communities, snerts and other deviant types wiggle their way in. In some cases the misbehavior at the Palace will be similar to other online groups, in some cases different. There are universal forms of deviance that will be recognized anywhere on the internet, as well as specific forms that are unique to each community.

Almost all the techniques for handling misbehaving users that I mention in this article were discussed or implemented by the TPI officials and the volunteer managers of the sites known as "wizards" (see the article about wizards). As old-timers with a lot of experience and some special powers that other users don't have, wizards are the experts at this task of maintaining order in the community. Their devotion and insight is to be admired. This article is dedicated to them. At times, the techniques I am suggesting can be applied by any user, wizard or not. At other times, I focus specifically on intervention strategies for wizards.

(2)

It's All Relative... or Not

Two factors will account for the universal and specific types of deviance - one technical, one social. Every chat community is built upon a unique software infrastructure that offers unique technical features for how people experience the environment and interact with each other. Misbehaving users will find a unique way to abuse almost any unique feature you offer them. If you build it, some will exploit it. For example, in the world of multimedia chat, snerts can use sounds and visual images to harass others, which would be impossible in text-only environments like IRC or AOL.

The social factor may be partially or completely independent of the technical aspects of the environment. Every culture and subculture has its own standards about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. According to the theory of "cultural relativity," what is considered normal behavior in one culture may not be considered normal in another, and vice versa. A particular type of "deviance" that is despised in one chat community may be a central organizing theme in another. For example, at the TPI/EC Palace sites, taking and wearing someone else's avatar (see avatar article) is akin to stealing their identity, while at non-TPI sites (e.g., servers purchased and run by individuals) it may be the game people love to play. Standards may be generally more restrictive in one community as compared to others. At the Welcome site, where new and often naive Palace users arrive for the first time, the rules about wearing inappropriately sexy avatars are much more strictly enforced than at the Mansion site, where the more experienced members hang out. Some critics have even suggested that the people at Mansion have become so desensitized and caught up in the "let people do their thing" philosophy that they don't see the smuttiness as an outsider would. Even though Palace is one client/server chat program, PalaceSpace consists of hundreds of different communities, each being culturally unique, each with its own values and standards.

Many Palace sites are privately owned. Some are commercial. This distinction can have an important impact on the deviance that is permitted. Some owners of private sites have strict policies about misbehaving users. Get out of line, and you quickly are booted from the community. The overseers of the site are more concerned about the congeniality and integrity of the community than about the rights or psyche of the ill-behaved user. At some commercially owned sites, there may be more leeway. The business depends on sales, so a "customer is always right" philosophy may lead to a greater tolerance of impoliteness and mischief. Booting someone from the site may be viewed as the measure of last resort. After all, snerts do buy, like anyone else. Of course, if they get too snertish, they may drive off other potential customers. So, ultimately, it's a delicate balancing act between maintaining a congenial community where strict rules weed out the snerts, and a "customer's always right" attitude that encourages sales. It's a business. It's a community. It's a business AND a community!

It's also important to remember that the large majority of chat communities are a leisure activity for most people - i.e., the community and all that is happening there is entertainment in the form of a recapitulation of the "real world." Deviant behavior may be a disruptive turnoff to some people, but for others it is part of the show.

The strategies for managing deviant behavior also can be classified according to the "technical" and "social" dimensions. At the Palace, software features such as the ability to mute, pin, kill, and gag were specifically designed to help members and wizards deal with annoying visitors. The more social interventions require interpersonal skills. How do you talk to a misbehaving adolescent, or an adult acting like one? That's the issue. In fact, the technical solutions alone are insufficient. Without a psychologically sophisticated person knowing when and how to use those tools, they may be applied inappropriately and thereby become just another form of abuse. What strategies are used - and how - will vary according to the culture.

(3)

Getting Known Through Anonymity

Much has been said lately about how anonymity on the internet "disinhibits" people. Feeling relatively safe with their real-world identity hidden, they say and do things they otherwise wouldn't normally say or do in "real life." In some cases, that seems to be a good thing. People may be more honest, open, generous, and helpful. In other cases, however, the nasty side of a person gets unleased. Hence the snert.

I'd like to give a slightly different spin to this "disinhibition through anonymity" concept. My basic premise is this: NO ONE WANTS TO BE COMPLETELY ANONYMOUS. No one wants to be totally invisible, with no name or identity or presence or interpersonal impact at all. Everyone wants and needs to express some aspect of who they are, to have others acknowledge and react to some aspect of their identity. In some cases, it's a benign feature of who you are. In some cases, not. Anonymity on the internet allows people to set aside some aspects of their identity in order to safely express others. Snerts need someone to react to and affirm their offensive behavior. This need is a bit different than simply catharting their frustrated drives, as the "eros-ridden" idea suggests. Snerts are trying to express some unresolved and warded-off feature of their troubled identity in an (often desperate) attempt to have it acknowledged. Unfortunately, they do it in a way that abuses other people. Under ideal conditions, they may be able to accept and work through those inner feelings and self-concepts that torture them. If not, they will continue to vent that ooze through their online snert identities, while safely dissociating it from their "real world" identity.

Does greater anonymity result in greater deviance? It's an interesting question. Because greater anonymity usually is associated with less accountability for one's actions, the answer would seem to be "yes." In the world of Palace, new users must register (pay) for the software before they can permanently acquire the ability to give themselves names and create custom avatars. Until then, their name is a number ("Guest 232") and their avatar a generic smiley face. The greater anonymity for guests does seem to result in their misbehaving more often than members. But members misbehave too. So there are other factors at work.

The higher prevalence of misbehavior among anonymous users may be more than just a "disinhibiting" effect. Rather than the anonymity simply "releasing" the nasty side of a person, the person may experience the anonymity - the lack of an identity - as toxic. Feeling frustrated about not being known or having a place in the group, the new user acts out that frustration in an antisocial manner. They need to feel that they have SOME kind of impact on others. It's not unlike the ignored child who starts acting "bad" in order to acquire attention from the parent, even if it's scolding and punishment. The squeakiest wheel. Humans, being humans, will almost always choose a connection to others over no connection at all, even if that connection is a negative one. Some snert guests may think (perhaps unconsciously) that their misbehavior is a justified retaliation against a community that they feel has stripped away their identity and alienated them. They reject because they feel rejected.

In rare cases, people who are well known in the community - even wizards and others of high status - may become the trouble-makers. Social psychology has demonstrated that people with power and status often have "idiosyncrasy credit" - they are given a bit more leeway in violating some of the less critical rules of the community. But they are not permitted to break the major rules - especially the rules that protect the integrity of the higher status group. For example, wizards may get away with wearing avatars that are not entirely appropriate, but giving the wizard password to an non-wizard cannot be forgiven. People are ousted from the wizard group for such offenses.

Ain't Misbehaving: The Lower End of Deviance

Deviant behavior occurs along a continuum from mild to severe. The most severe types probably are those that would be universally detested anywhere, anytime. The most mild types may be labeled as deviance or not depending upon the culture and the particular situation. For the most part, these mild and usually unintentional forms of deviance are the result of carelessness, playful mischief, immaturity, or simple ignorance. Correcting such misbehavior may be very easy. Briefly explaining the community's rules of etiquette, educating the user about the program, and/or encouraging the person, in a friendly way, to "ease up" should be enough. If that simple, benign intervention doesn't work, then the deviance may be more intentional and indicative of a personality problem.

Clueless Newbies

Users entering the environment for the first time may be very confused about even the most basic aspects of how to move and communicate. With all those visuals, sounds, avatar movements, and text coming at you, programs like the Palace can be a bit overwhelming for newbies who have never experienced multimedia chat. They may not even know where their avatar is on the screen or that people are talking to them. As a result of that confusion and a need to figure out what's happening to them, they may act inappropriately. People tend to regress and exaggerate their behavior when disoriented. Some newbies blurt out inappropriate statements ("What the hell is going on here?"). Some keep hitting their return key, expecting that to somehow save them. Hyperactive people may bounce their avatar around the screen ("Gee, how does this work?), which is an annoying distraction and tends to flood the server. A common problem is blocking. Not knowing where they are, or how to move, or ignorant of this faux pas, the newbie sits his or her avatar on top of another user's avatar. It's a violation of personal space, which really annoys some users.

Possible Interventions - Clueless newbies usually don't require disciplinary action, but rather a little help. Unfortunately, wizards sometimes mistake their unintentional blocking for abusive blocking and may pin them, especially if everyone else in the room is complaining and the guest fails to respond to the wizard's inquiries. Wizards have discussed the possibility of a "nudge" command that would gently shift a user's avatar an inch or two to the side. Often, simply addressing newbies by name, in order to get their attention, and saying "just point and click to move" is enough to save the day.

One obstacle in helping newbies is the fact that they may speak a different language. If unsure, wizards can check the user's IP address to determine where she is coming from. Unfortunately, if there indeed is a language barrier, there's not much anyone can do except hope that the newbie can figure things out for himself. As chat communities become more multi-national, the Tower of Babble problem may grow.

(5)

Culture Clash

In the manual he wrote for wizards, Jim Bumgardner (see the interview with him) pointed out that some users come to Palace from other chat communities, such as IRC or AOL. They bring a different culture with them. For example, on AOL it is acceptable to periodically ask the users in a room "M or F?", "Age/Location?", or "Any SWFs out there?" At the Palace, such lines traditionally have been considered rather tacky. These kinds of pithy probes evolved in communities where there were relatively large and changing populations, so users developed such tools to quickly identify other people they wished to engage. Palace communities tend to be smaller and more stable, so people often experience these questions as intrusive and impolite. However, as Palace communities get larger and more diverse, such behavior may become more acceptable. As immigrants arrive and necessities change, cultures evolve by absorbing the norms and values brought from other cultures.

Possible Interventions - The introduction of "inappropriate" behaviors from other cultures will lead to one of two possible outcomes. The residents may attempt to discourage the immigrants' ways and motivate them to do as the Romans do. In keeping with the mischievous, playful atmosphere endorsed by the the original Palace philosophy (see the article on the history of Palace), Bumgardner jokingly suggested that the reply to such questions as "M/F?" should be "I am zygote and I live in a tea kettle." No doubt, the immigrants would be rather confused by this reply - i.e., culture clash. The other possible outcome is to embrace the new ways - i.e., the melting pot.

(6)

Mischief

As I just mentioned, Bumgardner originally intended Palace to be a playful, somewhat mischievous place - a place where people could feel that they were "getting away with something." Playing jokes on fellow users is acceptable behavior. Naive newbies make for easy targets. Sometimes, it may just be a good-natured prank. Sometimes it may have a hostile edge. It's a thin line between acceptable mischief and unacceptable abuse. For example, by "spoofing" someone with the "msay" command, you can throw your voice to make the text balloon pop out of someone else's head. Or you can make the words hang in mid-air with no body attached. Making your friend say "I am a zygote and live in a tea kettle" could be a hoot. But some people use spoofing to mistreat others. A member, rather inappropriately, kept putting the words "I'm gay!" into the mouth of another user as he was trying to carry on a conversation with me. Using msay like this may indicate the person's inability to contain their own troublesome thoughts or feelings, while also being

unable to own up to those thoughts or feelings for fear of how others will react.

Sometimes, it's hard even for sympathetic people to resist the antics and game-playing. One night at the Mansion, although trying to remain a neutral observer, I eventually found myself as an accomplice to another member in a prank on newbies. We set up a free-standing ("dummy") female prop in the spa pool and used "msay" to talk THROUGH the prop while also talking TO it as if it were another user. Essentially, it was a virtual ventriloquist act. "Honey" (the prop) acted rather seductively towards the guests. Several rather responsive newbies thought it was a "real" avatar with a real women behind it - and they eagerly took the bait. It was quite funny, although perhaps a bit insensitive to the naive guests who were unaware of the msay command.

Possible Interventions - The distinction between a prank and abuse is a judgment call. Different people and communities will set different standards. Ultimately, it's the target of the prank who should be consulted. If a person is hurt or insulted, then an intervention should be considered - unless the community and the business behind it is willing to accept the fact that some of its (probably soon to exit) members are being offended. The mischievous element of Palace philosophy may work best in a small community where intimacy acts as a buffer between pranks and abuse. As a community gets larger and more strict rules of etiquette become necessary, the mischievous philosophy may fade A more extreme intervention would be the removal of such software features like spoofing that may lead to abusive behavior - but then some of the fun, and some of the basic premises of Palace philosophy, would disappear.

Mischievous people often are testing the limits. They want to see how far they can push the envelope before they "get caught." Usually, they respond quickly to the law once it is layed down before them. Part of them may even be comforted by the fact that they can't get away with anything.

(7)

Graffiti

Palatians have the software ability to paint on the background graphics that make up a room. It allows people to interact with the environment, play (sometimes mischievously) with each other, and be creative. However, painting - like spoofing - is another example of the "If you build it some will abuse it" principle. Some users adorn the walls with obscene drawings or words. Others might smear black over an entire room, leaving new users totally confused as to where they are and what's happening. Freud would love to label them as "anal expulsive personalities." In order to vent their anger about feeling over-controlled and helpless, they deposit - often secretly and in defiance of authority - their unacceptable stuff all over everyone else.

Possible Interventions - Be the user's mother and clean up after him (which probably reflects some of his unconscious needs). Unless, of course, the perpetrator can be caught in the act. Often shame is a primary feature of the expulsive graffiti "artist's" personality, so simply getting caught and gently reprimanded might be enough to correct his ways. If this doesn't work, then a more resistant kind of deviance is at work, requiring the stronger interventions discussed later in this paper. The most drastic intervention would be the removal of the painting feature. But again, this would mean removing some of the Palace fun and philosophy along with the excrement.

(8)

Adolescent Antics

In the wizard manual, Bumgardner points out that young users (adolescents and preadolescents) may take delight in the freedom of Palace. They use it as an opportunity to act out. It's like that freshman year of college when young'uns are unleashed, for the first time, from the rules and regulations of home. For example, adolescent users might get a kick out of seeing profanities pop out of their avatar's mouth for all the world to see. Or they may play the flatulent "wind" sound many times over (a sure sign of an adolescent male). Or they may act out what they imagine is sexy adult behavior and ask "Anyone want to screw?" Acting inane is the way to entertain themselves and their friends. They may be testing the limits to see how far they can go in annoying other users, especially the wizard authority figures. Particularly problematic are the anonymous adolescent guests who don't have or want to spend the money on registering. They have no commitment to the community - and probably feel frustrated and hostile about not belonging - so they get their thrills by abusing people and provoking responses. If it's in violation of the rules, it's more exciting and fun. This probably is a more serious problem than simple adolescent antics.

Possible Interventions - The level of adolescent acting out can vary widely. For relatively normal kids who are simply experimenting with cyberspace freedom, a gentle reprimand and reminder of social etiquette may be sufficient

("Simmer down, kids!"). Essentially, you are reminding them that this is not a video game but a real social setting, with real people, where rules of conduct still apply. Psychologists would call it "reality testing." Adolescents who simply are testing the limits of the rules tend to follow them once they are enforced by authorities. In fact, some adolescents, secretly frightened by their freedoms, WANT the comfort and reassurance of knowing what they can and cannot do. They test the limits BECAUSE they want someone to set them. A quick pin should be the strongest measure needed to snap them out of their misbehavior. If that doesn't work, then once again we're talking about a more resistant type of deviance that requires the even stronger interventions discussed later.

(9)

Parodists

On his web site (http://www.rahul.net/natpix/wiz.html) where he discusses problematic Palace users, the well-known Palatian know as Dr. Xenu describes the "parodist." In an attempt to be humorous, some users mimic the behavior of an abusive person. The parodist intends it as playful mischief, although it probably speaks to his/her identification with the snert and a vicarious wish to act like one.

Possible Interventions - The problem is that it's easy at first glance to mistake the parodist for the real thing. "I have seen at least one instance," Dr. X says, "where a tired wizard, weary from a session of endless kills, killed such a user without warning. Perhaps this is why there is a sign at the airport asking you to refrain from talking about bombs at the metal detector. This is another good reason why it is good to talk to users before killing them. The point is that after you've met and killed 13 [snerts], it is easy to pigeonhole people - especially Guests who are wearing the same props - don't. The '15 yr old' [snert] you are killing may actually be a 45 year old psychiatrist."

(10)

Wizard Wannabes

Becoming a wizard is a sign of status and accomplishment at many Palace sites. It means you are part of the inner circle, that you truly belong. It means you have some powers that others don't. Wanting to attain that status is an understandable wish, but some users become a bit insistent and downright pushy in their quest. Many wizards have grown tired of hearing people ask "how do I become a wizard." As a result, an implicit rule has evolved: If someone asks to be a wizard, especially if they PERSIST, they will not be invited to become one. The Don't Ask Rule also rests on the assumption that more mature users - those who aren't determined to get some power and most likely abuse it - are the ones who will be more discreet about seeking wizardship and more wise wizards should they become one.

Possible Interventions - Some users may be overly eager beneath their questions about becoming a wizard, some may simply be curious. It's not always easy to tell the difference. Although wizards may get tired repeating themselves - and may wish to tease or toy with the person - the most polite policy is to briefly explain how wizards are chosen. Users also can be pointed towards documentation that explains this topic in more detail. For example, Dr. Xenu's web site and my article about wizards contain some suggestions for the wizard wannabe.

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Deviant Enclaves

Apparently "deviant" subcultures may evolve within specific locations of the larger community. On the TPI/EC servers, for example, there was a period of time when small groups of "weird" adolescents were hanging out at the Members Palace and within specific rooms at that site (subcultures often claim specific rooms as their territory). The "weirdness" consisted mostly of off-color language and avatars that looked menacing, bizarre, or anti-social in theme. No doubt the off-putting quality of their scenario helped define the identity of their group as well as firmed up the boundaries of their territory by making it a bit uncomfortable for outsiders to join in. These groups tended to form at the Members site for two basic reasons: (1) that site was relatively under-populated and isolated from the much more active Main Mansion site, hence leaving open a space for non-mainstream subgroups to gather, (2) the wizards infrequently supervised that site, so there were few authority figures around to inhibit subculture deviance.

Because they mostly kept to themselves, these counterculture groups posed no particular problem to the overall community. If an outsider happened to stumble onto their territory, the response varied. Sometimes the group was mildly hostile or ignored the newcomer. Sometimes they were quite pleasant. MSLady, a TPI wizard, visited one of these groups and came to this conclusion:

So many times, kids that see themselves as "different" from the rest at these ages do not realize what makes them feel so isolated is actually the fact they are more mature, studious, inquisitive, or talented than their peers. They end up branding themselves as "weird" until they realize they don't fit in because they are drawn to pursuing computer, art, literature, or whatever while their peers talk on the phone! They then feel they have to express this "weirdness"...make a "statement"...whatever.... You kinda have to idle into their realm by getting to known them. It's so amazing to find out that much of the noise they are making means nothing more than just normal teen conformity, and how reasonable they can be after they drop their guard and just talk. I had the most enjoyable talk with "TheDemon" early the other morning. I admit his whole "act" has made me a bit hesitant to approach him previously!

Possible Interventions - If the larger community adheres to a "Live and Let Live" philosophy, then deviant enclaves may be left alone as long as they remain within their territory and do not abuse visitors. Problems arise when some citizens stumble upon the subculture and begin to complain to the authorities about how the neighborhood is "going downhill." As traffic increases to the underpopulated areas where deviant enclaves tend to develop, the enclave may naturally dissolve or move on. They probably prefer isolated areas where they will be left alone. If a more active intervention is necessary, the first effort might follow the insights of MsLady: make an effort to befriend the group and benignly suggest that they "tone it down a bit." Or suggest another room or site to where they could relocate. Maybe it's even possible to offer them a specific place to call their own. Groups that are more troublesome to the community and resistant to reason may fall under the category of "gangs" which require stronger medicine.

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Sleepers

If you follow the rules of etiquette, you put up BRB sign ("be right back") when you leave or aren't paying attention to your computer. Due to either ignorance of this rule, forgetfulness, or deliberate and inconsiderate neglect, "sleepers" fail to do this, leaving their avatar on screen sitting motionless and silent. Other users may not know what to make of the fact that you seem about as responsive as a post in winter - maybe you're BRB, maybe you're lagged out, maybe you're very shy, a passive voyeur, or a snob. As it is, cyberspace is an ambiguous place for social interaction. With the lack of face-to-face cues, people's imagination can get the best of them when they try to figure out what other's are thinking and feeling. Sleeping exacerbates this ambiguity. Sleeping is especially inconsiderate in a room that is crowded or full so other more social users can't get in.

Possible Interventions - Whispering may be an effective way to get the sleepers' attention, if they are paying any. If they don't explain themselves, ask if lag is the problem. Even in severe lag they might be able to get through with a simple "yes" or "lag!." If they are still unresponsive, it might be helpful to explain the situation to other people in the room who seem perplexed by the doltish avatar. If the sleeper ever comes back to life, you might find out what happened, and, if necessary, educate the user about the brb sign. In the wizard manual, Bumgardner suggests that sleepers be ignored for about 20 minutes (unless they're in a private room, in which case they might be an eavesdropper. At that point, whisper to confirm that they are alive, giving 5 minutes for a response. If not, kill them for zero minutes, which allows them to sign back on whenever they wish. Some wizards believe this strategy is a "mercy kill" for people caught in lag. Before disconnecting the user, the wizard may whisper (humorously) to him that "I'm going to free you from your lag bonds and you can come right back." Sometimes reconnecting does improve the lag.

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Ghosts

Dr. Xenu describes how the "ghost" looks like a sleeper, except that the user's computer may have disconnected from the site in some nasty way (e.g., a local power failure), leaving behind only the avatar as the empty shell of the person's former presence. Ghosts will not move or respond to anything around them because they are not connected to the user or even the user's machine. They're forms without any substance (or they're busy working on unfinished business from their past lives). In this case, it's probably not the user's fault at all. The deviance lies in the machines.

Possible Interventions - If the avatar is completely unresponsive, Dr. Xenu suggests using the "finger" command. It can trigger an automated reply from the sleeper's finger script, but will have no effect on a ghost. Wizards may similarly use other scripts in an attempt to make the avatar "say" something - which, again, may work for a sleeper but not a ghost. When detecting a ghost, you're doing more than just trying to figure out if there's a person there. You're trying to determine if there's even a MACHINE there.

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It's a lot easier to create your own Palace site than it is to entice people to come visit or develop a stable community there. Some site owners try to recruit users from the more busy sites by announcing their site and displaying ads. Some salesmanship may be acceptable, and probably a good thing for the development of PalaceSpace as a whole. But there is competition among sites for visitors, so persistent attempts to draw people away will not be appreciated by the site owner. Some overly eager people spam the room with signs and heavy-handed proselytizing, which turns into a distracting nuisance. Wizards have joked about automated avatars ("bots") that would roam a site spouting commercials. It would be like R2D2 rolling through your living room projecting holograms of Pepsi in front of your face. Not a pleasant thought.

Possible Interventions - Whether or not to intervene with a user bearing commercials will depend on how much of a nuisance that user is. If people complain, then it's probably a problem. It also depends on the culture of the site - whether it's one that encourages the colonization of PalaceSpace, or one that mostly is looking out for itself. Some proselytizers will respond to a polite suggestion to ease up. The more diehard types might require stronger measures, like gag, pin, or even kill.

Trouble-Makers: The Higher End of Deviance

At the upper end of deviance we find users who are deliberately trying to make trouble and/or resisting any benign attempts to talk them into behaving properly. These users may include relatively "normal" people who insist on doing things THEIR (inappropriate) way, as well as people who are - well, to use a less than technical term - socially challenged. If we do use some technical terms, we're probably talking about personality disorders, such as the anti-social, paranoid, passive-aggressive, and narcissistic types.

I remember an old Kung Fu TV episode where one of the masters at the Buddhist temple describes how to deal with an attacker. While we watch a string of quite unsuccessful students go at the master one after another, the narrator says something like, "Avoid rather than divert; divert rather than restrain; restrain rather than maim; maim rather than kill."

This strategy of moving from mild to strong interventions also is a good one for dealing with trouble-makers in cyberspace. If possible, try to prevent deviance from occurring in the first place (an ounce of prevention....). When it does occur, first try talking and reasoning with the offenders - maybe even try to redirect or rehabilitate them. If that doesn't work, restrain (pin, gag, propgag) before temporarily disconnecting them (kill). And temporarily disconnect before permanently disconnecting (ban).

1. See No Evil: Deviance Involving Offensive Avatars

The beauty of a multimedia chat environment is how the graphics enhance its psychological power. The problem is that things can get TOO graphic. For some people, the anonymity of cyberspace makes it a sexy space, so they will take the opportunity to create avatars (also called "props" at the Palace) that test the limits of decency. In some cases, users innocently will wear avatars that they think are sexy in a cute sort of way, without realizing some (but not all) users are offended by them. Such people usually are not trying to make trouble. They may be trying to draw attention to themselves, communicating an interest in flirting or cybersex, expressing a sensual/sexual aspect of their personality (i.e., exhibitionist tendencies), or simply showing off their skills in avatar creation. If asked politely, they usually will remove the naughty attire - and perhaps even be apologetic and embarrassed about it.

The more serious problem are the users who wear obviously offensive avatars that are intended to shock and victimize. They are looking for attention, control, and power by abusing others and violating the common sense rules of decency.

Setting Avatar Standards

One of the biggest problems in controlling naughty props is defining exactly what is "naughty?" Views will vary widely among people and cultures, both online and real-world. The supreme court has a difficult time determining what is pornographic, so the job is no easier for people running the show in virtual worlds. In small communities, official standards may not be needed since the implicit norms and social pressures of the group will keep people in line. As the population gets bigger, official and publicized rules may become necessary. Setting these standards will go hand-in-hand with defining the philosophy and purpose of the community. The most basic question: is the site for adults or kids?

At the TPI/EC Welcome Palace - where a demographically wide variety of new users arrive - the rules about avatars are rather strict. It makes good business sense to keep the first Palace experience as benign as possible for as many people as possible. The rules are less strict at the Main Mansion site, where more experienced users hang out and the community tries to remain true to the original philosophy that Palace is a somewhat mischievous place where people should be allowed to "make of it what they will" of the environment. The strictness of the rules also may vary from room to room at a particular site. Very public areas (for example, where users arrive) may require more stringent standards than rooms with less traffic. Private rooms - those which can be locked - may be exempt from these rules. At the Palace, anything goes in a private room, as long as all the people in the room consent.

The wizards engaged in many long and sometimes heated (pun intended) debates over setting rules about pornographic props. Listed below are some of their ideas. The more of these strategies adopted, the more rigorous the program for controlling inappropriate props. Setting rules, and making sure people are aware of them, fall under that first Kung Fu category of preventing a problem before it even occurs. Here are the strategies:

- Create clear and specific rules about what avatars are inappropriate as well as what ones are appropriate (people need to know what they CAN do as well as what they can't)

- Make the standards public and easily accessed by the users, as in a "rules room" where the rules can be automatically displayed

- Make the publicly displayed rules clear but concise. People may not read or may get confused by complex policies. A separate and more detailed (written) version of the rules may be needed by the superusers (e.g., wizards) who must enforce them. However, make sure these two versions of the rules are consistent with each other.

- In addition to the specific rules that are publicly displayed, provide a "short-hand" rule of thumb for users. For example, inform the users that acceptable avatars are anything you would normally expect to see someone wearing in a metropolitan area during the summer, or on prime time TV.

- Public signs based on well-know rating systems may help orient users ("This room is rated G"). This strategy might be especially useful if the rules vary from one room to another at a given site. One problem: few, if any, rating systems are recognized internationally.

- Contrary to the "Do as I say, not as I do" principle, authority figures (i.e., the wizards) always should adhere to the standards.

- To insure that the authorities (wizards) understand the standards that they must enforce, create a private room or web page where they can see examples of acceptable and unacceptable avatars, and/or have meetings where they can show and discuss examples of "borderline" avatars (of course, this results in an ironic situation similar to Supreme Court justices viewing pornographic movies!).

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Pros and Cons of Setting Avatar Standards

At the Palace, setting standards made it a bit easier for wizards to uniformly and fairly manage the types of avatars that users wore. Much less was left open to the vagaries of individual judgment. Having written, publicly accessible rules also gave wizards a handy alibi when they had to enforce them. If users argued, wizards could simply deflect the debate by saying, "Those are the rules. I'm sorry. We all have to follow them." Generally speaking, though, most people need and like having some rules. They feel more secure, more comfortable, knowing what they can and can't do.

Attempting to create rules about avatars can lead to some problems. As is the case in any classification system, no matter how precisely you try to define "acceptable" and "unacceptable" avatars, there will always be borderline or ambiguous cases that don't fit the categories. This can result in heated debates (is an avatar of someone pointing a gun at you acceptable?). No matter how precisely you define the standards, people will vary in how they interpret and apply them, resulting in inconsistent interventions, conflicts. and more debates. No matter how fair or clear you try to make the rules, someone will not agree with them. The result? You guessed it- even more debates. When some superusers (wizards) enforce the rules while others don't, a "bad guy/good guy" perception may develop among the users while arguments flare up among the superusers. It wouldn't be a surprise if conflicts about the new classification system became more of a problem than the problem with avatars that the system was intended to solve. At the Palace, some wizards noted that becoming overly preoccupied with rules and regulations could damage the sense of freedom that was part of the original Palace philosophy. The rules about naughty avatars could also have a paradoxical effect on some wizards. As one wizard joked, "I now find myself peering at the screen searching for stray pubic hairs or nipples. All my magnifying glasses are steamed up. I've taken so many cold showers I've caused a drought. It's turned me into a pervert."

Some of these problems are associated with the initial process of creating new standards where none existed before. In the long run, many of these problems may subside as the bugs are worked out and everyone becomes familiar with (and hopefully accepts) the rules.

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Intervening When a Naughty Av Appears ("propgaging")

Members and Guests at the Palace have no way to deal with an avatar that offends them, other than attempting to convince the person to take it off or leaving the room. Although this software option frequently has been suggested, they cannot block out another person's avatar similar to how they can block out someone else's text messages ("mute"). Wizards do have the ability to "propgag" - which forces the users avatar into the generic smiley face and cripples the ability to wear any custom-made avatar until the propgag command is turned off. There are some individual differences in how wizards deal with a user wearing an inappropriate avatar, but the generally accepted, basic strategy goes something like this:

(1) Ask the person to remove the avatar and explain why. Be polite and always whisper, even if the person is talking out loud.

(2) If the user refuses, remove the avatar yourself using the "propgag" command. If the avatar is obviously obscene, propgag first then explain (so other people don't have to look at it while you talk). If the user agrees not to wear the avatar, turn off the propgag. Some wizards like to propgag then immediately turn off the propgag.

(3) If they put the avatar on again, propgag them again and let them know that they have been propgagged (a brief explanation is important, since the user still sees the avatar while propgagged even though no one else can).

(4) In order to avoid the users attempts to debate the issue, some wizards like to leave the room quickly after propgagging and explaining why. If the user does attempt to argue, state that you cannot debate the issue. Simply point to the rules that must be enforced. Let the person know that he/she might want to visit other Palace sites where that type of avatar is acceptable. Giving people a choice or an alternative in a situation where they feel restrained is always a good strategy. Users who persist in arguing should be treated as a "freedom-fighter."

(5) Users who persist in wearing inappropriate avatars may be propgagged indefinitely during their stay at the site, or killed. Usually only users that have a known track record of wearing particularly nasty props are disconnected.

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Second Opinions about Avatars

If wizards are unsure about whether a borderline prop violate the rules or not, they may page the other wizards and ask for a second (or even a third and forth) opinion. Some believe it's a good idea to get that opinion first before speaking to the user. Otherwise, "discussing' the issue could be perceived as harassment. The decision among wizards about a borderline avatar occurs privately, in whispers, to avoid embarrassing the user. Wizards also like to avoid publicly debating, disagreeing, or over-riding each others decisions. It's a good idea to present a unified front to the community. If a user comes to a wizard to ask if an avatar is acceptable, some wizards like to page the other wizards to see if it's a case of a "splitting" - i.e., a user who attempts to play wizards off against each other.

<div align="right">(19)</div>

Flashing and Prop-Dropping

Not being the bravest of souls, the flasher quickly clicks on a naughty av, then clicks it off. It might be a playful tease, or a peek-a-boo attempt to draw attention, surprise, shock, or thumb your nose at the rules. Obviously, flashers are not as easy to catch as users who parade around in their malapropos costume.

Even less brave than the flasher, a prop-dropper will toss an obscene prop into an empty room and then run, so as not to get caught. The exhibitionist and rebellious psychology of the prop-dropper is probably similar to the flasher, with the exception that they attempt to dissociate themselves from their dropping. A Freudian would love to speculate about the "anal expulsive" nature of their personality. Quite literally, they deposit their unsuitable stuff so others are forced to clean up after them. It's an act of defiant anger, and probably disguises underlying feelings of shame.

<div align="right">(20)</div>

Hate and Violence Avatars

Unfortunately, people use avatars not just to inappropriately express their sexual drives, but their aggressive ones as well. Hate avatars might involve anti-gay and anti-women sentiment, religious prejudice, Nazi swastikas, or pictures of a guest smiley face with a bloody ax planted in its head. Violent avatars can span the range from menacing figures bearing weapons to mutilated bodies.

Many of the issues concerning sexual avatars apply also to hate and violence avatars: the importance of individual and cultural differences in defining what is unacceptable, the pros and cons of setting standards, and the techniques for intervening when these types of avatars appear. Controversies about political correctness may surface when dealing with the mild versions of "hate" avatars. When creating and enforcing rules about acceptable avs, it's probably a good idea to keep in mind that western (American) culture tends to more accepting of public displays of violence than of sex - unfortunately so.

<div align="right">(21)</div>

Abusive Blocking

Members consider it a social faux pas to place your avatar on top of or too close to another person's prop. Unless the person is a friend who's in the mood to be close, it's an invasion of personal space. "Please get off me!" and "You're sitting on me!" are two common complaints. Some naive users (mostly guests) do this without knowing it is inappropriate, or the person may be lagging and unable to move. But some hostile people deliberately accost others by blocking or poking at their avatars. Often snerts who are verbally abusing others will use blocking to supplement their attacks, or will resort to blocking when others try to ignore their offensive language. Blocking is one of those unique examples in which it is not the content of the avatar that is offensive, but rather how it moves (jumping your avatar frenetically about the screen also is considered inappropriate because it is both distracting and a source of lag).

Blockers first need to be politely informed of avatar etiquette. If they don't move or reply verbally, they might be helplessly lagged. In the case of obvious abusive blocking, there's not much a user can do except ignore the person and hope that he gives up and goes away... or page a wizard. Wizards have the special ability to "pin" a user's avatar. When pinned, the avatar is stripped down to the generic smiley face, wrapped in tiny visual chains, and trapped into the corner of the screen until the wizard unpins it. Usually wizards will reason (via whispers) with blockers while they are

immobilized. If the blocker repents and/or promises to behave, the wizard will set him free. Blockers who persist in assaulting people, even after the pinning, will be killed.

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Eavesdroppers

Ironically, eavesdroppers (a term coined by Bumgardner) are not deviant in the content or behavior of their avatars, but rather in the fact that they don't have one. By reducing their avatars to very tiny or camouflaged images - and their usernames to only one character - they try to become invisible so they can secretly listen in on conversations. They may search for couples who are alone in a room talking, or wait in a room (usually the private rooms) for other users to enter. As a type of lurker, they are acting on voyeuristic (and perhaps schizoid) tendencies to avoid intimacy and gain a sense of advantage and power over others. I wonder if chronic eavesdroppers last very long at the Palace. People enjoy so much the ability to express themselves visually through their avatars - and the camaraderie revolving around that activity - that it seems self-defeating to avoid this opportunity by hiding. Maybe that says something about eavesdropping. It *is* self-defeating and, literally, self-negating.

Bumgardner suggests that it's a good idea from time to time to warn other users about eavesdroppers. The best way to detect their presence is to keep an eye on the counter that lists the number of users that are present in a room. An eavesdropper who won't leave a private room when requested will be warned, and killed, if necessary. In the case of a chronic but elusive eavesdropper, undercover work by wizards might be considered.

2. Speak No Evil: Deviance Involving Offensive Language

Indecent language is another deviant behavior that spans the range from mild to severe. Relatively benign examples involve "colorful" expressions in which less than polite words are used to convey emphasis and emotion. No particular person is the "target" of the colorful expressions and the words are not intended to offend, although they might insult some people. In the middle range are the lascivious users who try to seduce other users who are much less than interested in their advances. Due to inexperience or a basically tactless personality, their come-ons often are not at all subtle. Higher up on the continuum, dirty mouths are deliberately aimed at antagonizing a specific person - as in the case of the breather, the stalker, guest bashers, wizard bashers and, of course, the ubiquitous acting out teenager. Some offensive talkers may try to antagonize a whole room. More rarely, exhibitionist users may engage in verbal cybersex out in the open.

The subjective impression of some wizards is that foul talkers more often tend to be the guests. The generic smiley face - with a number instead of a name - feels left out, alienated, and hostile. Abusive language is one way to have an impact on people and wield some power. Some foul talkers are deliberately trying to get themselves killed. These rather masochistic self-destroyers gain some control over their alienated condition by deliberately setting up a situation where they will be disconnected. Once booted, they may feel justified in their rejection of the community that rejected them.

<div align="right">(23)</div>

Less Anonymity, Less Bad Mouthing

If anonymity does fuel the tendency to mouth off, then one preventative strategy would be to decrease anonymity. At the TPI sites, guests were given the opportunity to become "trial members." For a limited time before registering, they could experiment with creating avatars and changing their username. These trial members were much less likely to use offensive language than the smiley-faced guests. With a name and an av to identify themselves, they felt more like they belonged. They had some control over their role in the community, something to talk about (avs), and more to do to keep their otherwise idle hands busy. They were more interested in learning the ways of Palace than in being a snert.

<div align="right">(24)</div>

The Purely Human Intervention with Foul Talkers

In the more mild cases of scatologia, a simple whisper about etiquette may be enough to curb the user's mouth ("please don't use profanity here"). A friendly or at the very least POLITE approach is preferred. Curt or nasty barbs launched at the bad mouther might add fuel to the snert's fire, especially for stubborn and oppositional people. They may feel like a

reprimanded child, and get more angry. In what becomes a positive feedback loop, nastiness breeds more nastiness. This principle also holds true for scripts that display over the snerts head an automated message or image that's designed to humiliate or chastise him. Humiliation tactics most likely will backfire.

Because foul talkers are looking to shock and provoke others, giving them NO reaction at all might be enough to extinguish their unpleasant behavior. According to operant theory, there may be a momentary INCREASE in their snertish talk once the cold shoulder begins (a last ditched attempt to provoke a reaction), but eventually they'll get bored and move on.

Some designers of multimedia environments (like Jim Bumgardner and Randy Farmer) believe in the philosophy of letting social pressure curb bad language, rather than crafting software to mechanically eliminate it. If there isn't sufficient social pressure to stop the problem, then perhaps it isn't a problem. It's a feature of the subculture. However, some gnarly users won't respond to social pressure or that friendly piece of advice. They're not interested in the community or simply being colorful in their language. They want to abuse. Although the first and best strategy should always be a purely social/personal attempt to reach the reasonable and benign part of any offender, some software tools sure come in handy.

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"I Can't Hear You!" (the mute command)

Each Palace member has the power to "mute" any other user(s). All typed text of the shunned user(s) will be automatically vanquished from your screen. If everyone in the room mutes one particularly repugnant person, that person is effectively speechless. This rarely happens since there is always someone who is entertained by such snerts, eager to take them on, indifferent, or doesn't know about muting. The beauty of the mute command is that it upholds the principle of "Have it your way." If you want to hear him, you can. If not, click him off. "Sometimes, I just TELL them that I'm muting them," one user reported, "then I don't respond to anything they say.... It can be quite hysterical."

Unless you inform the foul talker that you have muted him, he doesn't know because he CAN see his own words. It's something like a Twilight Zone episode in which an obnoxiously loquacious man talks and talks and talks, but the only victim in a room of unresponsive people is his own ears. Poetic justice? It may be possible, from the standpoint of software design, to make the offender's words invisible to everyone, even to himself. However, giving the person an opportunity to say something nice, rather than not being able to say anything at all, may be a better strategy for extinguishing the bad words and leaving the door open for good ones.

The down side to muting is that inexperienced users do not know about it. Education then is the key. When inappropriate language begins to surface, some wizards like to announce to the room how to use the mute command. Being tactful, they don't mention the offending snert by name. When they hear that they can be silenced, some snerts stop. Some users DO know about the mute command but decide to page a wizard rather than use it. Perhaps they would like to see the snert "punished" and enjoy witnessing the drama of the powerful "good guys" defeating the "bad guys."

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Wizard Meets the Foul Talker (gagging and killing)

Wizards have a tool that the ordinary user does not - the "gag" command, which will silence a bad-mouther's typed text so no one can see it (although the snert CAN see it). Before gagging, some wizards like to politely inform snerts of the site rules about foul language to see if they will stop on their own. Other wizards prefer to gag immediately (especially when the language is very foul) in order to protect everyone's ears from further abuse. Then they discuss the matter with the silenced snert, and then turn off the gag. If the snert persists in uttering garbage, wizards may repeat the procedure, just in case the snert missed the point. If the snert still persists, there may be a final warning and ultimately a kill. In some cases wizards may leave the offender gagged until they relent and promise to be behave. Two hour gags may be set for people who refuse to respond to the wizard or resist curbing their abuse. Clever snerts know that they can disconnect from the site and then sign back on, which undoes the gag. This loophole leaves some wizards wishing for a TIMED gag command that would endure despite such maneuvers.

After being killed (disconnected), some very determined snerts may sign on again in order to offer a sequel to their obnoxious ploys. Wizards usually will continue to kill them until they give up. Very persistent abusers may be reported to TPI/EC, along with excerpts from the log to verify the offender's persistent abusive language... just in case the

company later gets "complaints" about how the offender was treated unfairly. Tit for tat, some foul talkers (as well as other misbehavers) threaten to report the "unjust" wizard to the company. In these conflicts, which some members experience as sibling rivalry, TPI/EC can become the symbol of the parent ("I'm gonna tell on you!").

As always, it's a good idea to politely let snerts know what actions are being taken against them (gag, kill) and what that entails. Being left in the dark about disciplinary procedures may generate confusion and more acting out. People who want to argue about their rights to free speech are known as "freedom fighters" and may require slightly different interventions.

In order to avoid embarrassing the snert (which also may escalate their antics), wizards will always whisper when they speak to them. Because this leaves the other users guessing about whether anything is being done to control the offender, wizards might mention to the room that they are dealing with the problem. The wizard might also take this opportunity to mention the mute command.

If wizards aren't in the room, members usually will page them to inform them about a foul talker. But not always. Wizards have debated the possibility of a script that would automatically detect vulgar words and expressions, and then relay those words and the name of the offender into the paging system. The informed wizard could then pop into the room to intervene. A number of complications and controversies emerged in the debate. Would wizards be flooded with a barrage of naughty words that clog the paging system? Should the script detect whispers as well as public speech? If so, would that include whispers in private rooms and private cybersex encounters? Would people feel violated and controlled if they found out that their speech was being automatically monitored and relayed to all the wizards? Isn't it simply eavesdropping? Speaking across rooms to offenders (aka "ESPing," which would be a temptingly easy way to intervene) surely would give away the fact that users were being wiretapped. So wizards would have to first go to the room and observe in-person the foul talk, wouldn't they? Even then, the "secret" about automated monitoring would eventually leak out to the community, resulting in a paranoid, Big Brother atmosphere.

These issues were never fully resolved. As we'll see, automated interventions tend to generate much debate. Automated detection of "bad" words is a particularly tricky issue.

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Time Out in the Rules Room

One possibility is to send foul talkers to a "rules room" where they are temporarily held captive while the rules of the site are automatically displayed for them. Their ability to converse with other users also may be suspended while they are learning their lesson. The users-in-charge (such as wizards) may send the offenders to the room, or scripts can detect lewd words and automatically deposit the offender into the time-out tutoring session. Whether this time-out method is effective or not depends on how infantilizing the experience feels to the offenders. If the display of rules sounds like it is "talking down" to them, or contains harshly reprimanding language, they may feel like they are being treated like a child, which might escalate their snertish behavior. The very idea of being timed-out reminds people of being a child sent to the corner, which can backfire. A purely automated punishment may aggravate rather than rehabilitate some people because there is no opportunity to explain or defend themselves (that ol' feeling of helplessness which makes people act crazy). A more detailed discussion of timed-out lessons appears later in this article. And as we'll see next, a purely automated detection and intervening with nasty language is a complicated business.

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Automated Mouthwash and Word Substitutions

The beauty of computers is their ability to do simple, repetitive tasks faster and more efficiently than humans. If you want to eliminate unpleasant expressions from a chat environment, apply the computer's strength to this relatively straightforward task. At the Main Mansion site, if you type "fuck" or "shit" people will end up seeing "f***" and "s***" on their screen (assuming they have this "censor" script turned on in their client program). Essentially, the computer washed your mouth out with asterisks. Simple, easy. A variation on this strategy is a script that detects bad language, gags, and warns the user. However, there are some complications associated with this automated mouthwashing:

> - Some (probably adolescent) users swear away just to activate the script. They think it's entertaining. Over and over again everyone sees the partially bleeped naughty word. Automated intervening has fueled the fire.

- More curious and mischievous users will say "F***" over and over again in order to figure out why they didn't see it the way they typed it. When they finally realize an automated censor is intervening, they try every variation of the word to test the limits of the script (fucked, fucking, fucker....). . Again, automated intervening has fueled the fire.

- Creatively mischievous users experiment with new ways to spell the word that will defeat the script.... such as "fuq," "phuk," and "phuq." Even more fuel for the fire.

- Unless the script is sophisticated, it may censor words that don't need to be censored. A slightly mistyped "I wishit were true" will come out as "I wis*** were true." Bleeping "cock" will also wreck the integrity of cockatoo, cocker spaniel, cocktails, and cockadoodledoo. These examples are more a nuisance than a real problem, but the inflexible, trigger-happy script can lead to more serious mishaps. A wizard described greeting some Japanese visitors to the site. A "You're welcome" appeared as "Ile, do itashimas***e" and a goodbye as "Arigato gozaimas***a, Sayonara." The wizard didn't have the language skills to explain what was going wrong - and, knowing that Japanese visitors tend to be rather formal and polite, was quite embarrassed by the predicament. "Nothing like making that language barrier a little wider!" the wizard concluded.

- If a server draws an international crowd, there may be hundreds of words and expressions from various languages and ethic backgrounds that could be considered inappropriate. It would be a lot of work programming in every foul possibility. Which words should be censored, and which ones not?

- For every inappropriate word that is bleeped, there will be other uncensored words or phrases that some people think are MORE offensive. Personal and cultural differences in standards abound.

- Some users, especially adults, HATE having their language automatically censored, especially if it's their whispering. Don't people have the right to use in private conversation whatever words they like? For public conversations, how much should adult language be curbed for the sake of protecting the sensitive ears of children?

Some of these problems can be solved. Deleting the inappropriate words or phrases COMPLETELY (no asterisks, nothing appears) might prevent mischievous users from flooding the room with a string of "f***" and "s***." Or the script might reply with a "Sorry, language like that is not allowed on this server" instead of allowing the display of offensive words. Sophisticated scripts can leave untouched naughty strings of letters that are embedded within acceptable words. Programs can be modified so that whispers are left alone. Some rooms can be censored, while others allow fast and loose language.

A humorous alternative to bleeping with asterisks would be scripts that automatically substitute silly words for the offensive ones. Wizards have joked about various possibilities:

FUCK = snugglebunnies or I love ("Snugglebunnies you!" "I love you!")

SHIT = doodoo caca or flower power ("Oh doodoo caca!" "You flower power head!")

ASSHOLE = poopshoot ("I can't believe you're such a poopshoot!")

BITCH = radical grrrl or totally beautiful and caring person ("Come over here you radical grrrl!" "Hey you totally beautiful and caring person!")

DAMN = cool ("Cool it!")

HELL = thank you ("What the thank you are you doing?")

While not everyone will find these word substitutions funny, the power of humor should not be underestimated when attempting to control offensive behavior. Humor can help people step back from the intensity of the feelings that fuels acting out. They can laugh about it. After all, the purpose of these online communities is to have FUN.

One powerful and flexible solution to dealing with offensive language follows the "Have it Your Way" principle. The client program can offer the user the option of modifying a language filter. The user can add or delete words from the list of unacceptable words to be censored. The type of censoring (asterisks or complete deletion) could be another

feature. If the user wants, the censor can be turned off completely in order to experience all language in its most raw form. Of course, the language filter option assumes that the user (or the concerned parent) knows about it and how to use it. Currently, the Palace program includes a censor/on/off option in addition to the "mute" command. Many wizards believe this is sufficient in "pushing the power down," as Randy Farmer, a multimedia environment designer, is often quoted as saying. It gives each individual the tools they need to have it his/her way.

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Unbecoming User and Room Names

If you build it, some will abuse it. Unfortunately, this principle also holds true for two rather unique features of Palace - the ability to change your username to whatever you want whenever you want, and the opportunity (at the Member's Palace site) to create your own personal room using whatever graphic backdrop you desire and any name you choose for the room. Some user and room names were slightly offensive, some a "creative" double entendre, and some blatantly inappropriate. People using borderline names tend to be more receptive to the suggestion that they change it. Perhaps they are testing the limits of what they can get away with. Those using outlandish names may be more stubborn or downright defiant.

Possible Interventions - Creating names is part of the Palace lifestyle of identity experimentation, so doing away with these features to prevent unsightly signatures would be cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. It also would be possible to program in a list of unacceptable names that user's would be unable to adopt, but that strategy would run into many of the same social, cultural, and logistic problems as the attempts to automate mouthwashing of bad words. For example, what about the name "CrackBaby?" Would anyone ever think of programming that word into a list of unacceptable names? Is the name even unacceptable? In the debates among TPI/EC wizards about a user who indeed chose this handle, personal opinions varied greatly.

The best intervention is probably a case-by-case, one-on-one attempt to reason with the offender - similar to the strategy when either a wizard or a fellow member approaches foul talkers. Through whispers, explain the site's rules of etiquette, try to politely reason with the misbehaving users, and if all else fails, disconnect them.

One wizard called for a "namegag" feature. Similar to propgag, it would enable the wizard to force the person's name into a generic form, for example "Member ." It would be a useful "firing across the bow" before having to kill a recalcitrant user. It also would spare others the unpleasantly of having to look at someone called "PenisInYourMouth" while the wizard tried to reason with him.

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Breathers

In the manual for wizards, Bumgardner describes what he calls the "breather." Most often a male, the breather is a special species of lewd talker who continually propositions female users, usually by whispering. Any member with an even remotely feminine name could be the victim, which suggests the rather "driven" (desperate) quality of the breather's motivational state. Bumgardner divides the breather into two types. The "horny breather" simply wants a sexual encounter and will typically say things like "Will you go upstairs with me?" (the location of the private rooms where flirting, propositioning, and cybersex is more socially acceptable). They usually go away when asked, or when told to "take it up stairways, please." If they do respond to such simple interventions, it's probably a sign that they possess at least SOME modest degree of interpersonal sensitivity.

Bumgardner calls the more pernicious type the "psychotic breather." They deliberately are attempting to offend and their motives may be more aggressive than sexual. Their language tends to be more obscene and derogatory than the horny breather's. In rare cases they may launch violent threats at other users (one disturbed person told a female member that he was going to kill her and cut her up). Although probably not "psychotic" in the technical sense - because their reality testing most likely is intact - these breathers do not respond positively to others attempts to divert them, reason with them, or reprimand them. Instead, they become more persistent and offensive. They are looking for a passive or willing target for their hostile needs to shock, control, and hurt.

Possible Interventions - The strategies for dealing with breathers overlap with those for dealing with generally offensive language that I discussed earlier. Start simple, with "purely human" interventions aimed at reasoning with the breather. Try ignoring them to see if their breathing extinguishes, or use the "mute" command to silence the person. If necessary, a wizard will step in to reason with, warn, gag, and, if necessary, kill the offender. Wizards usually first gag

the breather, whisper to the victim that they are dealing (also in whispers) with the abuser, and explain the mute command to the victim.

Before they can intervene with the breather, a wizard may feel the need to verify that the alleged breather is indeed abusing the supposed victim. Breathers usually whisper to their victims, and no user can see a whisper except the sender and receiver. The wizard must take the word of one user over another. Bumgardner suggests asking for specifics. For example, it's not enough that a member named Jane says "Guest 3412 is being rude to me." It's possible, Bumgardner states, that Jane is 12 years old and is offended by words she doesn't understand, like "existential." It's also possible that Jane holds a grudge against Guest 3412, or is playing a game (sometimes in collaboration with others) that Bumgardner terms "Kill the Guest." As a form of guest bashing, this game is designed to trick wizards into bumping-off random, innocent guests.

In these difficult-to-verify situations, the wizard may ask Jane for more specifics about what the alleged abuser is saying (unfortunately, this may compel the victim into repeating the very things she finds offensive). If Jane knows how, she can copy the abuser's language from her text log and insert it into a whisper that she sends to the wizard. A clever user may be able to fake a log excerpt, but it probably wouldn't be worth the effort. When there have been ongoing complaints about a breather, wizards have had some success in going "undercover" to catch that breather in the act.

Some experienced wizards prefer to skirt the whole issue of verification. They simply inform the victim of the mute command (thus giving them their own defense) and then tell the alleged abuser that the the victim wishes to be left alone. If victims continue to complain about the breather, then they did not comply with the wizard's advice. They are allowing the abuse to continue, which is their choice, or they are playing games. At this point, the wizard may simply say, "There's nothing more I can do."

Occasionally, there will be a user who frequently complains about abuse from other people - almost as if they are attracting that abuse. Unconsciously, some people may indeed place themselves into the "victim" role. They perceive harm where there really isn't much harm, or create situations in which others tend to mistreat them, perhaps even provoking that abuse.

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Verbal Exhibitionists

Verbal exhibitionists engage in explicit sexual conversations out in the open, rather than in a private room or via whispering. Essentially, they are two (or more!) breathers who are enjoying each other's company, but violating the ears of those around them. They may think - rather inappropriately - that their public display is just fun entertainment, or they may be trying to impress or shock other users. It certainly is an attention-getting behavior which speaks to their strong need to be in the limelight by having an intense impact on others. Hopefully, the amorous couple will respond to peer pressure suggesting that they either desist, whisper, take their encounter to a private room, or move to one of the adult Palace sites that allows such behavior. Intervening wizards will make the same suggestions after gagging (and then ungagging) the loquacious pair. In the unusual case that they persist, they will be killed. Of course, the mute command is another option for the offended user who can't find a wizard to help out.

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Stalkers

Stalkers are exceptionally hostile breathers who follow a victim from room to room. Their need to intrude upon, dominate, and control the other user is obvious - and probably reflects their own underlying anxieties about being helpless and victimized ("doing to others what one fears will be done to oneself," also known as "turning the passive into the active"). Some victims of a stalker have described the experience as quite creepy and frightening. The mute command will take a lot of steam out of the stalker's abuse, though they may also resort to antagonizing their victim by using their avatar to poke at and sit on the victim's avatar (blocking). The "hide" command will enable the victim to delete his/her name from the list of users at the site and the room they are in, which will make it more difficult for the stalker to track the person. But it still means the victim has to run to initially escape the stalker, which is not a pleasant option. It may be necessary to page a wizard for help. At first, the wizard will probably intervene in a manner similar to dealing with the ordinary breather, which may include the necessity of verifying that an abuse is really taking place. Persist stalking deserves a long kill, or even a ban.

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Guest Bashers

Guest bashers are members (registered users) who find it amusing to badmouth and harass guests who are using the default smiley face and a number instead of a name. They may verbally abuse guests, don names like "Guest Killer," or display props that depict their malicious sentiments, such as a picture of a guest smiley on a pet lease or with an ax planted in its head. At the bottom of the Palace class system, guests are a convenient target for prejudice and displaced hostility. Their greater anonymity (no name, no personal avatar) enhances the tendency to treat them badly because they seem to be a non-person with no established identity or status.

Some guest bashers consciously think that they are just having fun and no harm is really intended. Unconsciously, they need to feel superior and powerful - to feel that they belong while the guest does not. That need to feel "better-than" disguises underlying insecurities about their status in the community (and perhaps in life). Rarely do well-established members behave like this.

Guest bashers experiment with new and more insidious ways to mistreat the newbie. For example, they may page a wizard and insist that a guest has been harassing them via whispers. Because some guests, protected by anonymity, indeed do this sort of thing, wizards usually take the claim seriously but will try to verify it, similar to situations involving "breathers". To catch a suspected guest basher in the act, some wizards immediately gag the breather without telling the basher. Then when the basher continues to complain about the guest's whispers, the wizard politely informs the basher that the guest is gagged and CANNOT whisper. The response from the basher usually is something like, "oops," "uh oh, busted!", "tee hee," or "sorry, won't happen again."

Some users have reported favoritism among wizards towards members when there is a conflict between members and the guests. Sometimes guests are just defending themselves against a guest-basher, but the wizard's bias prevents a clear perception of this. This favoritism might be an unintentional form of guest-bashing.

Possible Interventions - In his manual for wizards, Bumgardner suggests that only rarely should guest bashers be killed. Usually they respond well to reason, which indicates that the healthy, rational side of their personality can snap them out of their unbecoming prejudice and displaced insecurities. Bumgardner also suggests that dealing with a guest bashing situation is a good opportunity to explain to the whole room that such bashing just isn't right. Guests are people too. TPI/EC also knows that guest bashing is bad for business. Guests are potential buyers. Giving guests the opportunity the become trial members who (for a limited time) can experiment with creating names and avatars can kill two birds with one stone. It minimizes guest bashing because the guest now looks a lot like a regular member, and it simultaneously encourages the guest to buy the software.

An interesting twist in the history of guest bashing was the "PRA." This anti-member "association" attempted to retaliate against the prejudice of members and what they felt was an unfair, racism-promoting class system. In it's attempt to create support and fellowship in the face of inappropriate and hostile prejudice, the PRA became a bit inappropriate and hostile itself. Here's a log excerpt of an encounter with a PRA spokesman, complete with his shouting caps:

> !MY FELLOW GUESTS IF YOU WANNA JOIN THE ANTI MEMBER ORGANIZATION AND ONE OF THE FASTEST GROWING GROUPS ON THE PALACE WITH OVER 40 MEMBERS THE PRA PALACE REFORMATION ASSOCIATION THEN PRIVATE MESSAGE ME...!MY FELLOW GUESTS IF YOUR TIRED OF MEMBERS HARRASING AND THREATING YOU AND PUTTIN UP STUPID IGNORANT PET GUEST AVATARS THEN JOINT THE PRA!!!.. !GUESTS LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD ON THE PALACE DONT LET THESE MEMBERS PUSH YOU AROUND JOIN THE PRA AND YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND HEY ITS GOOD MONEY!!!!...!GUESTS THE TYPICAL PAYMENT FOR A NEW PRA MEMBER IS FREE INTERNET ACCESS THE MORE YOU CONTRIBUT THE MORE YOU GET REWARDED!!

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Wizard Bashers

These users go out of their way to antagonize wizards. They send hostile messages into the wizard paging system. They verbally abuse the wizard through whispers and in public. They attempt to whip up a room of users into siding with them, including their all angrily accusing a wizard of being a "trigger-happy Nazi" when the basher finally gets killed. More deviously, the wizard basher may become an impostor by adopting the wizard's avatar and name, and then behaving obnoxiously in order to destroy the wizard's reputation. Or a basher may try to set wizards against each other

by "befriending" one wizard and then using that relationship to badmouth and accuse another wizard of various injustices. Persistence in this "splitting" - including the befriending and idealizing of a "good" wizard while attempting to criticize and destroy the "bad" wizard - is usually a sign of significant psychopathology. In fact, the more the group of wizards are in disagreement and conflict over a particular user, the more likely that user is engaged in multiple splittings, and the more serious that person's psychopathology. For some wizard bashers, a vicious paranoid cycle is set in motion. They think wizards are out to get them, which makes them angry, defiant, and abusive, which leads to wizards reprimanding and killing them, which confirms their feeling that wizards are out to get them, which perpetuates the cycle.

Wizards who are overly active in their reprimands, pins, gags, and kills will be prime targets for bashing. If a wizard often finds himself in the bashing hot seat, it might be time for him to think twice about his style of dealing with people. In most cases wizards are not mean or trigger-happy. If possible, they should not take the wizard bashing personally. Wizard bashers usually are troubled teenage males who are trying to impress their friends and prove themselves. They are acting out their need to challenge and rebel against authority figures in order to establish some sense of independence and power. Basically, they are very frustrated. Their hostile antics probably says more about their relationships with their parents than it does about the wizard. To keep their composure and self-esteem intact, it might be helpful for wizards to remember that the basher is simply displacing his angry conflicts onto a convenient but undeserving target - a process called "transference." Sensing this, one wizard wisely commented, "I prefer to have these guys take it out on me instead of another member because I have more tools to deal with it. I know these guys come and go and are no big deal."

Possible Interventions - Strategies for dealing with the wizard basher are basically similar to those for dealing with any nasty talker: First try to reason with the person, then gag or kill if necessary. The primary difference is that the wizard is the victim, so the wizard's ability to maintain composure and objectivity is being taxed. Asking for backup support and a reality-check from another wizard might be a good idea. If splitting is suspected, the wizard should compare notes with the other wizards (see the earlier section on "second opinions" about avatars). It's always a good idea for wizards to share their experiences concerning problematic users and act together in a unified, consistent manner.

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Self Destroyers

Some blatant foul talkers and bashers may be self-destructive. They abuse others in the worst way they know how and recklessly provoke wizards because they WANT to be killed. Unimaginative examples are users who type over and over again "Suck my dick," "Wizard X is an asshole," or simply, "kill me, kill me, kill me." Bumgardner calls them "psychotics." Although their reality testing probably is intact, their behavior certainly seems bizarre.

Why do they want to be disconnected? They may imagine themselves as bold and defiant rebels who dare to take a wizard's best hit. Teenage gangs often consider kills a badge of honor and turn it into a contest where they compete with each other. For some users, provoking a kill may be their way to gain control over their feeling alienated and rejected. Because they intentionally create the rejection, they feel they have some mastery over it. The kill also justifies their hostility towards the community and its authorities, which they probably felt even before they arrived for the first time (more "transference"). Paradoxically, some people may use kills to establish a unique identity in the community. They are the outcasts, the bad boys. Psychologists might like to speculate about their "masochistic" personality dynamics.

Possible Interventions - Due to their blatant, unrelenting style, self-destroyers generally are very easy to identify. Bumgardner does recommend being careful not to confuse them with children who are experimenting with the novelty of being able to say naughty things in public. Self-destroyers aren't interested in attempts to reason with them, so such efforts probably will be a waste of time. As with other types of foul talkers, members can be reminded about using the mute command, or the wizard may try gagging the offender. But in many cases the wizard may do best by quickly disconnecting the user. Unfortunately, self-destroyers often immediately try to return to the site. With self-destroying members (who usually belong to gangs), wizards may need to set the disconnect period for a long period of time. With self-destroying guests, wizards may need to track their IP to detect when they try to reconnect. For chronic self-destroying members and guests, a ban might be necessary.

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Event Crashing

In the past, TPI sponsored or assisted in some special event at a Palace site - for example, the live Rock Concerts where visitors could speak to the musicians when they were offstage, or the special Palace site set up in Washington during the Inauguration of Bill Clinton. Such events are intended to promote the Palace software and the Palace way of life. Unfortunately, some snerts take the unique event as a unique opportunity to harass people, especially famous people. They consider it a center stage to act out and attain some special sense of anonymous notoriety. They probably think of themselves as brave and daring. Usually their attempts to disrupt the event are not subtle, and the wizards reactions to their behavior aren't subtle either. At the first sign of obviously inappropriate behavior, the wizards act quickly and decisively. If you say "Are you queer?" to the lead singer, or "You suck!" to Vice President Gore, you are unceremoniously, expeditiously killed.

3. More Complex Social Problems

The following types of users present problems that are a bit more difficult to deal with - difficult in the sense that it requires more psychological and social expertise to manage them. This doesn't mean that the psychological or social roots of their misbehavior are more complex. Rather, the problem they present tends to be more intertwined with tricky cultural and interpersonal issues.

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Revolutionaries

On his web site for wizards, Dr. Xenu describes the "rabble rousers" and "political paranoids" who on occasion invade the Palace community. In some cases, they want to use Palace as their personal soapbox to rally support for their questionable political sentiments. Antisocial types spouting Nazi ideology is one example. In other cases, these alienated people specifically target Palace for their political attacks. For example, they may claim that Palace is a totalitarian state and that TPI/EC is recording all chat, including whispers (paranoids love to share their paranoia with others). It's sometimes hard to tell if they truly believe their political rhetoric, or simply are using it to act out their needs to gain attention and a sense of power by bombarding people with their ranting and raving. Dr. Xenu writes:

> ... there are many would-be gang leaders out there, usually members who are bitter about not being a wizard, or about any number of other social woes, and think that by attacking the Palace, and inciting others to do the same, they are somehow improving the world or more likely their place in it. Often, they mistake the Palace (and especially TPI/EC) as some sort of symbol for the entirety of industrialized society, and likewise mistake wizzes bumping them off the server for genuine jurisprudence... Since these people often see themselves as some sort of tiny folk hero (and often declare themselves above the law in great self-righteous rants), they are easily engaged if they think you want to hear their New World Plan.

Possible Interventions - There are a few slippery issues in dealing with revolutionaries. Some wizards worry about being too politically correct or violating the user's freedom of speech. In the case of more subtle revolutionaries - who may just be a bit outspoken in their unusual political beliefs - this may be a legitimate concern. The other difficulty is that attempts to reason with revolutionaries and tone them down may lead you into an entangled discussion of politics. These revolutionaries can be quite good at debate and will try to seduce you with their arguments, including arguments that they have the right to propagandize at the Palace; or, even if they admit to being outrageous, that there's nothing TPI/EC can do anyhow because they live in different state or country than where the server is located (a fallacious argument, according to Dr. Xenu).

It's wise not to get caught up in these debates. Many wizards first may try calm the person down. They may mention that there are other Palace sites where such political talk is acceptable. If that doesn't work (which is probably the case), they probably will follow similar procedures as when they step in to deal with foul talkers: gag the person, warn them, ungag them to see if they will behave, then kill if they persist. It's also a good idea to let other users know about the mute command so they have their own control over listening to the revolutionaries diatribes, or not.

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Freedom Fighters and Other Tenacious Debaters

Freedom fighters dwell on the argument that they have the right to freedom of speech and expression at Palace. But there's a delicate balance between allowing freedom of expression and offending other users - and freedom fighters usually sit heavily on one side of the scale. Sometimes they have a specific political ideology to spout, like the revolutionary. More often they just want to flaunt their inappropriate avatars or mouth off with foul language without anyone restraining them because it's their "right" according to the First Amendment. The basic internet philosophy that users should be able to "do your own thing" may be fueling their psychology. Similar to attempting reason with the revolutionary, it's very easy to fall into a no-win debate with the freedom fighter. Some wizards have described occasions when they did try to carry on a discussion with these users - probably because they were bored and had nothing else to do. The result was far less than intellectually satisfying because all these freedom fighters wanted to do was fight. Their mental set about "discussion" is basically similar to other self-important philosophical wannabes who come to Palace just to argue. Psychologists would categorize them as "oppositional personalities" who express their anger and frustrated need for independence through verbal/intellectual stubbornness. Wizards have joked about the possibility of creating an "Argument Clinic" (a la Monty Python) where freedom fighters and other recalcitrant debaters could be sent to spout their ideology at a bot that would mechanically reply with statements like, "I think I disagree" and "What's your proof on that point?"

Possible Interventions - Part of the difficulty in dealing with revolutionaries, freedom fighters, and other tenacious soapbox debaters is determining just when their lectures and arguments have crossed the line. The original Palace philosophy was that users should "make what they will" of Palace, and TPI/EC does want as many people as possible to enjoy themselves by doing their own thing. The number and intensity of complaints by other users in the room is probably the best indicator of whether or not the person is a nuisance who needs to be tamed. If almost no one is complaining, it may be best to just walk away even if you personally feel affronted. Freedom fighters who insist on using foul talk and avatars have probably already crossed the line with their inappropriate displays. If they persist, the strategies for dealing with them are similar to those for dealing with offensive avatars and language.

If the freedom fighter relents in using offensive avatars and foul language, but then wants to debate the topic of free speech, it's a good idea to side-step that entanglement. Even if you appear to "win" the debate, the bickering that accompanies it often leaves a bad taste in the mouths of everyone in the room. Wizards seem to agree on several points that might be explained briefly to the freedom fighter (if necessary, while they are gagged or propgagged) in order to short-circuit their need to argue. Palace is not a democracy. It's a membership organization that is not tied to First Amendment rules. It has its own rules about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, just like a country club or the local Moose. Freedom fighters should be invited to visit the "rules room" to read about the policies of the site.

They may retort with "But I PAID for this program, so I can say and do whatever I please!" In that case, it might be explained to them that they paid for the CLIENT program, not the server. They can use their client to connect to any Palace site they wish, and some sites will allow them greater leeway in using whatever language or avatars they wish. But THIS site has its own rules, which users are requested to follow. If they still want to debate, wizards may simply and politely state that they have explained the rules, that they have no control over those rules, and cannot discuss it any further.

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Bible Thumpers

TPI/EC policy does not support blatant evangelism at their Palace sites. It's perfectly acceptable for people to express their religious beliefs and to engage in religious discussions, but active attempts to proselytize and convert other users is not permitted. Of course, there's a fine line between "discussion" and "proselytizing" - and many differences among members in how much evangelistic talk they are willing to hear. Usually, the types of Bible Thumping that TPI/EC discourages are rather clear cut cases. Entering a room with a "Praise the Lord, All!" may be acceptable, but standing at the entrance to Palace and shouting at new arrivals "Accept the Lord, Sinners! Or burn in hell!" obviously is not. Thumpers who make such proclamations probably aren't very interested in discussion anyhow. They would rather launch sermons and apocalyptic warnings at people, which is tantamount to harassment. A more subtle example would be a loquacious Thumper's refusal to back off when someone says, "Well, that's fine but I don't really want to talk about this anymore." Persisting despite that request to stop is harassment.

It's not always easy to detect a problematic Thumper right off the bat. One wizard described chatting with a Nobel Laureate at a special Palace event when an apparent Thumper (and "event crasher") started to ask challenging religious questions. The wizard considered whispering to the religious-minded user to ask him to back off. However, the Laureate was willing to answer the questions which lead to an interesting discussion.

Possible Interventions - It's a good idea to be respectful of the Thumper's beliefs, but not to get entangled in religious debates. If they try to engage wizards in an argument about religious freedom or freedom of speech (similar to the freedom fighter), wizards may simply state the policy of the server and that they have no control over that policy. The wizard may even express that they understand how the Thumper feels, but rules are rules. "Then use any excuse you have to," one wizard suggests, "and remove yourself from the situation." For Thumpers who are a bit too enthusiastic in their pursuit of religious discussion with users who don't share their enthusiasm, wizards typically will remind them that discussion is fine, but not everyone shares their religious beliefs, and that some people may even feel affronted. They may encourage the Thumper to move to another room (or another Palace site) where there may be members who are more interested in their ideas. If Thumpers refuse to stop accosting other members, wizards may follow the procedures for gagging. The other users in the room also should be reminded about the "mute" command. Experienced wizards recommend that Thumpers never be killed.

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Identity Theft, Impostoring and Switching

One's personal identity is attached to one's avatars. If someone steals your avatar and wears it, they are stealing your identity, or at the very least diluting its uniqueness. If they steal your avatar and dump copies of it all over the site, they are deliberately demeaning the integrity of your identity and inviting others to steal it. Such identity "theft" may be an unintentional faux pas or a deliberate act of hostility.

Stealing someone's avatar, wearing it, and also using that person's name (or a variation of it) is the highest form of identity theft. You are abducting their entire identity. As a momentary joke to mimic your friends, this behavior is tolerated as fun. But some people - the impostors - are more insidious. Often as an act of revenge, they snatch the identity of the person that offended them and behave inappropriately in an attempt to damage the person's reputation. Impersonating a wizard is one of the more common types of impostoring - and also one of the more serious, because damaging the reputation of wizards damages their ability to work as well as the reputation of the community's authority structure. If the impostor isn't seeking revenge, then he is most likely using the wizard identity in an attempt to impress or threaten other people, to persuade them into cybersex, or to make requests of users that a real wizard never would (like revealing your registration key). Some brave wizard impostors have even attempted to acquire the wizard password from other wizards. For this reason, wizards never give the password out while at the Palace.

One especially problematic variety of impostoring occurs when a user assumes the identity of a well-know member at one Palace site (usually a wizard) and then goes to another site to act like a jerk. There have been several cases of fake wizards and TPI officials showing up at smaller sites to threaten and insult people. Some impostors have even given out the stolen avatars and encouraged others to join in with the impersonation, insisting that it's just a Palace joke. With hundreds of Palace sites all over the internet, it's very difficult to track and control this potential damage to one's reputation. Here's where communication across Palace sites - especially among wizards - is important in controlling deviant behavior. Messages to the Palace User Group (PUG) mailing list is one method for this cross-site communication.

Misbehaving users also may employ identity switching to avoid detection and reprimands. Notorious snerts often rotate through a series of alias identities (names and avatars), which makes it more difficult for wizards to keep track of them. They may act perfectly nice under one identity and be a demon under another. Some wizards keep a list of known aliases of these trouble-makers. The combination of this ability to switch identities and the fact that you never know for sure who is sitting at the keyboard sometimes makes it almost impossible to know who the snert is. When finally cornered, a misbehaving user who has switched through several identities to avoid detection may insist that "It wasn't ME who did that! It was my brother/sister/friend who was using my computer!" Teenagers have even pretended to be their parents who come online or send e-mail to TPI/EC officials in order to plea the case for their misbehaving son who was banned from the site. At times like this, one must rely on the experience and wisdom of the wizards and TPI/EC staff in determining whether the person is lying or not. Often it's impossible to tell.

When dealing with identity switchers, it's also a good idea to consider the possibility that they are suffering from a genuine identity disturbance.

Because identity switching is part of the Palace culture, there have been important borderline cases that stirred up considerable controversy about whether or not a "crime" really had occurred. In one fascinating incident, a member who asked to be a wizard but was not considered "wizard material" switched personae in order to develop a character who WOULD be considered good wizard material. The strategy worked, resulting in heated arguments between wizards who knew about the different personae and those who didn't. Was this deliberate deception on the part of the new wizard, or just a variation on the Palace way of life?

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Detecting Impostors

There are a variety of ways to detect an impostor. Look for behavior that is uncharacteristic of the genuine person. Ask the suspected impostor to show an avatar or produce knowledge that you know the genuine person possesses. "Finger" the person to call up the information from their finger file, which might reveal clues about whether they are impostoring, particularly if you are familiar with what the genuine person's finger file looks like. Wizards also have the ability to list a user's registration number and IP address, which is more than enough information to positively identify someone. Wizards also can track these registration numbers and addresses, so they know when misbehaving users are coming and going despite their switching usernames and avatars. In his manual for wizards, Bumgardner also recommends that wizards keep a personal log of their pins, gags, and kills - which is useful information for staying on top of repeat offenders.

To prevent impersonating a wizard, the Palace program was modified so only wizards could wear an asterisk (*) in front of their name. Identifying a wizard is therefore easy. If you suspect someone is impersonating a wizard, ask them to show their "badge." TPI has encouraged working wizards to wear their asterisk at all times - and if they are not wearing it when a user asks to see it, they should comply. Some clever wizard impostors create tiny asterisk props that they place in front of their names. However, as Dr. Xenu notes on his wizard web site, the effort is not clever enough. While the forgery may look fine on their own computer, other users my be viewing their screen with different fonts, so the fake asterisk will look peculiar. Also, if you turn off the usernames in your client program, you will see the tiny asterisk prop hanging there all by itself. Easiest of all, the faked asterisk prop will never show up as an asterisk in the site's list of usernames or in the running log that records what each user is typing.

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Intervening with Impostors

If a member is using someone's name, but not the avatar, it might simply be a coincidence. It's a good idea to tell them that another member uses that name and this probably will result in other members confusing their identities. If they are using the name of a well-known Palatian, tell them that lots of users will be confusing them with the old-timer, resulting in many whispers and ESPS from strangers - which could turn into a very uncomfortable situation where they are constantly being interrupted and constantly having to explain themselves. After hearing this advice, most unintentional "impostors" will pick another name. If they decide to keep the name anyhow, recommend that they speak to the other user about it in order to help minimize confusions - or inform the other user yourself that he/she has a "twin." If the person insists on using the name, and is behaving less than ideally, there's not much that even a wizard can do to protect the original user's reputation. As long as the "impostor" isn't breaking any other rules that requires an intervention, the wizard can only inform the original user that there is someone else using his/her name, and that, unfortunately, the other user isn't the nicest person around.

Using someone else's name and avatar while acting badly is a sure sign of intentional, malicious impostoring. It's a judgment call as to how to intervene. At the very least, the original user should be informed. Wizards may decide to gag, pin, or kill the impostor, but probably will only do so when the impostoring is clearly violating other Palace rules.

When people accidentally use a wizard's name, similar strategies apply. The first step might involve asking the wizard if it's OK that someone else is using the same designation. For those users who persist in using a wizard's name, despite being asked to change it, TPI/EC officials recommend to wizards a series of steps. In order to determine the motives of the person, explain that the company's policy does not allow anyone to use a wizard's name without their permission because it is potentially confusing to other members. If they refuse to change the name, do nothing other than inform them that they will be disconnected if they are "caught" doing it again (thus giving them the opportunity to think about the consequences of their actions). If wizards later find them still using the name, they will give one more warning, then kill for a short period if they do not comply. Longer kills will follow if the (rather stubborn) person still insists on using the name.

In those hardcore cases of users obviously and deliberately impersonating wizards in order to damage their reputations, TPI/EC has contacted the administrators of the impostor's ISP - and in some cases, the user's parents.

A completely different strategy is the preventative one. Why not require users and/or wizards to register their names and/or props so no one else can use them? The technical, logistic, and legal difficulties in registering the images used to create avatars are formidable. For example, the images often do not belong to the user in the first place. They were copied from elsewhere, usually CD-ROMs or web sites (there have been many copyright debates about this very issue). Registering names is much more do-able, but would take some of the fun out of the Palace custom of playing with identities. A list of registered names also would apply only to a specific Palace server, unless there was some kind of "master" list for all Palace sites - which is an almost impossible task. As a result, it would be relatively easy for an impostor to use a person's registered name at Site A and then go to Sites B, C, D, etc. in order to wreck that person's identity.

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Genuine Identity Disturbances

One day in Harry's Bar I was greeted by someone I didn't recognize. Something about how he spoke made me uneasy. He acted as if he knew me, but his abstract avatar and name were unfamiliar. After a few minutes, he changed his prop to another rather strange design. For some reason, this made me more uncomfortable. "Do you know this guy?" I whispered to another member. "It's Octagon," she said. "He's been changing his name and props a lot." About a week later, I heard that Octagon was hospitalized. He had been suicidal.

This incident taught me something important about personae at the Palace. Unfortunate people suffering from disturbances in their identity may act out their turmoil in the personae they wear. For example, a virtual world where you can switch among alternate appearances might attract people suffering from "dissociation" - the splits in consciousness and identity as a result of trauma, as seen most vividly in the multiple personality disorder. It would not be unusual for these people to act very appropriately in one identity, and very inappropriately in another. On occasion, wizards come across perplexing situations where a user's personality suddenly changes, or their memory becomes disconnected. For example, a user may appear to be a misbehaving child who, when reprimanded, switches to an adult who is upset about his "daughter" being punished. Or a wizard pins a misbehaving user named "Marmalade," who then disconnects from the site only to reconnect moments later with a different name and avatar. Having access to the user's IP address, the wizard knows that it must be the same person. "Who pinned me?" the user asks. "Are you Marmalade?" the wizard replies.... "No."

Now it's very possible that these examples are simply the head games played by mischievous users. But it's also possible that in a small percentage of cases such users are suffering from a genuine identity disturbance. If that's the case, their switches in identity are not intentional, conscious attempts at fooling or manipulating others.

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Depressives

Another type of user who may not intentionally be causing difficulties, but nevertheless is difficult to deal with, is what Bumgardner calls the "depressive." Although, technically, these people may not all be suffering from a clinical depression (e.g., some might fall into the category of "borderline personality disorder"), the term is mostly accurate as a catch-all category. They are unhappy people who attempt to use Palace as a form of therapy or escape. Usually they are members rather than guests. Their behavior and moods may be erratic. They may require or demand a great deal of attention, particularly in getting people to talk to them about their life problems. They may be suicidal.

Here's a fictionalized example described by one wizard. UserJoe is quiet, even though others talk to him. Then he complains that he is being ignored and that no one likes him. Others try to offer consolation and support, but he says he hates Palace and isn't coming back. The next day he returns with many tales of woe about his life. He literally hangs onto other users' avatars, trying to find solace and a willing listener. He says he is drunk. He drops hints that he is thinking about suicide. People feel uncomfortable around him and page the wizards.

Other depressives are more blatant about their suicidal thinking. They talk openly and at length about how miserable their life is, and how they want to end it. On a few occasions, these people have tried to convince others to join them. Shortly after the news of the Heaven's Gate cult, a small group of teens at the Member's Palace site formed what seemed to be a suicide cult. They attempted to persuade other young users to join them in their quest to "move on to a

better place." It's very possible that they were simply joking or playing with their concept of a new fad. However, as all clinicians know, when people seem to be "just talking" or "joking" about suicide, they should not be treated lightly. It's very possible that they are quite depressed beneath their humor and intellectualizations. Suicidal talk may be a strategy for "just" getting some attention, but it's often a serious cry for help as well.

Possible Interventions - Wizards have agonized over what to do for troubled users. Attempts to encourage, support, and offer some friendly advice are admirable, and in some cases helpful. However, the depressive's needs may be deeper than any sympathetic Palatian can handle. It's very easy to get in over your head. The depressive may become highly dependent on you, needing much more than you can give. When you suspect this possibility - especially when the person talks or even hints about suicide - recommend seeking professional help. Make this recommendation several times. Suggest that the person look in the blue pages of the phone book for a crisis hotline, or speak to her physician about finding a mental health professional. If it's a young person, also encourage him to speak to his parents, a guidance counselor at school, or some other trusted adult. Another possibility is to give the person the url of an internet crisis center or an 800 phone number. While it's important to try to get the depressive some help, it's also important for the fellow Palatian to remember that there is only so much one can do. Try not to feel guilty or helpless when the situation doesn't seem resolved.

Rarely should wizards disconnect (kill) a depressive. It will only magnify their feelings of rejection and despair.

When users are promoting suicide, the situation is different. Even if it is only an adolescent "goof" or "fad," encouraging suicide among other users is not tolerated at TPI/EC sites. Suicide can indeed become epidemic, especially among depressed adolescents. Such promoters should be dealt with empathically but firmly. If they do not quickly respond to the strategies above and relent in their proselytizing, wizards will gag or disconnect them. For obvious reasons, wizards avoid using the word "kill."

It's interesting to note that in the discussions about these issues on the wizard mailing list, many debates arose about the ethics of suicide and euthanasia. Cultural, personal, and situational factors all determine whether someone believes it is "right" or "wrong." In the meanwhile, almost all the wizards agree that suicidal members need help, and that promoting suicide must be discouraged.

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Pedophiles

On occasion, some foul talkers and breathers have directed their attentions towards younger Palace members, usually females. Users with names like "BigDaddy" may ask - either through whispers or publicly - if there are any "young girls" around. Once they locate someone they believe fits that category, they proceed to whisper seductive or blatantly lewd language to that person. Public displays are not the typical MO of pedophiles, who usually act in secrecy and disguise. So foul talkers and breathers who are speaking openly may not be genuine pedophiles. They may even be minors themselves. There have been no clearly documented cases of pedophiles at Palace, but that should not stop wizards and other officials from keeping an eye open for such activity. Even hints of pedophilic talk and interests should be dealt with quickly and firmly, using steps similar to dealing with breathers. Minors should be encouraged to report suspected people, although the issue of verifying pedophilic activity can be complex, similar to verifying abuse in alleged breathers.

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Scam Artists

On his web site about wizards, Dr. Xenu describes some of the scams that have occurred at Palace. One example is the "AOL Scam," so called because that's where it first gained notoriety. The scam artist - perhaps impersonating a wizard or some other TPI/EC representative - asks new or naive members for information that he needs for some important "official" reason. He may request the member's registration number, Visa number, real name, phone number, etc. The information most likely will be used to rip the person off or invade their privacy. Another version of this scam involves approaching members who have been around for a while and telling them that they have been chosen to become a wizard. Of course, the member must first provide "necessary" information, like their registration number, real name, etc. Yet another approach involved setting up a billboard announcing "Enter to win a Toyota Landcruiser. Write to thepalace@overture.com and enclose your registration number." It should come as no surprise that the e-mail address is not TPI's.

In other scams, the confidence artist may befriend users, only later to make some unusual requests. In what Dr. Xenu calls the notorious "Picture Scam," one member - who presented as a bisexual woman - asked her new friends for nude photos of themselves. In reality, the scam artist was posting the pictures on a pay-per-view web site.

Because they work in secrecy, and thrive on being clever, scam artists are difficult to detect ahead of time. The best strategy is probably preventative. Users need to be informed of basic scam techniques, similar to how AOL warns users that AOL officials will never ask anyone for their password. Once caught, hardcore scam artists will probably be banned.

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Gangs

Gangs have been an especially difficult problem at the sites. Usually consisting of adolescents, some of these groups have come and gone. A few notable exceptions, like the "Legion," were more resistant to extinction. The gangs' deviant activities fall into many of the categories discussed elsewhere in this article. As bullies who do their best to intimidate other users, they resort to all varieties of foul language and offensive avatars. They may run scams or attempt to abuse the software through flooding, password hacking, and crashing. Often they become territorial and drive other users out of the room that they believe is their turf (not surprisingly, one gang claimed the "Pit" - a room that looked like Hades - as their home base). They adopted an unusual keyboard character as insignia to place next to their name, thus indicating their gang colors. Any other Palace member who tried to use the insignia was berated and ridiculed. Wizards suspected that some of these gangs spent a great deal of time on as well as off Palace planning their escapades - as if creating havoc became a game where points were awarded to teams for chasing away and crashing innocent bystanders, or for the number of times a team member was pinned, gagged, and killed.

Of course, being adolescent, gangs thrived on any and all attempts to fight the authorities. Their favorite pastimes included bashing and impersonating wizards in an attempt to humiliate them or destroy their reputations. As willing self-destroyers, gang members tried to outdo each other by pushing the rules to the limits and antagonizing wizards in order to force gags, pins, and kills onto themselves. Some would play more subtle headgames. They'd be very polite and respectful when a wizard was around, then turn into abusive, bashing snerts when the wizards left (the "Eddie Haskel" syndrome). Or they'd turn wizards against each other by befriending one and badmouthing another ("splitting"). Turning other bored, lonely adolescents against the authorities also was part of the fun. Gangs fashioned themselves as revolutionaries and freedom fighters who were resisting the evil efforts of wizards and TPI to repress people ("They are denying our freedom of speech," "The wizards killed me for doing NOTHING!"). Some gang members even went public with their outcries by posting messages to the Palace User Group mailing list and the Community Standards newsgroup. In their messages they justified their actions, tried to rally support for themselves, and attacked both the wizards and TPI.

Like anyone else in the ever-expanding Palace community, gang members are trying to find a place for themselves, a feeling of belonging, a sense of purpose and status. Unfortunately, they try to achieve those goals by being hostile towards others and the establishment. Attacking outsiders and authority figures is one way an insecure, alienated group tenuously holds onto it's own solidarity and identity. The Legion's need to feel unique was evident in their clever and highly possessive use of a username insignia that even experienced wizard PC'ers had a hard time duplicating on their keyboard. They gain a sense of power from the group membership and from the concept of themselves as being clever hackers. Taking risks, displays of bravado, and pushing the limits are all badges of distinction among these teen males.

On more rare occasions, the "gangs" are adults. When TPI officials tracked down the origin of one group of misbehaving users, they turned out to be several men in the technical department of a rather large company. When TPI phoned the operations manager, he apologetically explained how the company recently provided employees with internet access. Some of them, apparently, took that as an opportunity to act like adolescents.

Ph's Horse, a TPI/EC official and leader of the wizards, raised an important question on the wizard mailing list. Does the gang mentality actually exist in Palace or is it a convenient excuse to get rid of kids that wizards don't like? While some gangs clearly are deviant, there may be borderline cases. An unpleasant behavior in one person is simply unpleasant. An unpleasant behavior in a group of people seems more threatening. It's possible that wizards might get annoyed with an adolescent group that is misbehaving, but not really posing any serious problem. When the wizards attempt to curb them, they respond in the typical adolescent manner - disrespectful, resistant. More reprimands result in more discourteous reactions. Eventually, with their patience tested, wizards may unintentionally bait the gang into misbehaving more blatantly, resulting in a pin, gag, or kill. Outraged by the perceived heavy-handedness of the authorities, the gang now pumps up their snertish behavior. The situation escalates, a vicious cycle is born.

Differences in how people perceive a "gang" were evident in the many discussions about the Legion on the wizard mailing list. Some felt they were potentially dangerous hackers who might do real damage to the Palace technology. Others argued that they were simply bored, mischievous kids whose wishes about being a hacker far outweighed their ability. The "gangs" were simply a nuisance. These differences in perception are important to keep in mind when deciding on a intervention.

On his wizard web site. Dr. Xenu briefly takes a look at the bright side of snert gangs. Although their attempted hacking is annoying, they do sometimes reveal software security loopholes that need a fix. Although they are arrogant and hostile, they do bring a bit of dynamism to Palace life.

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Banning the Gang

One extreme but tempting way to handle a gang is to ban them, all of them. Anybody who professes allegiance to the gang, who wears their insignia, gets killed on sight. The urge to do this surely is a sign of extreme frustration on the part of wizards and TPI/EC officials who must deal with their antics. Although this sweet revenge has been discussed by wizards, it's never been implemented. It's more complicated than it seems and could easily backfire. Because members can alter their identities, determining exactly who is in the gang, or who are the most deserving of being banned, is not easy. Banning an entire group of people also draws the authorities onto thin ice. Will it look like a punitive overreaction or sweeping prejudice? Will it antagonize the gang, martyr it in the eyes of their sympathizers, thereby strengthening them, unifying them, and making them more determined to seek revenge? Kill or ban individual people for their specific misdeeds, several wizards have suggested. Don't punish people for their affiliations.

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Getting to Know You (befriending the gang)

A few wizards have tried a diametrically different approach to dealing with gangs. They hang out with them, try to understand and befriend them. After such visits, a few wizards have reported that the snerts are actually OK kids. They had fun and enjoyed talking with them. The gang described how they felt stigmatized. Just their showing up at the Palace made other users edgy and irritable. To them, it didn't seem fair that they should be treated that way just because they belonged to a "gang." In private conversations (whispers), some of the gang members opened up to the wizard even more. They described how they were bored, having problems in school, or uncomfortable with some of the antics that their ringleader put them up to. These kids felt sorry about the gang's mischief and didn't want to be banned along with the "really bad" ones. The wizards suggested to their colleagues that perhaps these kids were just alienated and misunderstood, that if wizards and other users got to know and accept them, maybe they would calm down. At the very least, perhaps some of the more "normal" gang members could be persuaded to either leave the gang or refuse to participate in its antics, thereby diluting the gang's strength.

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Rehabilitating the Gang?

If you can befriend gang members, maybe you can go even further. Maybe you can rehabilitate them. Following the Kung Fu principle of "redirecting" the attacker, some wizards have suggested that the gang's energy might be channeled into more productive avenues. Offer the gang members something valuable to do for the Palace community. Ask them to work on a project, but make sure that the project is indeed important and not just an idle activity, otherwise they will see through the tactic. WELCOME the gang - tell them you're interested in their ideas, their energy, their creativity, their sense of humor. Paradoxical strategies sometimes work well with rebellious adolescents. In a sense, this method for dealing with the renegade group involves making them part of the establishment. Rehabilitating the snert is an interesting and challenging strategy which I'll discuss again later in this article.

Critics have challenged the rehabilitation strategy, or any attempt to befriend and reason with the hardcore snerts. At best, the therapeutic effect may last for a few hours or days, but then the snerts are back at their trouble-making again. Some say that the snert gang members simply treat the whole rehabilitation scenario as yet another game. Behind their facade of cooperation, they are planning the next round of mischief. They'll try to use the "nice" wizard as a pawn in the game, or as a wedge to create conflict among the authorities. Even if you succeed in reasoning with an individual kid, he will eventually just return to the gang, which has a lot more to offer him. Some kids take the authority figure's gesture of politeness or concern as a sign of weakness. They respect and respond better to a "Knock it off or I'll kick your ass off

this server!" than a "Please don't do that" - if they respond at all. Anyone who thinks they can rehabilitate such snerts, some wizards claim, is in for a severe disappointment. "We don't need to dwell on being social workers," they say.

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Divide, Conquer, and Cutting off the Gang's Head

If individual gang members CAN be rehabilitated by showing an interest in them, welcoming their contribution to Palace, and making them feel that they are a "somebody"- it will weaken their dependence on the gang as well as the overall strength of the gang itself. Whittle away at the gang membership by drawing kids out. Turn the individual kid against the gang. Convince him that the gang - and especially its leaders - are simply using him as a pawn. Warn him that he might wind up banned along with all the rest. Some wizards have suggested that killing individual members might enhance this divide-and-conquer strategy because disconnecting gang members temporarily separates them, thereby disrupting the group. It was even suggested that a special software feature be added that would enable wizards to make gang members invisible to each other.

The single most powerful intervention would be the one focused on the leaders. Every acting-out group has a focal point. Usually it's one or two people who entertain and inspire the others with their antics. The attention they get fuels their act. They in turn encourage the subordinates to join in. Although it's VERY difficult to befriend, reason with, and rehabilitate these leaders, if you succeed, you will swing the whole group dynamics towards rehabilitation. If that fails, there's always the last resort of cutting off the group's head. Kill or ban the leader/s. Some groups - especially weak ones - quickly collapse without their general. The potential problem, however, is that the banned leader becomes a martyr, which may rally the group's strength and determination. Or the leader's absence simply triggers a struggle among the underlings to see who can capture the vacant throne.

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Tough Love for the Gang (kill, three strikes, ban)

When it comes to very entrenched snert behavior among gangs, many wizards like to take a firm stance. It may take the form of Tough Love - i.e., "We care about you, but keep misbehaving and you're outta here." It's a strict, no nonsense approach. After the initial warning, snerts are quickly punished without prejudice or anger on the part of the wizards. As one TPI official stated:

These kids get out of line, kill 'em. They mouth back, kill 'em. They argue with you about changing a prop, kill 'em. They play dumb over something you *know* happened, kill 'em. They utter obscenities, kill 'em. They don't learn after their first offense, kill 'em longer. No warning, no apologies. According to the "three strikes" rule, hardcore snerts are told flat out that they will be banned if they misbehave again after returning from their second kill. End of discussion. TPI statistics show that only a small fraction of 1% of all users are killed more than once, so such recidivist snerts are a rather rare (i.e., deviant) phenomenon. When applying kills and bans, it's important to be dispassionate and consistent. This will help minimize the gang members' tendency to turn the wizards' "unfair" and "hostile" actions into fuel for their battle cry. It will also help curb their attempts to use inconsistencies in the wizards' interventions as a tool for playing them off against each other.

One difficulty in carrying out a consistent Tough Love policy is keeping tabs on the gang members. The software "tracking" feature is a useful early warning system that notifies wizards when snerts have returned to the site. When wizards kill, the server records this activity in a log along with any comments entered by the wizard. Some wizards also keep a personal list of known snerts. It has been suggested that a wizard-wide "shit list" be created that records who the snerts are, who has been warned and banned, and how many times a particular snert was killed. Such information would make it easier for wizards to work together consistently and for implementing the three strikes rule. For really awful snerts who like to wander through PalaceSpace, there's also the touchy issue of sharing snert information - including "blackball lists" - with other Palace sites.

4. Techno-Crimes (Hacking)

All online deviant behavior requires some degree of technical skill because it is being expressed via a computer. What I'll call "techno-crimes", on the other hand, require a bit more knowledge and skill than the ordinary user possesses. In some cases, it may be a rather simple trick that the trouble-maker learned from a colleague or discovered on his own. In other cases, it may be a very sophisticated hack requiring considerable expertise. Basically, a techno-crime involves exploiting the software for purposes other than intended by the programmers. Mild versions would include mischievous pranks designed to impress or, at worst, confuse other users. For example, a user writes a script that makes closed doors look like they are open, or a vicarious lurker manages to alter the room occupancy number so everyone thinks there is an invisible user among them. Sometimes the hack may not be deviance at all but a creative contribution to Palace culture.

True techno-crimes are clearly anti-social and abusive. Directly or indirectly, someone pays a price. The most common types are flooding, crashing, and hacking for passwords and registration keys.

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Flooding

Flooding is a good example of an unsophisticated techno-crime. A naive user may repeatedly change avatars, play sounds, or run a script (like opening and closing a door), not realizing that this swamps the server and slows down the conversation in the room - what users call "lag." A true techno-snert understands this effect and floods deliberately in order to gain attention ("see what I can do!") or to disrupt the socializing in the room, probably as a result of feeling alienated and jealous. More insidious and slightly more clever snerts will target a specific person with repeated whispers packed full of abusive or nonsense text, which cripples the victim with lag. Gangs have been known to "gang-whisper" victims by pounding them over and over again with such voluminous text balloons. All deliberate flooders are driven by a need to feel powerful. Having to disrupt other people's ability to communicate probably reflects their own inabilities and insecurities about relating to others.

Possible Interventions - The server can be programmed to disconnect certain types of flooders. Bounce too often on the bed in one of the private rooms (which is a script), and the server automatically will oust you from the site while politely informing you of your faux pas. Wizards also can turn all scripts off in a room where snerts are deliberately using them to flood the server, and then turn them back on when the hyperactive pranksters have calmed down or left (clever snerts might realize they can move to another room and try again). Depending on the particular method of flooding, wizards may also warn, pin, gag, propgag, or, if necessary, kill. One difficulty is that wizards too may be lagged by the snert, which makes intervening more difficult. The intervention may need to be swift in order to remedy the situation as quickly as possible.

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Crashing

Crashing other users, or the entire server, is a much more sophisticated techno-crime. On one occasion, snerts figured out a way to use scripts to crash the PC users in the room, forcing them to reboot. The "screechers" used scripts to create a horrible high pitched shrill on the speakers of Mac users (technically, not a true crash... but it sure sounded like one). Wizards intervene quickly with these antics, usually with a kill - lest they become the victim of the crash too. But then comes the more challenging question. How did the snert do it? In some cases, it took the wizards and TPI officials a while to figure out these tricks. Crashing is a good example of the sometimes highly sophisticated technical battle of wits that get played out between the Forces of Good and the Forces of Evil. Looking at the half full glass, some wizards and TPI/EC officials see crashers as an opportunity to fix loopholes in the software.

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Password and Registration Key Hacking

A hardcore netter once defined a "true hacker" to me as someone who illegitimately breaks into a system in order to access restricted privileges or databases. If this an accurate definition, then Palace has had its share of hackers. Usually they try to crack the password safeguards to gain wizard powers (impersonating a wizard in order to persuade another

wizard to reveal the password is another tactic, but not really hacking). Others try to crack or bypass the registration key system in order to gain membership abilities without paying. Safeguards built into the Palace program eliminate some of the less sophisticated hacks. Anyone who persists in trying to figure out the wizard password will be automatically disconnected from the site after a few failed tries. The more sophisticated hacks are much less frequent. Similar to flooding, it becomes a cat and mouse game where the Palace technical team detects the hack and fixes the loophole. Sun Tzu, the famous Chinese warrior and strategist, stated that you must embrace the enemy's attempts to detect your weaknesses. With this knowledge, your defenses can be fortified.... Or, as Nietzsche once said, "that which doesn't kill me, makes me stronger."

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Inside the Hacker

What motivates the hacker? Some are captivated by the challenge and excitement of venturing into forbidden territories. They derive a sense of accomplishment, mastery, and power from doing what others can't. Impressing other users, especially one's fellow hackers, is a source of self-esteem. Some are motivated by a rebellious nature. Cracking the system of the "institution" reflects a defiant attitude towards authority figures. Psychoanalytic theory would predict an underlying Oedipal striving to challenge and prove oneself better than the father. In extreme cases, a hacker - and especially hacker wannabes - feel pressured to demonstrate that they are better and smarter than anyone. The cat-and-mouse drama of beating the system becomes a tireless, relentless quest to prove oneself. "I will prevail" becomes the battle cry. Defeat creates feelings of powerlessness and humiliation that fuel the fires. Driven by inner insecurities, they brag about their accomplishments and supposed powers (like being able to kill). When other users (and undercover wizards) ask them to display these powers, they make excuses. Such false bravado and desperate needs to prove oneself may be more common in the hacker wannabe than in the truly skilled hacker.

More on Intervention Strategies

In this section I'd like to expand on some of the intervention strategies discussed earlier. I'll discuss them here in a more general context rather than related to a specific type of deviant behavior. All intervention strategies can be categorized according to three dimensions:

- **Preventative versus Remedial:** Does the intervention create conditions that attempt to prevent the deviance from ever occurring, as in creating restricted areas and controlling traffic flow. Or does it attempt to fix the problem after it appears, as in pins and kills? Preventative measures shape the culture at the congenital level, while remedial measures correct aberrations in the culture's evolution. "Secondary" prevention detects a problem in its very earliest stages (before it's yet a problem) and averts its development; "primary" prevention keeps a problem from ever occurring at all. As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention...

- **Interpersonal versus Technical:** Does the intervention primarily rely on a psychological or social process, usually a wizard personally assessing the situation and persuading the offender to behave, which requires social skills? Or does it rely on a software tool like pin, gag, kill, or even fully automated server actions like killer bots? Many strategies combine the interpersonal and technical approaches in various mixtures. Without the human touch, technical tools like pin and kill will only be marginally effective. For this reason, with few exceptions, TPI/EC officials discourage wizards from taking action (pin, gag, kill, etc.) "across rooms" - without actually being there in person with the offender. Fully automated server actions surely save time and energy, but online "community" means people interacting with people, not with programs.

- **User or Superuser:** In the case of technical tools, is the feature available to all users (e.g., "mute") or just superusers/wizards (e.g., gag, pin, kill)? The overarching issue is power - and who has it. Presumably, the basic interpersonal interventions are available to everyone, although not everyone will be skilled at those interventions.

Big Brother is Watching (Presence)

Establishing a presence - a mostly psychological intervention - can achieve a lot in preventing mischief before it starts. If wizards are nearby, snerts will tend to behave. For this reason, TPI strongly encouraged wizards to wear their badges (unless they were off-duty). Of course, even if wizards are present, snerts can always slip off to another room to pursue their antics. Following them might then be perceived as harassment. Using scripts, wizards could monitor activity in another room (e.g., detecting foul language) and then when necessary inject a warning from across rooms, but this constitutes eavesdropping. It's a delicate balance between establishing a healthy "presence" and slipping into the role of an intrusive Big Brother. By strolling through the site (patrolling) and sending global messages across all rooms, wizards can let all users know that they are there, somewhere.

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Nazis and Bleeding Hearts

Wizards have jokingly drawn a distinction between their colleagues that seem like "Nazis" and those who act like "Bleeding Hearts." Of course, these terms are parodies. Neither extreme makes for a good intervention philosophy. Wizards who discipline users out of a need to control, feel powerful, or forge some imagined "perfect" society need retraining and an honest look at their own motives. So too for overly sympathetic wizards who fear confrontation, anger (including their own), and being disliked.

Taken down several notches, the Nazi/Bleeding Heart distinction does point to two very different, equally viable methods for handling deviance. The distinction reminds me of the psychological research on parenting styles which demonstrated that strict and permissive approaches both can work well in raising children - as long as the parent is not acting cold, distant, or cruel. Being firm and decisive, but also fair, may be just the right medicine for certain types of misbehaving users (the "tough love" tactic). Other problematic users may respond better to a more sympathetic, tolerant approach. Some wizards may be better at one method and not the other, which means that one wizard may call on another to handle a situation because "your style works better with this type of person." Some interpersonally talented wizards will be effective at both styles and can switch accordingly.

Entire online communities may endorse either a strict or permissive philosophy. Those determined to make their home a friendly and peaceful place may quickly dispense with trouble-makers. Those with a more open and permissive ideology (and those run by a business that needs paid registrations) may be more tolerant. The composition of wizards - strict, permissive or a mix - will be determined by the site's philosophy and will reciprocally shape the site's philosophy.

The various intervention strategies discussed throughout this article fall at different points along the strict/permissive continuum, with a leaning towards the permissive end.

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Talk is Good!

That's what Jim Bumgardner has said on several occasions when offering advice to wizards on how to deal with misbehavers. It's generally better to talk than to kill. It's the purely social approach. Communities (and the business behind them) develop and thrive on the arrival of new people. If there's any hope of socializing a misbehaving user, that hope can only be realized if you talk to them first. The anonymity of cyberspace encourages people to act up, including some good people. There's no logic in throwing the baby out with the bath water. Talking gives people a chance, especially when their acting up is an attempt to gain some attention and a reaction to feeling left out. Of course, talking is no panacea. A variety of complications may arise, and in some cases talking just plain fails. For example:

- The misbehaving user does not respond to you. In this case, wizards may gag, prop gag, or pin in order to get the person's attention. Then they inform the person that "You must respond" or "I need a confirmation that you understand. Otherwise I will have to disconnect you." Some wizards gag a non-responding person for a specified period of time (e.g., 2 hours).

- The misbehaving user responds very politely and apologetically to the wizard, then just continues with the snertish antics after the wizard leaves, perhaps even ridiculing the wizard behind his/her back (the

Eddie Haskel Syndrome). Being paged over and over again by users complaining about the same snert is a sure sign that talking has failed.

- The snert just wants to argue, so the conversation goes nowhere. One good example of this is the "freedom fighter".

- The unruly user responds well to one wizard's attempts to talk, but is resistant to another. This could be attributed to how the user is reacting to a perceived difference in the wizards' interpersonal styles (for example, the perceived "Nazi/Bleeding Heart" distinction). Or the user may be attempting to play the wizards off against each other (splitting). In this case, wizards need to compare notes.

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Whisper

As Ph's Horse points out in his guidelines for wizards, it's usually best to whisper to the misbehaving user. Public reprimands and warnings tend to be embarrassing, and could provoke determined snerts into even higher levels of snertdom, especially if they deliberately are playing to the room. They may want revenge, or feel a need to save face. Public confrontation tends to fuel the drama for all involved, including wizards who are on the spot to do something. Lots of egos are on the line. Whispering also can help reduce the tendency for other users in the room to harass the perpetrator when they see a wizard attempting to correct him. Lastly, whispering does establishes a more personal connection to the user, which may have a powerful effect. For some, it may be the recognition that they were looking for in the first place. Many behavioral problems are the result of ignorance or a child looking for attention, so a more personal reminder may be exactly what's needed to remedy the situation.

One possible disadvantage to whispering is that other people in the room do not get a chance to see exactly what the wizard is saying. A wizard's skillful handling of a snert could serve as a role model for other users. It's also good public relations for the reputation of the wizards. Without seeing what the wizard is saying, some users may project all sorts of fantasies onto the wizard's actions ("he killed that guy for no reason at all!). At the very least, intervening wizards should politely inform the room that they are dealing with the situation and would be glad to talk to people once the situation is resolved.

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Be Polite, Be Dispassionate

Being polite and showing respect for the misbehaving user is a good policy - even when a horrible snert shows none of this in return. On some level, your modeling a humane attitude is sinking in, even if you can't see the effects. Experienced wizards politely ask people to correct their misbehavior, politely explain the rules, politely administer the "punishment." Some like to sprinkle their interventions with "please" and "thank-you." Getting angry with snerts probably will only antagonize them. You become the hostile, critical authority figure that they already hate, and the situation will escalate. Maintaining that dispassionate attitude in the face of an insulting, obnoxious snert is a bit easier when you keep in mind that their abusive tone usually has nothing to do with you personally. They have no idea who you are. You are just another authority figure, a convenient target for what psychoanalytic thinkers call a "transference" reaction. Use that concept of transference as a shield to protect your self-esteem.

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Don't Argue, Don't' Bait

Part of being polite and dispassionate is not arguing with the snert. This is exactly what some hostile, oppositional users want. Some of them - especially the "freedom fighters" - will be exceptionally good at luring you into a fight. It's a trap because it's impossible to win such debates. The snert's true underlying (passive-aggressive) motive is to feel powerful and in control by antagonizing you into doing something hostile. It's a game to them, and you're their pawn. Ignore the person, or mute them. If you're a wizard, keep in mind that you, ultimately, are in control because you have the power to pin, gag, or kill the user if they persist in their verbal abuse. Despite the onslaught of an obnoxious snert, some wizards find peace of mind and confidence in knowing that they do have this "final word." They don't feel the need to debate. They simply state the rules, expect compliance, and dispassionately apply the penalty if the user doesn't show it. It's a lot less stressful when you avoid entangling your ego in the situation.

It's only human to want to return sarcasm and defiance with more of the same. It's sometimes very tempting to take on the snert in a battle of wits, especially when you're a wizard and you know that you can pin or kill if you so choose. Having the ultimate last word is very satisfying - it's a remedy for all sorts of painful memories from our childhood when we DIDN'T have the last word. And so, wizards may be tempted to "play with their food." Some may want to playfully (sadistically?) poke at the snert and rile him up until he does something really obnoxious, which gives good reason to kill him. Such baiting is one way to turn a borderline snert situation into a clear cut snert situation. However, that borderline snert could actually be a decent person. Deliberately aggravating him would be akin to entrapment.

One might argue that sparring with the snert is just part of the online show. It's fun entertainment. It may be exactly what some users are looking for. It may indeed be the accepted norm in some online communities. But sarcastic, insulting debates rarely fall into the category of humane and empathic encounters. For authority figures like wizards, as Ph's Horse points out, it's also not very professional.

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Humor and Deflection

As that Kung Fu technique suggests, it's sometimes best not to tackle a force straight on. Work around it. Deflect and redirect it. Some wizards have found that being light-hearted and joking with snerts sometimes can alleviate their obnoxious attitude. While showing some mature restraint, kid them, join in the fun, and then move the obnoxious behavior into more socially acceptable behavior. Ask them about themselves, offer to trade props, or try to get them involved in a game. Aikido calls it "joining and leading." Such purely social interventions take practice and may require some natural interpersonal talent.

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Snert Rehabilitation

One of the greatest challenges is to persuade the snert to change his ways, to become a productive, friendly member of the community. Wizards who have succeeded at this task found it to be a highly rewarding experience. Some wizards like to specialize in it. Converting a snert requires considerable interpersonal skills and is not something everyone can do. It involves listening to and even befriending the person. The person must be engaged on a level other than their snertishness. Acknowledge their positive attributes and skills. Redirect their energies toward constructive activities. Wizards have described lonely, bored, alienated, and extremely bright teenagers who caused trouble by mischievously fiddling with scripts. They responded well to the wizards' friendly curiosity about the scripts, their praise of the teens' intelligence, and their suggestions about how the teens could help rather than aggravate the community. Taking such young people under their wings, wizards have successfully converted them.

As a general rule, mental and physical problems that respond quickly to a treatment weren't that severe to start off with. The same is true of efforts to rehabilitate snerts. The more readily they respond, the better off they were (psychologically speaking) in the first place. Others will flat out reject any rehabilitation attempt. Some will pretend to respond. They'll offer all sorts of apologies, explanations, promises, and commitments... and then will keep right on doing what they did before. Beneath their suave lies and deceptions there may be sociopathic tendencies. They have their own agenda and will simply use the rehabilitation scenario to further their cause. Monumental efforts to convert such people might possibly succeed, but should that much effort be expended? It depends on the values of the community and the designated purpose of those who oversee it. As a TPI official once said to the wizards, "We're not social workers here."

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Circumventing Anonymity (spooking)

If anonymity increases deviant behavior, then one way to deal with that deviance would be to decrease anonymity. For example, wizards have access to a user's IP, which reveals the user's location. It's possible to "spook" misbehaving users with such information. For example, after discovering that he lived in the same town as one rather obnoxious gang member, a wizard decided to play a little trick on him. Out of the blue, he asked the user "How is everything in Bigsville?" He was hoping to inject a little paranoia - as well as some conscience and sense of responsibility - into the gang mentality. The user was indeed "freaked" and kept asking how the wizard knew where he lived. While playing such tricks on chronic troublemakers may not be an optimal approach in all situations, letting them know that "we know where you live" (literally and metaphorically) could help alleviate their mischief. In other online communities, the e-

mail addresses of the users are readily available to everyone. Without the protective shield of anonymity, people can be held accountable for what they say and do. This policy probably does help minimize deviant behavior.

But there are problems with taking away people's anonymity. Part of the fun and philosophy of Palace is to experiment with one's identity, to experiment with fantasy, in a contained and "confidential" environment. The more you remove anonymity, the less comfortable people will feel in pursuing these experiments. If others have access to your IP, or your e-mail address, they can acquire lots of other information about you. Without your necessarily wanting it, they can enter other areas of your life, violate your privacy. This not only sabotages Palace philosophy, but also the basic ideology of the internet which upholds the right of the individual's anonymity. Most users come to Palace to make friends, some wizards have stated, so why not let peer pressure be the accountability system rather than the removal of anonymity by allowing access to e-mail addresses. Others have pointed out that many chronic snerts already know about the wizard's IP access, so "spooking" will have little effect.

The circumventing of anonymity can work in both directions. Trouble-makers are clever. They too can find ways to discover the "real life" facts about wizards and TPI/EC officials. Seeking revenge for being killed or banned, gang members have been known to send e-mails containing the wizard or official's full name, home address, and phone number... accompanied by veiled threats and warnings to "be careful how you treat me."

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Bring in the Real World

When dealing with chronic trouble-makers, there's sometimes no choice but to completely bypass anonymity and enter the person's "real" world. In a last ditched effort to reason with users, TPI officials have called them on the phone - or spoken to their parents. In some cases the direct personal connection may have a powerful effect, but sometimes it has little effect. In fact, some hardcore trouble-makers use "real-life" contacts as a tool in their game. They call the TPI office in an attempt to pry information out of the workers. They warn TPI that they will bring their parents (especially when they are lawyers) into the situation in order to support them in their battle against TPI's "injustices." On a few occasions, (self- proclaimed) journalists and professors have threatened to go public with their grudges against Palace by publishing a scathing article.

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Undercover Work

Some misbehaving users are very good at the Eddie Haskel maneuver - i.e., being perfect angels when wizards are around, and devils once they are gone. When other users continue to report very abusive behavior, but the alleged perpetrator can just never seem to be caught in the act, wizards might go undercover. You remove your badge, change your name and avatar, and go to the room where the perpetrator is hanging out in order to quietly observe his behavior. When the alleged snert is young, some wizards have also tried to act like a teenager in order to fit into the group more unobtrusively. If and when the deviant behavior rears its ugly head, the wizard identifies him/herself (by showing the badge), and then intervenes.

In discussing undercover work, wizards have pointed out a number of potential problems:

- Some consider it a form of deception and eavesdropping, which is deviant behavior itself.

- Growing impatient with simply observing, some wizards may be tempted to stimulate the alleged snert into doing something wrong, which is essentially baiting.

- If a user asks for any wizards in the room to identify themselves by putting on their badges, what should the wizard do? A TPI policy stated that when a user asks a wizard to show his badge - in order to verify that she/he is not a wizard impostor - the wizard should do so. But should this rule apply when an alleged snert might be trying to detect an undercover wizard? Off-duty wizards are not required to show their badges even if a user asks them, but the distinction between "off-duty" and being "undercover" can be quite murky.

- If undercover work becomes common, then snerts will get wise. They'll become even more careful and clever about when they misbehave. They'll try to find ways to detect undercover wizards (tricks for this have been discovered). Or they'll accuse wizards of harassment and entrapment.

Blackball Lists

Really bad snerts can be banned from a site, but that can't stop them from going to other sites. So how do you prevent the spread of their mischief? For the extreme cases, wizards have discussed the temptation to put first rate snerts on a blackball list that could be shared with non-TPI sites. The list might contain the user's name, registration code, and IP, or even "real world" data like their name, address, and phone number. In the spirit of reciprocity, these other communities could then share information about THEIR outlaws. Theoretically, these blackball lists periodically could be distributed to other specified site owners, or provided only when requested by another site owner. Such cross-site efforts would also contribute to the general spirit of cooperation and integration of all Palace communities, which is valuable to the health and survival of the entire Palace universe.

While discussing blackball lists, the wizards pointed out a number of important controversies and complications:

- Are these lists a violation of the user's privacy? Does the information about misbehaving users and their behavior belong to the site owner, and can they do what they please with that information?

- Will these lists result in prejudicial perceptions and actions towards users who haven't yet done anything wrong at a particular site. Will wizards be itching to jump all over them at the slightest provocation? Will they become scapegoats? Blackball lists have a tendency to expand into a paranoia that rolls over innocent people. Take a look at McCarthyism.

- With hundreds of Palace sites in existence, and more being created all the time, just how would blackball lists be distributed? Would the exchange of information become haphazard and/or biased? Does TPI/EC, as the creator of the software and owner of the sites where many users (especially newcomers) dwell, have any obligation to share such information with other site owners?

- The definition of "deviance" and the reasons for placing a person on a blackball list may vary widely from one Palace community to another. An offense at one site might not be considered bad at another. In some cases, a site owner may ban or place a person on a blackball list for idiosyncratic reasons. It's a personal grudge, or even a lover's tiff. To be effective, these lists might need to contain descriptions of the crime. Universal standards about "serious" crimes might need to be established. Getting agreement across numerous site owners about such standards would not be easy.

In extreme cases, wizards and TPI have shared information about unruly users with other site owners. TPI's policy was that if someone has a justified reason for needing such information, they were willing to share it with the caveat that, should law enforcement action be deemed necessary, they reserve the right to require TPI's approval prior to any action being taken. Before wizards share such information with other sites, TPI encourages them to discuss it first with TPI officials and to present the information in a professional manner, without a spiteful or derogatory tone.

Restricted Areas and Traffic Flow

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of kills. One way to control deviant behavior is to designate exactly where (or when) such behaviors are tolerated. This is another variation of the Kung Fu principle of redirecting a force rather than trying to stop it head on. Early in the history of the TPI Mansion site, when the population began to boom, misbehaving users became more prolific. Attempts were made to control that deviance, but not stamp it out completely. Doing so would have been rather difficult. It also would have created an oppressive atmosphere. Instead, a new site called "Welcome" was created where rules about misbehaving were more strictly enforced. The client program was changed so that new users were, by default setting, connected first to that site. Their initial Palace experience, therefore, would be the kinder, gentler atmosphere of Welcome than the more raucous Mansion.

This strategy of running a more restrictive site alongside a less restrictive one did result in some complications. Some people were concerned about a "politically correct" atmosphere evolving at Welcome. Justifiably concerned about business, TPI considered this a necessary evil of creating a place where new users would feel friendliness, acceptance, and a desire to register their software. It also was a bit difficult keeping the cultures of the "sister" sites separate. People did spill over from one site to the other. Working both sites, TPI wizards had to adjust to different intervention standards at each community. Many wizards seemed to prefer working at Mansion - due, at least in part, to their

preferring the less restrictive atmosphere which was less work and perhaps more fun. But this left Welcome unsupervised and more vulnerable to deviance. To keep the two communities separate and different, TPI established more clear guidelines for wizards about managing unacceptable behavior at each site. They also set up a system of perks that encouraged wizards to spend more time at Welcome, and asked wizards to choose either Welcome or Mansion as their primary "home." Separate wizard mailing lists and passwords were created for each site, in order to enhance the separation of the two communities.

Within a site, some areas can be more restrictive and some less. At the Mansion site, the rules are a bit stricter in the more public rooms where traffic is heavier (Harry's Bar and the Gate, where people arrive). Few, if any, rules hold for users in private, locked rooms - as long as everyone in the room consents to what is going on there. Other rooms fall somewhere between these two extremes. This variation in strictness across rooms can, of course, lead to considerable confusion among users and wizards about what is allowed where. The standards must be clearly spelled out, as in "Rules Room" where written descriptions of the standards can be easily accessed by everyone. Coordinated with such rules, signs based on easily understood rating systems could be posted in each room as reminder ("This room is rated G"). Going one step further, some wizards have suggested implanting an adult verification code into a person's registration key, so that children (or sensitive adults) could not enter rooms where more "loose" behavior was tolerated.

If standards do vary from room to room, then attention must be paid to the juxtaposition of the rooms and the flow of traffic between them. Placing an X or R-rated room next to a G-rated one is not a good idea. Experienced users will know how to jump from one room to any other, so the physical layout of doorways should be designed with the novice user in mind. Exits from permissive rooms need to be clearly visible. There will also be a tendency for loose behavior to spill out of a room into adjacent areas, as in lewd users leaning their avatars out of the private rooms and into the hallway in order to proposition people.

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A Home for Bad Boys (Dodge City and the Pit)

If you can create rooms with varying levels of strictness, then why not create a place where there are no rules at all? It could be a haven for snerts that would draw them away from the mainstream. "Giving them a place of their own" might be a good intervention with gangs. Hand over a territory to them and perhaps even put the head snert in charge as "sheriff." It might be therapeutic for him, which may then filter down to the gang. Perhaps he would learn some sense of responsibility and self-worth, as well as gain an understanding of what a wizard's life is like.

Something like this was attempted in the Dodge City experiment. At this TPI sponsored site, there were no wizards, no rules, no holds barred. You could do anything you wanted without the establishment looking over your shoulder. In an attempt to redirect and contain the snert problem, TPI deliberately created the site as a haven for naughtiness and mischief. Snerts indeed gathered there. Unfortunately, they were not content with a kingdom of their own. They used Dodge City as a staging area to launch raids on the Main Mansion, where they made as much a nuisance of themselves as possible. Not long after it opened, Dodge City was closed down. The lesson learned from this failed experiment? Acting out is indeed acting OUT. Anti-social people will never be content with themselves. They need a more normal social structure to act against, thereby defining themselves. No matter what territory you yield to them, there will always be barbarians at the gate.

Sometimes snerts choose their own home. At the Mansion site, several months after the closing of Dodge City, they tended to gather in the Pit - a room where the background graphics resembled Hades and the program automatically places horns on your head. It wasn't surprising that snerts found the room appealing (something to keep in mind when designing graphics and scripts for a room). The snerts used the Pit as a staging area for their forays into other parts of the site. Any user who happened to stumble into their home territory usually was not greeted very warmly. To break up the gang, TPI closed down the Pit, but that only sent the snerts in search of other places to roost - especially Grand Central, a surrealistic room where a train is crashing through a window, and the Dressing Room, where scripts enable users to exchange props and cybersex sometimes occurs. Both rooms were predictable choices by the snerts. Eventually, the pit was reopened.

Some say that giving snerts their own home, implicitly or explicitly, only reinforces their negative behavior. It gives them the opportunity to gather strength. If they really want their own place, some wizards have stated, snerts can always colonize other vacant Palace sites or create their own site. But they never do. They want to be near the center of activity, not away from it. They want the opportunity to stick thorns into the side of the community and the establishment. That's their game.

In a message to the wizard mailing list, I speculated about a possible solution to the Pit dilemma. The underlying logic is a compromise: allow the snerts to gather in the pit, thereby remaining near the community, but don't reinforce their behavior by officially handing the Pit over to them. If a user hits a link to the Pit, a warning sign comes up. "You are about to enter the Pit. Unfortunately, unpleasant users tend to hang out there. If you want to return to the room where you came from, press XXX." Misbehavior that spills out of the pit is quickly corrected by wizards, but activity within the pit is mostly unsupervised. The snerts have an unofficial "home," they are partially isolated from the mainstream, and wizards know where they are. Also, some users might be intrigued by the warning notice and want to enter the pit to match wits with the snerts. It would be their idea of fun. It might also keep the snerts busy dealing with the challengers. In this strategy, the snerts become a partially controlled feature of the Mansion site rather than something the establishment is always trying to eliminate, but never fully succeeds. Even though a pain in the ass, snerts do add some dynamism to Palace life.

Of course, many things could go wrong with this strategy. It easily could become another Dodge City experiment. Dr. Xenu once suggested an alternative: Dispatch misbehaving snerts to a jump station room where they have 5-10 seconds to select a link to a non-TPI site. If they fail to select one, a script automatically and randomly sends them on their way to one of these destinations. In other words, show them the door. Ideally, the list of links includes sites that are more suitable for snerts, so perhaps they'll decide to stay there. This approach also resembles the "time-out room" strategy, except the time-out room is another site. The argument could be made that the entire Main Mansion site is a bit like Dodge City. It does tend to be a more naughty, rowdy place than many smaller Palace sites. It's the New York City of PalaceSpace - where deviant, unusual, and creative behavior is commonplace. Perhaps, in a positive feedback loop, this is what draws snerts to it. It's very possible that allowing the rules at Mansion to remain somewhat lenient - rather than cracking down - may benefit all of PalaceSpace. Mansion may attract snerts away from other sites and towards a community where experienced wizards know more about how to handle them.

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Time-Out Room and Automated Lessons

A "rules room" - where users could read about the do's and don'ts - was a necessary addition to the busy TPI sites. On several occasions, wizards discussed the possibility of carrying this concept one step further. Misbehaving users could be sent by a wizard to a "time out" room where they would be held captive while the rules of the site are displayed before them. The timing out and "teaching" of the user could be fully automated via scripts, which would save wizards some typing and sanity. In fact, this strategy is used in some Palace communities. When the wizards discussed the possibility of implementing it at TPI sites, a variety of issues surfaced:

- While in the time-out room, the user might also be pinned, gagged, denied incoming chat, and/or stripped to a generic (smiley) avatar. The more actions levied against the person, the more severe the punishment appears, the more controlled and helpless the person might feel, and the more likely oppositional users will fight back.

- Timing out and automated lessons might work well with kids, but adults might find it infantilizing. Backfiring, the strategy might make some adults angry and determined to fight back, perhaps by acting out even more than they did in the first place.

- A purely automated time-out and lecture might feel cold, impersonal, and confusing to some users. It's probably a good idea for a wizard to accompany the person to the room in order to explain what is happening, answer questions, and offer some friendly advise.

- Making the time-out experience humorous might alleviate the backfire effect. In some online communities, the time-out room looks like a prison, complete with rat, bread, and water. One wizard suggested a school room, complete with chalkboard and "I will behave" written 100 times (adding a dunce cap might be a bit too much). The humorous design of the experience might take some of the sting out of the reprimand, as well as remind people that one goal of Palace is to have some fun.

- Clever users will find ways to escape or sabotage the rules room. Loopholes need to be detected and fixed. For example, if people quickly disconnect from the site (presumably without reading the rules), (1) a log could record this escape, or, (2) the person automatically is prevented from reconnecting for a specified period of time, or, (3) when they sign back on, they automatically are redeposited back into rules room until they finish their "sentence." Ideally, the person will be warned about these consequences at the very beginning of the rules display.

- To help prevent the time-out from becoming a novel experience or a game, the room should not be hidden from other users.

- If the display of rules are long and very boring - and the room itself looks drab - the time out experience will be very tedious. Perhaps people will behave themselves just to avoid it. Of course, long and boring displays might achieve little as an educational experience.

- After reading the rules, users could be required to declare their acceptance of them, either by paging the wizard or via a script. Only then are they released from the room.

- Rather than displaying rules, the time-out room could just contain a clock that ticks out the time remaining. It sure would feel like "sit on the stairs for 10 minutes!" (all of these time-out strategies conjure up feelings from childhood) - but it does little in terms of educating the person about the rules.

- Popping a snert out of a crowded room and into the time-out room might, at the very least, give other benign users an opportunity to take the snerts place in the room. When and if the snert tries to return, the room may be full. The punishment, then, is being locked out of the room where the snert was "bad."

(72)

Sent to the Corner (Pinning)

Pinning a misbehaving user into the corner of the screen can be a very effective attention-getter. It's visual, spatial, and actually feels like a decisive physical action has been taken. It takes away from the user a unique feature of multimedia environments - the ability to move. Pinning is an especially effective tool for controlling hyperkinetic people who jump their avatars all over the room (causing lag as well as visual annoyance), and for "runners" who try to escape a wizard responding to a page.

There are some problems with this tool. Pinning, releasing, and pinning again - repeated several times over - easily can be perceived as a wizard's powerplay. Intentionally or not, the wizard is "playing with his food" and baiting the user. Some wizards enjoy creating scripts that enhance the pinning experience with laser beams and tossing the user about the room before immobilizing him in the corner. While some of the other users may get a kick out of this show - and some obnoxious snerts seem to deserve being turned into a show - such scripts again smell like powerplays. Adding to the humiliation of being pinned, other users in the room sometimes seize the opportunity to verbally harass the immobilized user who is obviously being punished. The very publicly visible tactic of pinning someone tends to contradict the principle of always whispering to a misbehaving user in order to protect their self-esteem. Rather than pinning, some wizards say, why not send the person to a time-out room?

What happens visually to the appearance of the person's avatar while pinned alters the psychological quality of the experience. At TPI sites, the avatar was changed to a generic smiley wrapped in chains. The chains, no doubt, were originally intended as a bit of a joke, though some users may experienced it as a degrading or humiliating. It reinforced the idea that wizards have the power, while you don't. Humorous visuals might help lighten up the situation, but that means the person may not take the situation seriously at all. One wizard suggested simply placing a thick-lined box around the avatar while it is locked into the corner.

(73)

The Kill (disconnecting)

Killing strikes a blow at the heart of what the internet means to people - being connected. At the Palace, to be killed means your misbehavior crossed the line. You had to be ousted from the community. The more serious the crime, the longer you are blocked from returning. Less than 2% of all users are killed, which suggests that your mischievous behavior fits the statistical model of "deviance" defined as a very infrequent behavior. Sometimes the kill is initiated automatically by the server, as when you (intentionally or not) flood the server or attempt to crack the wizard password. Because these types of kills are less public (and usually of short duration; the user often can immediately reconnect), people are less perturbed by them. When a wizard initiates the kill, the situation is much more personal. The reactions can be intense and varied - humiliation, remorse, anger. Conscientious users might apologize when they return to the site. Hardcore snerts will use the situation as a springboard for spiteful revenge. In his guidelines for wizards, Ph's Horse states that many users do not learn any sort of lesson after their first kill, which suggests that most kills are performed on rather chronic or stubborn misbehavers. He also points out that killing is more the removal of a

problem than a teaching method. It indicates that the community failed in socializing that particular user. For this reason, wizards appreciated the creation of tools like gag, propgag, and pin which enabled them to "fire shots across the bow" and intervene at a more intermediate level, rather than resorting to the black-or-white kill.

Because a kill is the most "lethal" of interventions, a number of rules and guidelines have been created for its use. The rules reflect the elevated concern among wizards and TPI/EC about using this intervention:

- With few exceptions, the "death timer" (length of the disconnect period) is set to 120 minutes. This is the standard kill at TPI/EC sites. To help make their kills consistent and fair, some wizards create a rating system (e.g., a scale of 1-6) where each successive level marks a higher level of misbehavior and a longer disconnect time. For long kill periods, users may be informed that they can write to TPI/EC to plead their case.

- Some wizards adopt a "three strikes" policy. For the third offense, the user is killed for the maximum length (30000 minutes).

- Wizards are authorized to kill up to 12 hours. Beyond that, authorization from the company is required. In certain instances (e.g., dealing with known crashers), wizards might obtain prior approval for long kills. Handing over the really chronic trouble-makers to TPI/EC allows the company to make the final judgment about how to manage each situation on an individual basis. Company officials may decide to phone the user before killing for long periods or permanent banning.

- As a rule of thumb, users should be warned before they are killed, informed why they are being killed and for how long, and given sufficient opportunity to amend their behavior. Being killed without an explanation only fosters confusion and anger. The "house rules" that have been posted as people arrive at the site have informed people about the possibility of being killed without warning, but that message applies to the automated killing of flooders.

- In more rare cases, the user may not be warned. Such cases include the hyperkinetic avatar who succeeds in flooding the server (thus preventing the wizard from warning him), as well as the self-destroyer who returns after a kill to immediately resume his spouting of foul language. In very rare cases, extremely troublesome, resistant snerts who manages to bypass their bans will be killed on sight.

- The server automatically records who was killed and by whom. Wizards also briefly describe in this record why the person was killed. Communication among wizards is essential for consistent plans of action. For longer kills, TPI/EC encourages wizards to save the log of the interaction with the offender. In some cases, TPI/EC requests a copy of the log excerpt as a verification of the misbehavior and the wizard's actions.

- Killing across rooms is not allowed, with the exception of killing crashers who might succeed in crashing you if you actually enter their room .

It's difficult for users not to take the kill personally. They often see it as a "me- versus-that-wizard" scenario. To minimize this reaction, many wizards simply point out the site's rules to the offender and state that they have little choice in having to kill people who violate them. "Blame the rules, not me." Because some people experience a kill as a loss of control over their fate - a situation of helplessness - it may be helpful to empower them with a choice. Tell them that they are faced with a decision. They can choose to follow the rules, or be disconnected. The wizard, on the other hand, makes it clear that he/she really has no choice:Wizards are obligated to follow the rules about killing. This interpersonal tactic deflects power away from the wizard and onto the user.

One wizard pointed out that for some offenders there is something satisfying to being punished when they know they have DONE their "time" and not been given a break. "It gives them a new start, if they are so inclined."

Lastly, there's that word "kill?" Why use that particular word to describe the action of disconnecting the user? This is a cultural phenomenon. The word "kill" is a carry over from the world of multi-user games where characters indeed kill off each other as part of the contest. Obviously, Palace has its roots in these multi-user fantasy scenarios. Evidence for this popped up one day when one wizard noticed that the automated message the user receives after being killed states "You have been killed (terminated) by another PLAYER."

Some wizards avoid using the word "kill" when talking to users. Instead they use "disconnect." They believe "kill" is too harsh and creates negative reactions. The exact word used probably does flavor the experience. Wizards have joked about other possibilities: "toasted," "cool off," "say bye-bye," "executed," "go visit grandma," "popped," "bumped," "vaporized," etc. Some are humorous, sarcastic, euphemistic, infantilizing, or hint at aggression and humiliation. Wizards also have joked about using words or phrases designed specifically for each wizard. For example, the automated message displayed when AsKi (me) disconnects a user might be "You have been terminated by AsKi, but please remember that you're still a human being with worth and dignity." In addition to alleviating their own anxieties about having to "kill," such joking among the wizards also indicates their feelings about killing being a very personal situation. It means something different to each person.

Killing Machines (bots)

Theoretically, robot avatars can be created that would patrol the Palace site, looking for deviant behavior. Upon detecting such behavior, they would kill the offender. Much less sophisticated than the Enterprise's Data (actually, he's an android), the bot would be programmed to detect very specific, simple types of trouble-making, such as foul language.

Experiments with bots have been tried at TPI sites - experiments that sometimes go awry. One night a wizard saw "XBot" log on as a wizard. Thinking it was a colleague using a creative name, he said hello, but received no reply. Xbot came into Harry's Bar, sat quietly for several minutes, then left saying "I am late for an appointment." A short while later it returned and repeated the cycle. That same evening Xbot killed another wizard for saying "Bite me," which didn't exactly impress the booted wizard. Realizing now what Xbot was, the wizards on duty were a bit annoyed that they weren't warned ahead of time about a bot running loose. "I was careful not to say 'Bite me,'" one wizard noted, "but I was very tempted to tell it to 'Masticate my prostate!'" The next day, the wizard responsible for creating Xbot apologized, explaining that he had been testing it and accidentally fell asleep while it was still active.

The advantage of using such automated police? They could lend a helping hand to wizards during busy hours, or patrol the site when wizards were not online, especially during the late hours of the evening and early morning. Bots also solve the problem of wizards being inconsistent or too emotionally involved in their work. Bots would be very steady, objective, and dispassionate when intervening.

The big disadvantage, though, is that bots have no judgment or reason. The story of the derailed experiment illustrates this. Bots are unable to determine the context of a problem. Because deviant behavior and the various interventions for them often are subtle, complex, and very dependent on the meaning of the particular situation, bots would regularly end up booting innocent users while letting genuine snerts walk all over them. In fact, they'd probably end up as play things for mischievous users. People also tend to skeptical and a bit weirded out by bots. Allowing automated police to patrol the site does not enhance the image of Palace as a friendly community, a HUMAN/E place, where people socialize with people. For these reasons, TPI discouraged the use of bots.

Exile (bans)

According to TPI statistics, less than 1% of all users are killed more than once. Repeat offenders are the exception rather than the rule. Even more rare are those relentless trouble-makers who challenge the "3 strikes rule" and, consequently, find themselves permanently banned from the site. By tagging their member registration key - or their IP address (in the case of guests, who don't have a key) - the server automatically prevents them from signing on. It also reminds them that they have been banned when they try, and in some cases informs them that they can e-mail TPI/EC an apology if they wish to be reinstated. Requiring approval by the company, bans only occur after repeated failed attempts to reason with the chronic snert, including phone calls from TPI/EC officials. In cases where the company's staff have no first hand experience with the snert, they hear out all the views of the wizards who are in the trenches before they make a decision. By the time a user is exiled, many active wizards have had a run-in with him. Some of these users "see the light," send that apology to the company, and promise to behave - at which point, the company lifts the ban. Other very persistent and now highly revengeful snerts find ways around the ban so they can return to the site.

Because emotions run high, bans can stir up considerable controversy. Wizards and company officials may not all agree about exiling a user or about when/if the person should be reinstated. Very heated debates between those who side with and against the person may reflect the users attempts to "split" the authority figures by playing them off against each

other. Some wizards have complained that forgiving users after "permanently banning" them makes the word and authority of TPI (and wizards) look weak. How many chances do you give someone? Why does one person get a second chance and not another? Angry about their exile, some users threaten to bring legal suits against the company or demand their money back. They may be informed that their registration fee bought them the client program, not the right to visit a company site. Some wizards have suggested that an "extreme snert" clause be included in the TPI purchase agreement, enabling the company to reserve the right to cancel the registration while refunding the user's money. This would protect all of PalaceSpace from the truly obnoxious trouble-makers. "And just to rub a little more salt in the wound," one wizard joked, "we could send them a 'I've been kicked out of the Palace for Life' shirt."

A technical problem with the ban mechanism is that it cannot be applied precisely to guests - who are a bit more inclined towards trouble-making due to their anonymity. Guests do not have a registration key, so their IP address must be banned. Because most users come from a dynamic address, a wildcard (e.g., 208.129.208.*) must be used to ban all possible points of origin from that user's ISP. But then anyone else coming from that banned string of addresses also will be locked out of the site. It's like throwing many babies out with the foul bath water.

A similar predicament arises in proactive attempts to prevent problems by banning a particular ISP point of origin. Wizards discovered that the IP of one killed trouble-maker seemed to indicate that he came from a prison. If prisons indeed were giving inmates internet access, should TPI/EC allow them on their sites? On the wizard list, there was a string of debates about criminals coming to Palace, the rights of individuals (including prisoners), the purpose of "being in prison," and prejudicial actions against a labeled group.

<div align="right">(76)</div>

Tracking

What if all the bad guys were officially tagged so that their anti-social status was immediately available to everyone? It sure would help the law-abiding folk who may want to steer clear of the trouble-makers, as well as the authorities who are trying to keep an eye on them. In online communities, the technology exists for marking and tracking offenders. Their registration codes and IP addresses provide two possible tags for detecting their arrival and following their movement around the site (especially useful in dealing with "runners"). At the TPI/EC sites, the server automatically alerts (only) wizards through the paging system when a "trackip" is set on a trouble-maker, usually someone who was killed. Some wizards also have called for a easy way of keeping an eye on the location of trouble-makers WITHIN the site, other than having to look up their name in the userlist. Going even further, some have suggested creating more elaborate tags that would record how often a person was warned or killed. .

Tracking can present problems. How far does one go in tagging and observing users before it becomes a violation of their privacy? Prejudice would surely develop against publicly marked people, so the information most likely should be kept confidential among the overseers of the site. Even then, biased attitudes among the authorities might result in their perceiving more trouble than the previously labeled user is now actually creating. That label might even cause some wizards to encourage or bait the trouble-maker into repeating their crime. On a more practical level, wizards have complained about their colleagues setting a trackip on almost everyone they kill, resulting in a very annoying spam of trackip messages in the paging system. TPI officials recommended tracking a person for a short period of time (say 10 minutes), because the odds are low that the trouble-maker will spend more time than that attempting to reconnect to the site. Every user from the IP being tracked also shows up in the paging system, so for large domains like AOL there could be a flood of track pages. By keeping the track times low, TPI suggested, wizards accomplish the goal of detecting if a user returns, while keeping the paging system activity to a minimum.

<div align="right">(77)</div>

Keeping Records

As crime increases, so does the need for criminal profiles and crime statistics. At TPI/EC sites, the server automatically keeps a record of actions taken against offenders (e.g., kills), their IP address and/or registration key, and what wizard took the action. Wizards also add to the record their comment about the incident, usually what the offender did wrong. Some wizards like to keep their own personal records with more detailed information, such as how many times a particular person was warned and killed, details about the incident, and known aliases of repeat offenders. TPI/EC also encourages wizards to save excerpts of the log that captures the dialogue and wizard actions during the situation.

Records come in very handy for a variety of reasons. It's much easier knowing where to go with snerts if you know where you (and others) already have been with them. Records are vital for intervention consistency among wizards.

Statistical analyses of the server records can reveal how the number of kills changes over time, how those changes correlate with changes in intervention strategies and site modifications, the number of kills made by specific wizards, and how one site compares to others. Log excerpts are very valuable for the training of wizards and receiving feedback about how one handled a situation. As one wizard pointed out, seeing oneself "objectively" in the excerpt can be an eye-opening experience. Logs also may be needed for reasons of accountability and legal purposes. In some cases, alleged offenders have forwarded their own log excerpts to TPI/EC as part of their complaint against a wizard. Sometimes the complaint may be legitimate, but logs can be doctored.

Standardizing Interventions

When a site's population grows, resulting in more frequent and complex forms of deviance, the intervention strategies among wizards tend to become more diverse and inconsistent. To counteract that effect, the community needs to create a standard set of rules for appropriate behavior among users as well as standards for how wizards should enforce them. These standards provide equal protection and "justice" under the law, regardless of who the user is - a guest, member, wizard, friend, or enemy. Wizards will be less confused - and feel less helpless - about how exactly to deal with specific problems. These standards also will help deny snerts the opportunity to use inconsistencies among wizards as a tool in their manipulative games. Good record keeping is a preliminary step in creating intervention standards - otherwise it's more difficult to know what to do if you don't know what's already been done (and what works). For example, one wizard suggested, such records could be used in rating offenses according to their severity so that specific effective penalties (pin, gag, kill periods of different lengths, ban) could be assigned to each offense.

A simple method frequently used by wizards is the creation of scripts or macros that contain warnings or explanations frequently given to misbehaving users ("Excuse me, BigTime, your prop violates the rules for this site. Could you please remove it?). Such scripts enable the wizard to interact with the user quickly, efficiently, and consistently - and with much less typing. Whereas most of these scripts are created for personal use, it would be relatively easy to provide standard scripts to be used by all wizards. More sophisticated scripts could automate more complex intervention sequences - for example, warning a person, then pinning, then explaining while the person is pinned.

Other important features of standardizing interventions include the formal training of wizards and the creation of a manual (perhaps similar to this one). One component of the manual might be log excerpts that contain examples of effective interventions with different types of problems. Actually SEEING (reading) what other wizards said and did is much more powerful than simply talking (reading) about it in the abstract.

Of course, standardization can go too far, resulting in overly formal and rigid wizards who look more like robots than humans. For example, macros that launch automated text at a user need to be written well, so that they at least sound like a personal communication rather than a canned response. Better yet, these macros should be interspersed with the wizards spontaneous, "genuine" talking to the user. Scripted interventions also should be flexible so that they can be easily modified or tuned to the specifics of the situation. This is a good rule of thumb for the overall standardization of intervention strategies: make the standards specific but flexible. Provide wizards clear guidelines, but also the leeway to apply their judgment and humanity.

Formal Training of Wizards

A training program is probably the single, most effective method for ensuring quality and consistency (i.e,, standardization) in how all wizards perform their jobs. It not only provides an opportunity for wizards to share ideas and experiences, but also for the development of camaraderie and group spirit. A comprehensive training program would contain at least some of the following elements:

- A manual containing the rules of the site and how to enforce them. This manual provides the foundation for the training, and may be modified as a result of ideas discussed during the training.

- Periodic real-time training sessions in which there are discussions, demonstrations, and role plays. It's probably wise for all wizards to attend such sessions, regardless of their level of expertise or whether they "need" training. Newbie wizards need elder wizards as role models. Elder wizards can benefit from a "refresher" course as well as from the ideas and enthusiasm of the newbies.

- A library of log excerpts that illustrate effective and less effective examples of intervening with different types of problems. These excerpts might be a component of the manual. Discussing these excerpts also may be part of the real-time training session. Wizards should be encouraged (or required) to bring in excerpts from their own logs so that they can discuss with their colleagues the various situations they have encountered.

- A "buddy" or "mentor" system in which a newbie wizard is paired up with a seasoned wizard. The experienced wizard accompanies the new wizard during the initial on-the-job training. The two also may communicate via e-mail. Such a system provides the newbies with role models and helps bond them to the entire wizard group. Serving as a mentor also reinforces an experienced wizard's understanding of wizarding, as well as bolsters her self-esteem as a knowledgeable "oldtimer" and his commitment to the wizard group.

- Modeling and role playing during the real-time training session. This is an essential. People learn best by observing a behavior and then rehearsing it, rather than by just talking about it. Generally speaking, good roles plays start with a preplanned scenario in mind (i.e., a structure for what the wizard and misbehaving user will say and do), but are flexible enough to allow spontaneity and improvisation. A number of variations on role-playing are possible:

> (1) Experienced wizards first demonstrate (model) their techniques with a particular type of problematic user, then newer wizards take their turn at imitating the elder wizard.

> (2) A trainee plays the role of the wizard, then switches to play the role of the misbehaving user. Stepping into the user role helps the wizard understand the user's personal experience of the intervention, which provides insight into how to improve the intervention.

> (3) Role plays cover as many types of problems as possible. Role plays start with relatively easy situations, and then gradually increase in difficulty level.

> (4) Trainees are encouraged to play the role of a snert that they feel familiar with (and perhaps even enjoy!), or to role-play a problematic user that they recently encountered.

> (5) Trainees take turns in dealing with the same problematic user, perhaps even stepping into a role play during midstream when the previous trainee gets stuck or yells "uncle."

> (6) Wizards "feed lines" to a trainee who is stuck or needs help during a role play. The suggested line may lead the role play into a new, productive direction.

> (7) The role play may be "frozen" for a moment so that the leader or other trainees can ask questions, offer a commentary, or suggest a new direction for the role play.

> (8) A group discussion follows each role play. The people in the role play are encouraged to describe what the role play was like for them.

Conclusion: Sticks and Stones

Worst case scenarios with snerts probably would include their attempts to crash your system, ruin your reputation through impostoring, or luring you into a scam. But these scenarios are rather uncommon. And for the experienced computer user, the community member who is well known among online friends, and the savvy individual, each of these respective scenarios probably is not much of a threat. In a very large majority of cases, the most a snert can do to you is toss unpleasant words or images at your, or interrupt your ability to speak to friends. The inclination to feel insulted, frustrated, or indignant by a snert's actions reflects the tendency to invest a lot of psychological energy in one's online world. Users take it personally and feel very emotional when it comes to their virtual community. To them, it's as real as the real world. Perhaps the best defense against snerts is to unravel that psychological investment a bit. You can always turn off the computer and walk away. The Greek philosopher Epictetus said that people are not

disturbed by things that happen to them, but by the views they take of those things. In other words, sticks and stones can break your bones, but the snerts of virtual reality can rarely hurt you... unless you let them.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The internet regression, by Norman Holland
The online disinhibition effect
Conflict in Cyberspace: How to resolve conflict online

Part 5

Research Methods in Cyberpsychology

Intensive Case Studies in Cyberspace

and the Evolution of Digital Life Forms

One day in my undergraduate biology class, the professor suggested that all of biology should focus its research on a single species of fly. Every dimension of the fly should be examined in detail - including its anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, behavior. The massive amount of information gathered on that single fly could then be integrated into a complete, holistic understanding of what that fly is all about. "Then we would really know something!" the professor exclaimed.

Humans are a bit more complex than flies - not just in the fact that our biological make-up is more complicated, but also due to the seemingly infinite variety of ways we express ourselves. In this new millennium, we have entered the next stage in the expression of what it means to be human. Cyberspace is a powerfully complex, versatile environment that is creating previously unimagined forms of digital "life" - social entities that did not exist just a few years ago. How can we study these new human expressions? How can we fully understand and maximize the well-being of these digital life forms?

In this age of complex experimental designs and statistical analyses, the power of the case study often is overlooked. We sometimes forget how many of the most influential theorists in psychology started with observations of single subjects - Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg, even Skinner. Case studies are a powerful tool for generating finely tuned hypotheses that can be further explored using experimental methods. But case studies are not simply a preliminary step. They possess strengths that are missing in many of the more controlled quantitative research, which is why combining them with experimental strategies is so important. By carefully examining all of the intricate components of an entity - and how those components are related to each other - case studies reach an understanding of the whole that surpasses the sum of analyzing parts. They are self-correcting, flexibly adapting their focus and readjusting hypotheses as new findings are discovered. While the results of one case study may not always generalize to other cases, this holistic understanding can tell us why the results may not generalize. When it comes right down to it, no two organisms are ever exactly the same and no results are unequivocally universal. The case study accepts, even embraces this fact.

Given the very wide range of digital life forms in cyberspace, a flexible and comprehensive approach like the case study is essential. We must be creative in our vision of what a "case" is, as well as in our methods for studying those cases. We can focus on a single individual who is representative of a group; a unique individual who plays a special role in cyberspace; groups created via e-mail, message boards, chat, and video conferencing, including large scale communities consisting of hundreds or thousands of people; services and organizations positioned on the internet; and networks of interlinked web sites. We should focus on how the conventional boundaries of time, space, and sensory stimulation can all be altered to give expression to the new life forms. To investigate these phenomenon, the case study approach should integrate as many tools as possible: unobtrusive observation, participant-observation, empathic-introspection, focus groups, quasi-experimental manipulation of variables in the field setting, quantifiable questionnaires, and structured and unstructured interviews conducted via e-mail, bulletin boards, chat, phone, and/or face-to-face contact. Some tools may be adaptations of traditional in-person techniques; others will involve innovative applications of internet technology.

Beyond the case study comes the practice based on that research. What is the role of the psychologist and other applied social scientists in this new millennium of the internet? If new digital life forms are evolving, will traditional methods for clinical and community interventions work? In some cases, yes. We can build on and adapt strategies from the past. But as I suggest in my article on psychotherapy in this issue, new models may be needed. As social scientists attempting to improve psychological well-being within and via cyberspace, our methods need to evolve innovatively to match the needs of the new digital life forms. Combining cognitive, clinical, and community psychology with human factors engineering, we need to think in terms of software interface, communication channels, and networks. We need to recognize that what we traditionally thought of as a "case" - a person or a group of people - is changing. Just as the identity of a person or group can be altered, sifted, and sorted in a fascinating variety of ways online, so too can the roles and interventions of the cyberologist.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

- Ethics in cyberspace research
- One of us: Participant observation research

One of Us

Participant Observation Research at the Palace

Armchair Research
AsKi the Newbie
Guidelines for Research
One of Us: Seeing from the Inside
The Objective/Subjective Cocktail
Making Wizard
The Palace Discussion Group
Writing Up the Results... and Beyond

Armchair Research

It's 10:30 pm. The kids finally fell asleep and my wife is reading in the living room. At last, the house is quiet. Doing a bit of reading myself is a possibility, or perhaps a few rounds of channel surfing. But I decide against it. Something more intriguing waits for me beyond the walls of my home. Something that uniquely mixes both work and fun. I settle into the swivel chair at my computer, locate the program from the "recent" line of my Apple pull-down menu, and launch it. The modem lights start blinking. TCP is connecting. I'm on my way to the Palace... to resume my research.

People have joked about armchair philosophy for a long time. Now we're in a new age. The age of armchair (or, in my chase, swivel chair) field research in the social sciences. The internet is a ripe target for psychologists and other behavioral researchers. And it's not just because cyberspace is such a fascinating social realm, but also because it's so easy and convenient to get there. You don't need any laboratories or freshman subject pools. You don't have to drive or fly to study people in some distant location. It's all right there on your monitor. You can be in the middle of exploring a very unusual psychological phenomenon on a server in Australia, and then take a break for five minutes to fetch a glass of milk from the frig or answer a phone call from your mother. As a self-confessed MomDad who shares the childrearing with his wife, I've found cyberpsychology to be a wonderful opportunity for pursuing a fascinating line of research, while keeping an eye on the kids.

Some researchers are attempting to adapt traditional quantitative research methods to studies of cyberspace - like surveys or online experimental designs. As for me, I've always been intrigued by participant observation research. One book from my undergraduate days that stands out clearly in my memory is William Whyte's *Street Corner Society*. Whyte studied the social structure of an inner city Italian slum by living there for several years. Can you think of a better way to understand a community of people than by moving in and becoming one of them? Later, with my growing interest in the psychology of religion, I was fascinated by John Lofland's surreptitious method of investigating the Divine Precepts - a small religious cult that prematurely predicted the end of the world - by joining it. Is there really any other way of investigating a closed and rather guarded social system than by entering it from the inside?

What I love most about participant observation research is what many other researchers hate about it. It's NOT "objective." You don't stand at arm's length from the phenomenon you are studying, with a clip board or a operant conditioning cage or an ANOVA to promise you some neutral, objective, "scientific" distance from the subject. In my mind, such objectivity is an unattainable ideal, maybe even a delusion. Participant observation research embraces the obvious. Rather than fighting off the nuisance of subjectivity that creeps into every research project, it amplifies, explores, uses it. One's own personal reactions - one's thoughts and feelings - are refined into a powerful tool. By joining and participating in the group to be studied, the researcher becomes the very thing she is studying. Everything the researcher subjectively experiences is grist for the scientific mill. Many conventionally trained academic scientists are uncomfortable with this idea, but it's an epistemological style that's very familiar to the psychoanalytic researcher.

I'll avoid here any further discussion of the philosophical and scientific merits of why I choose to study the Palace by becoming a member. I'm not likely to convince the skeptics anyway. Instead, let me proceed right into a nuts and bolts discussion of exactly what I did, why I did it, and what I learned about this style of research. My conclusions about participant observation are just that... *MY* conclusions. They may not necessarily apply to others. Because the individual researcher's subjectivity becomes the investigative tool, the truths of the method may vary from individual to individual.

AsKi the Newbie

I first heard about Palace from my online friend Vince Potenza in December of 1996. Before this, I had spent a considerable amount of time in AOL chat rooms and IRC - what researchers call "synchronous" computer-mediated communication. I found them interesting, but the idea that chat environments like Palace had become VISUAL truly intrigued me. When I first signed onto the Palace I did so purely out of curiosity, without any specific intentions to study it. A very visually oriented person (much of my early research focused on mental imagery), I quickly became captivated by the psychological ramifications of a graphical online environment. Not only was it intellectually fascinating, but also a lot of fun. A graphical MOO or chat room was something very new on the internet, and surely a predictor of things to come. At first I balked at the idea of mixing business and pleasure, but ultimately I could not resist the opportunity to formally study such a unique online world.

While exploring the visual aspects of the Palace (which I describe in my article on avatars and graphical space), I quickly realized that it was impossible to separate them from other aspects of Palace Life. The more time I spent there, the more depth and complexity I discovered in the social and psychological dynamics of this graphical world. To do justice to exploring and understanding Palace, I knew I had to conduct a holistic and comprehensive case study of all dimensions of this community . I knew I had to immerse myself into it by becoming one of them.

I called the 800 number and gladly paid my registration fee. Now, as a member with the fully loaded software client, I had before me the task of creating an online identity for myself. After much internal debate, I settled on the name "AsKi." While I could have used my real name, I preferred to join the spirit and fun of an online world by creating a new name that was more interesting than "John" and/or "Suler" - and, in fact, said a bit more about me than my real labels. Here are the reasons why I choose "AsKi":

- It's a condensation of "Asia" and "Kira," the names of my daughters - and thus a expression of how my identity is closely allied to my being their father. And if it wasn't for my spending more time at home with the girls, I may not have become interested in our computer and the internet in the first place.

- "AsKi" sounds like ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange), the standard computer character set for data communication. Hence "AsKi" is a bit of a computer geek's joke.

- It's a relatively benign, even cute, name. I wanted to appear as least threatening to people as possible.

- "AsKi" sounds like "Ask me" or "Asky" or can be read as "Ask I" (me). I intended this to mean that people could ask me anything and I would be as honest as possible in replying. If people at the Palace finger me to see what data I supply about myself, the automated reply is "Ask me and I'll tell you." Later on, as people came to know me as the resident social scientist, "AsKi" also signified that I tend to ask questions.

The second task in creating my online identity was the enjoyable one of choosing avatars. I must admit that early in my research I went through a period in which I felt a bit obsessed with searching the internet for pictures I could turn into props - an "addiction" familiar to many Palatians. Props are one way to gain acceptance and "join the club." They also help members express their moods, intentions, and personality - a phenomenon I explore in my article about avatars, including my analysis of my own avatar collection (a good illustration of participant-observer data!). Although I still keep an eye open for interesting pictures to turn into avatars, my preoccupation with them seemed to wear off as I became more deeply involved in the social dynamics of the Palace. I was more interested in getting to know people and having them know me than in playing with props (this playing never disappears completely for members, since it lies at the heart of the Palace experience).

Although I chose a pseudonym and symbolic pictures to represent my identity, I must emphasize that I was always honest about who I was. As best as I can recall, I don't think I ever dissembled or avoided any member's inquiry into who or what I am. This includes the fact that I was a psychologist who was conducting a study of Palace. In the early

stages of my research, I did not spontaneously offer this specific information, but I did not deny it if someone suspected this and asked. Later on, as I developed some friendships or became acquainted with influential Palatians (such as wizards), I did spontaneously offer this information. The response was almost always benign. At the very worst, a few people simply seemed a bit wary of me - and, thankfully, would joke about it.

I felt it was extremely important for me to be honest about my role as a researcher and psychologist. I also felt it was important for me to let people know that I was ALSO a Palatian, just like everyone else. I wanted people to see that I indeed was conducting research, but I also enjoyed Palace as a place to play and socialize. I was one of them - and I meant it. Other Palatians had their outside skills and knowledge that they could offer the community - so if I, as a psychologist, could be helpful to the community in any way, then I welcomed that opportunity. In fact, the articles I write about Palace are as much for the benefit of the Palatians as for other researchers or curious non-Palatians. In my eyes, this honest approach to participation/observation was the best possible way to conduct this research. It also avoided the sticky ethical issues that arise when online researchers attempt to hide their identity from the people they are studying.

In addition to this "prime directive" of honesty, here are some of the other guidelines I developed for myself during this early phase of my research:

Be a Newbie - Few people like being a naive newbie. However, for the first week or so I allowed myself to be the uninformed, rather dumb newcomer. I asked questions that had been asked a thousand times before. Unfamiliar with the details of the program, I stumbled around the Palace not knowing where I was going, accidentally fell into rooms (especially the chessboard), stepped on people, broadcast my words to the whole room when I thought I was whispering... the whole range of newbie mistakes and breaches of Palace etiquette. Wanting to understand all aspects of Palace life, I thought it was important for me to experience what it was like being the clueless new kid on the block. I didn't particularly like being one, which led to the second guideline....

Master the Program - After a week or so of trial and error learning, I decided to make a more focused, systematic effort to learning the Palace. I read all the documentation. I started developing my avatar collection. I downloaded the server program so I could run it on my own computer and experiment with Palace offline (it was a bit eerie and lonely walking around all those empty rooms). In addition to helping me learn about the technical side of Palace, this intense study of the software and documentation also acquainted me with some of the language, customs, and history of Palace.

Master Other Palacing Skills - It's easy to overlook the fact that computer-mediated communication involves a whole range of perceptual/motor skills that aren't needed in face-to-face communication. First of all, you must be able to type quickly. Fortunately, having done much writing over the years, my typing was up to par. But I quickly learned at the Palace that I needed to develop a proficiency in other eye-hand coordinations. To move, whisper, change props, control speech balloons, and execute a variety of other commands - all requires a new set of keyboard fingering techniques. One has to be able to do it quickly to maintain smooth socializing. I had anywhere from three to six windows open on my screen while Palacing (some for the Palace program, others for research purposes, such as notes and screen captures). It took time to figure out where to place them so I could efficiently move from one to another. When a room is busy with activity, avatars are changing and jockeying for position while speech balloons are popping all over the place. To a newbie, it looks like buzzing confusion. It takes time to develop the necessary perceptual filtering and focusing to mentally organize all this activity. Even more difficult are the fluent eye-hand coordinations and mental dissociation needed to whisper to two, three, or (heaven forbid!), four people at a time.

Hang Out... A Lot - In order to understand and become part of Palace life, the most important rule is also a very simple one. Spend a lot of time there. Like any social system, it takes time to feel like you really belong and understand the culture. For the first months (January through May 1996), I signed on every day for approximately one to three hours. I stayed mostly at the Main Mansion Palace site since the other sites, at that time, were much less active. In order to observe as much of that particular community as possible, I moved among all the active rooms and signed on at different points during the day.

Socialize, Be Friendly - In this early phase of research, I tried to understand Palace by simply participating. Although tempted, I tried not to ask too many questions. While I occasionally would inject such inquiries into my conversations, I mostly socialized and played without a thick overlay of investigative demeanor. I wanted to be friendly and helpful.

It's important to note that all of my research occurred at the Main Mansion site, which was the original Palace site (created by Jim Bumgardner and Jeffrey Marks who worked for Time-Warner), and for several years the most populated community. Later on, many other independently owned sites began to spring up all over the internet. Although I did briefly explore some of these other communities, I eventually decided to focus my energy on understanding in-depth the experience and social dynamics of Main. My motto: One intensive case study, one community.

One of Us: Seeing from the Inside

After about a month of daily attendance at Main, I began to feel like a "regular." People knew me and I had established a few friendships. On one occasion, someone even referred to me as an "old timer" - which struck me as a bit odd since I had only been a Palatian for a little more than a month. The Palace itself was only a few months old, so, in the minds of some people, the developmental time frame for becoming an old timer was rather condensed.

The participant side of the participant-observation method paid off extremely well. By examining my own behavior in and reactions to Palace, I believe I discovered many subtle - and sometimes not so subtle - aspects of Palace life long before I would have discovered them through interviewing or sending out questionnaires. In some cases, I may not have arrived at those insights at all through only objective methods. For example, there are many nuances of feeling in reaction to how other users move their avatars in and around the personal space of your own avatar (see the article on avatars). I could not always verbalize these reactions myself until I made a deliberate, conscious effort to focus on my subjective experience. These types of unconscious reactions are common when it comes to non-verbal communication. Once I realized some aspect of how I, personally, was reacting to Palace life, I then made an effort to ask others about it in order to compare and contrast their reactions.

What insights surfaced from my personal experiences? Many. I discovered a wide variety of thoughts, feelings, and actions that I believe many Palatians would understand. I enjoyed playing and competing with avatars. I was annoyed when someone stole my props, proud when someone complimented me on them. I felt tempted to join in on cliques while tending to ignore the newbie guests. I played practical jokes on some people and confided in others, sometimes revealing things about myself that I wouldn't ordinarily reveal in a comparable real world situation. I wanted to feel like I belonged, and was upset when I felt left out or ignored. Once (only once!) someone attempted to seduce me into cybersex. I secretly wished I would be asked to be a wizard. At times I thought that I was addicted - which was, in fact, the theme of the first article I wrote about Palace.

My role as "psychologist" and "researcher" did affect my reactions. Knowing that I also was here to study Palace - and not just participate - allowed me to objectify my experiences. Sometimes it gave me some extra beneficial leverage in distancing myself from an uncomfortable situation. For example, one night two members whom I did not know joined forces in attempting to trick me into believing that one of them was Jim Bumgardner (the creator of Palace) in disguise. I found this bending of reality to be a bit disorienting and unsettling, until I recognized it as an exercise in power and identification with power. Similar to the psychotherapist's analysis of countertransference, my objective analysis of my own personal reactions helped me understand, and hence regulate, those reactions.

Being a psychologist and researcher, I felt the need to minimize acting out (which is very tempting in cyberspace) and behave as responsibly as possible. I tried to contribute to group cohesion and positive morale, while helping to control the snerts. I encouraged activities that had a potential to be fun and educational - such as avatar games. I made an effort to ask guests if they needed help and on several occasions took newbies on an introductory tour of Palace. Once my identity as a psychologist and researcher spread through the community - especially when I began publishing online my articles about Palace - I also became known as the Palace "shrink." This sometimes placed me in the role of advisor and counselor. When people came to me for help or advice, the issues usually revolved around half-serious/half-joking concerns about being "addicted," or about worries for other members who appeared to be depressed and in need of help. The role of psychologist/researcher also required me to be sensitive to the possibility that others might be uncomfortable hanging out with someone who was going to "analyze" them (a common occupational hazard of being a psychologist). Assuring people of confidentiality, honestly reaffirming my benign intentions, joking a bit about the situation - and just being myself - helped alleviate many of these concerns.

Sources of Information: The Objective/Subjective Cocktail

In addition to my own subjective reactions, I relied upon several other sources of information during this first stage (the first year or so) of my research at Main:

Unobtrusive observation - Often I simply sat back and observed the conversations and activity in the room around me. While this approach sometimes proved fruitful, it often got boring after long periods and did not seem to yield as many insights as participating in the action and talking with people.

Logs - Each time I signed on, I saved to disk the conversations that had taken place. Although the log cannot capture what is happening visually at the Palace, it is a complete record of all text communications and many of the action commands (e.g., playing a sound)

In-house discussions with Palace members - Usually in a very informal fashion, I would ask people about their views and experiences of Palace life. Sometimes I would pose questions to a group of people. Sometimes I would whisper privately to one person. The most useful information came from friends and other knowledgeable Palatians whom I specifically approached to discuss some aspect of Palace.

"Standard" questions - In one stage of my research, I experimented with presenting a standard question (or a short series of questions) to people in a room. Each time I presented the question/s to a new group, I attempted to remain as consistent myself in how I behaved, while noting differences in how the group reacted. Sometimes the question was intended to gather straight-forward descriptive statistics, such as "How long has everyone here been coming to Palace?" While this was useful at times, open-ended questions yielded more interesting results, such as "Why do you think people like coming to the Palace?", or, "Why do you think people get addicted to Palace?" It was a projective test, of sorts. But even this technique did not prove to be as useful as informal in-house conversations with people.

E-mail interviews - Due to lag and the limitations of synchronous typed-text communication, the in-house conversations with people needed to be supplemented with more in-depth discussions. Whenever I met a member who seemed knowledgeable and interested in talking about Palace life (especially wizards and other old-timers), I invited them to continue our discussion through e-mail. Some people I "formally" invited to participate in a structured e-mail interview. For others, the e-mail discussion was more casual and free-form. I corresponded with approximately 50 members. My correspondence with Jim Bumgardner was especially helpful in allowing me a glimpse into the underlying philosophy of Palace and "behind-the-scenes" happenings. Writing about the early history of Palace would have been impossible without e-mail interviews with the old-timers.

Newsgroup postings - In the early months of Palace, a newsgroup was formed for participants to discuss community issues. There was a flurry of activity near the beginning of the list, which gave me insight into this early phase of Palace. Since that time, postings became very sporadic. Eventually the newsgroups died out completely, replaced instead by mailing lists.

Introducing family, friends, and colleagues to Palace - On a few occasions I had the opportunity to introduce people I knew to Palace. This enabled me to assess how known personalities would react to Palace life. One of my closest friends didn't particularly like the experience at all, which cued me to the fact that visual chat, or chat of any kind, does not appeal to everyone. A self-selection process shapes the community.

Screen captures - Because the Palace is so highly visual, it was essential to take screen shots of typical gatherings, planned events, and unusual occurrences. These pictures are an integral component of my article on avatars and graphical space. Many times I took these pictures "on the fly" as something interesting was happening. However, several times I completely forgot to take a screen capture of an interesting event simply because I was caught up in the experience and the idea of recording it never crossed my mind (for example, the time a member attempted to seduce me by flashing seductive-looking avatars!). This, perhaps, is one of the hazards of participant-observation. On other occasions, I signed onto Palace specifically to take pictures rather than socialize (as when I was categorizing the different types of avatars).

Mailing lists - Early in the summer of 1996, the Palace User Group formed and created it's own mailing list, which became known as "PUG." The list quickly became very active - due, I believe, to the need for Palace users to establish a larger arena for communication and shared identity than is possible when people are scattered among the numerous rooms and numerous sites of the Palace universe. The messages on this list provided a great deal of insight into how people were reacting to Palace. It also informed me of social and political events much quicker than I might have discovered them on my own. The list provided a glimpse into the larger social dynamics of the entire Palace community. Later on, the "Deep Thoughts" list was created as a space for Palatians to indulge in political discussions. Often the conversations were NOT about Palace specifically. National politics and social issues usually dominated the posts by some of these brightest and most influential figures of the community. Nevertheless, I found it fascinating to see how these discussions indirectly reflected the political and social dynamics occurring within the sites run by Electric Communities, the company that eventually came to own the Palace software (Palace at first belonged to Time-Warner, then became incorporated on its own as The Palace Incorporated, and later was merged with Electric Communities).

Personal Notes - I took (hand-written) notes on any important occurrence that could not adequately be captured by the logs or screen captures - for example, how moved their avatars or sequences in events and conversations. Although the logs are a very objective index of exactly what was said, they simply record the chronology of all statements within a room without any indication of how the conversations were occurring within various subgroups. In a log it's not always clear who was talking to whom, at what pace the statements were made, or the visual context of the group dynamics. Notes *can* capture these essentials. In fact, logs often are very difficult to read because they are a conglomeration of the several different conversations that were occurring at the same time in a room. When reading the logs offline, my personal notes helped me to mentally reorganize the conversations.

I also used notes to record my personal reactions as they occurred on the scene. Subtle changes in my mood and attitudes sometimes reflected hidden dynamics of the Palace experience. Objective logs of text conversation cannot capture this. After signing off, I similarly made a conscious effort to write down what I remembered about each visit and my reactions to it. Sometimes an insight into what exactly was important about a particular visit did not strike me until hours, or even days later. The distance of time allowed me to more objectively recall and evaluate the in vivo experiences. At the Palace I could not always label these experiences as significant because I too busy being *in* them at the time. When these post-visit light bulbs went off, I immediately (or as soon as possible) recorded the ideas in my notes.

These personal notes were essential supplements to the logs. They helped me organize and highlight the important events of a particular visit - which the log could not do. On the other hand, it sometimes was an eye-opener to compare what *I* remembered someone saying to what was actually said according to the log. Discrepancies helped me understand how my own psychology had reshaped events. Balancing the objective and subjective sources of information is essential in participant-observation research.

Making Wizard

In September of 1996 I was invited to become an "Honorary Wizard" of the Main Mansion site, which then was owned by Time-Warner. Appreciative of my writings about Palace, the wizards offered me the opportunity to participate in their e-mail discussion list, without being expected to spend a great deal of time hosting and managing the site itself (which are some of the responsibilities of wizards). I indeed was honored and excited by the invitation, and eagerly looked forward to the induction ceremony. Much to my frustration and disappointment, my ISP altered the logon script to their server, which, on the very night of the induction, prevented me from entering the internet AT ALL through my PPP connection. Desperate to inform people of my inability to attend the induction, I fired up my rarely used AOL account and shot off a message to a few of my wizard friends. I still regret missing that induction.

Becoming a wizard opened an entirely new phase in my research. My first eye-opening experience was plugging in the wizard password at Main, and discovering a whole new layer of the Palace experience. Through the paging system, wizards anywhere at the Palace site can communicate with all the other wizards. "Behind the scenes," they are conversing, joking, and informing each other of what is happening across the whole site. It is like a layer of "wizard consciousness" that unifies the whole site. The paging channel was particularly helpful to me in studying deviant behavior at the Palace. Whenever a member paged the wizards for help with a snert, I could quickly jump to the scene of the "crime."

Eventually, my participation on the wizard mailing list became the main focus of my work. My presence at the site itself slowly dropped off to only an occasional visit - in part due to the fact that it was so time consuming to be chatting online, but also because the wizard list proved to be such a rich source of information and insight. On the list, the wizards discussed the social and technical issues of the day, as well as just hung out with each other. This e-mail group proved to be an invaluable avenue into the inner workings and news of the Palace community. Many of the critical events occurring at Main - events I may have missed even if I spent a great deal of time there - were discussed on the list. I also saw how the social dynamics of the wizard group - the core of the community - shaped the atmosphere at Main.

My participation as a wizard led to two major articles - one about the lifestyle of the wizards and a second, very long piece about the wizards' techniques for dealing with deviant users. That second article is an excellent example of integrating my knowledge as a psychologist with the knowledge of the wizards. As a participant-researcher among the wizards, I envisioned it as a compendium of wizard wisdom that could serve as a training manual for anyone interested in learning how to manage the "bad boys" of cyberspace. Getting to know the wizards through the list also led to very valuable e-mail interviews for my article on the early history of the Main community.

In June of 1999, Electric Communities implemented a policy decision that marked a major turning point in the history of the Main Mansion wizard group, as well as in the history of my research there. To remain a wizard, people had to work the site at least 10 hours per month. Presumably, this strategy was intended to weed out inactive wizards and encourage others to actively maintain their presence at the site, hosting, educating, and managing the influx of new user "customers" who took advantage of the fact that the client software was now free. It was a business decision. Unfortunately, this "cut" also resulted in the removal of some oldtimer wizards who were active on the wizard list, but not at the site. I was one of those wizards. Originally, I was invited to the list to offer my expertise on cyberpsychology, as a kind of consultant. I suggested to the Company that perhaps my continued participation in that role might be valuable to them. As an oldtimer who was no longer active at the site, but who fully understood its history, I might offer an objective perspective that could be helpful to the wizard list - a "seeing the forest from the trees" advantage, as I explained it. The new policy, however, firmly placed a greater emphasis on encouraging wizards to work the site than on participation on the e-mail list. So I - along with some very prominent oldtimers, including Jim Bumgardner - was cut.

The Palace Discussion Group

In September of 1997 I sent a message to the wizard list inviting people to join me in creating what I called "The Palace Discussion Group." In the spirit of pure participant-observer epistemology, I envisioned the group as a small, closed-membership e-mail list where we could talk about our lives in cyberspace, our in-person lives, and how the two affect each other. Unlike larger and/or open e-mail groups, such as the wizard list, I hoped it could become a much more cohesive, confidential environment where we could compare our experiences. Ten very bright, creative, internet-savvy people volunteered and "PALGRP" was born. Over the past two years, this group has been an invaluable tool to me in my research. Often I have presented my hypotheses to them, allowing them to critique and help modify my conclusions. As knowledgeable oldtimers, they offered insights into aspects of Palace life that I may not have seen otherwise - often because their insights stemmed from their own personal experiences that they may not have been willing to discuss under less trusting, intimate conditions. Because we have come to know each other personally, they also have helped me sort out how my own subjective reactions (i.e., transference) might be affecting my investigations. The members of PALGRP were not simply a sophisticated source of information and "data," but more importantly, an environment for reality testing of personal experience via group discussion and consensus. This is a benefit for EACH of us, giving us all the opportunity to explore the subjective/objective cocktail of how we come to understand our lives, in-person and online.

A major event in the history of this group coincided with that major event in the history of my research and the Main wizards: the Company's policy to remove wizards who were not active at the site. About half of the PALGRP members were affected by that "pink slip," which became the title of our discussion thread. Comparing our perspectives and feelings about this change turned out to be one of the most valuable discussions in the group's development. It gave us all a much clearer, more comprehensive understanding of our relationships to Palace and its wizard group. For me, this discussion fulfilled all my expectations of what PALGRP could be - a place where we could test, challenge, verify our subjective impressions of Palace life. It was extremely valuable to me in my research. More importantly, it was extremely valuable to the cohesion and identity of PALGRP as no longer simply "The Palace Discussion Group," but as a "Group of Pals" who now faced the challenge of understanding our lives both within and BEYOND the realm of Palace.

Writing Up the Results… and Beyond

In the summer of 1996 I began writing the collection of articles about Palace that comprise one large subsection of my online book *The Psychology of Cyberspace.* Once completed, I would upload an article to my server, but before linking it into my book and advertising its appearance to the general public, I first sent an announcement with the url to the PUG and/or wizard lists. I invited Palatians to read my work and provide me with feedback. I received some excellent suggestions that enabled me to correct mistakes and add additional information before the articles would be seen by the general public. All quotes and references to specific people in the articles followed the standard research guidelines for informed consent.

I intend my articles about Palace to be valuable resources for other cyberpsychologists and online researchers. I also write the articles in a style that I hope will make them interesting and useful to the Palatians and internet users in general. Ideally, I'd like my work to fulfill both sides of the participant-researcher equation - to serve as a contribution to online communities as well as to cyberspace researchers.

I believe the conclusions in some of the articles I have written will be valid for some time to come - especially the articles that focus on the psychological dynamics associated with the basic software features of Palace and with the unique visual/spatial quality of this virtual world. While these features may evolve somewhat over time and new features will be added, I believe the basic psychological principles will remain essentially the same. Although I have only briefly visited other graphical worlds on the internet, many of the psychological principles associated with the visual elements of Palace should apply to these other worlds.

The psychology of visual chat communication is but one level of analysis in studying these virtual communities. Built onto this level is another realm of complex social dynamics not unlike that found in any real world community. The population of Palace users has expanded rapidly. New Palace sites are continually springing up, each with its own relatively distinct culture. Some fail to draw users and fade away. Others thrive. As the overall population of a site increases, there is a push towards social stratification, the creation of bureaucracies, intergroup conflict, and leadership struggles. Each community will handle these changes in their own style. I've studied only one, the Main Mansion site. No longer a wizard with a view from the inside, I'm left with several alternatives. Should I return to participant-observations at the Main site? Should I immigrate to one or more other Palace sites to understand the unique social dynamics of those communities? Should I rely on e-mail interviews or the various Palace mailing lists as sources of data?

For now, PALGRP serves as my primary connection to the Palace experience. Perhaps the developmental changes of that group are pointing me towards the insights that need to be explored. Some people stay at Palace. Some leave. Some people maintain their devotion to cyberliving and others drift away. Why? What motivates this coming together and separating in virtual living? What motivates these avid ventures into cyberspace and then, eventually, the return to "real" life.

We shall see.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Case studies of digital life forms
Life at the Palace
Steps in studying an online group: The Geezer Brigade
Ethics in cyberspace research

The Geezer Brigade

Steps in Studying an Online Group

Cyberspace is the information center and social playground of the relatively young, like middle-aged folks and especially the ever booming numbers of youngsters who are growing up with the word "internet" as commonplace in their thoughts as "TV" and "library".... Not exactly. Seniors are exploring cyberspace also, setting up their own territories and groups, such as Third Age, Senior.com, Senior Search, and the AOL Senior chat rooms. Unique among these online worlds is The Geezer Brigade (www.thegeezerbrigade.com) - a group that relishes the philosophy of being feisty codgers and codgerettes, as well as any and all humor that allows them to defy, embrace, and transcend the experience of being old. They are an excellent example of how the internet offers the opportunity for individuals with special interests, issues, or backgrounds to come together in a virtual group. In the "real" world, such groups may have been impossible to create due to geographical distance or simply the inability of the people to find each other.

People Make a Group:
The Founders, Leaders, and Membership

A first step in understanding any group - online or otherwise - is knowing something about its members, its leaders, and especially the founders whose vision shaped the group's initial spirit and direction. The Geezer Brigade (TGB) was created and continues to be run by The Geezer-in-Chief John Kernell, 65, of South Carolina (initially, he told me NORTH Carolina, but later jokingly corrected himself and chalked up his absented-minded error as "a senior moment"). Retired in 1991 from his position as vice president for an international PR firm, Kernell did anything but "retire" from an energetic lifestyle. He moved to Mexico, finished a novel, became fluent in Spanish, formally studied piano at a music conservatory, played piano in a good restaurant, designed an alternative therapy program to overcome his health problems, took his son to Europe on stock market profits, and eventually moved to Charleston for the weather and cultural opportunities. He also a has degree in English, Speech and Drama from Cornell and received an MA in counseling psychology when he was 44. It was during his drive to Charleston that he came up with the idea for a seniors club called The Geezer Brigade. At first he wasn't sure how he was going to make it work, but when he fired up his PowerMac and connected to AOL, a pop-up ad announced "Put your business on the Internet." And so he did. "I always knew I would some day seek to empower other Seniors while in retirement. Empowerment through humor is one way.... My forebears were Irish vaudeville comedians." As its founding member, he brought to TGB the energetic, adventurous, and broad-minded attitude that is so evident in his life.

TGB itself consists of approximately 160 members from all over North America, equally split between men and women. The average age for men is 73 and for women,70. The entry level age is 55, with the oldest man at 96 and the oldest woman, 88. Most members are retired mid-level, white collar workers, with a college degree but no advanced education. "But the group is very heterogeneous," Kernell explained, "LOTS of exceptions. Ex-Army. Language teacher. Dentists. Doctors." No doubt, the adventurous, open-minded philosophy of TGB draws such a diverse collection of people together, and that diversity in turns reinforces the philosophy.

Leadership and motivation for promoting the group tend to emerge from the membership when people feel a common bond, when there is group spirit. While members of TGB enjoyed the humorous e-mail publications distributed daily, it was the Saturday chat program that enabled them to "meet," to get to know each other and connect as a group. As a result, Kernell noted, it became the breeding ground for leaders over the years. One person appointed himself as Membership Chairman and devised a poster campaign for promoting TGB among senior centers. Others helped developed a member's photo montage web site and a chain-letter e-mail to be used as a type of bulletin board that circulates among the membership.

Expanding the membership and seeking out new pathways for participants to interact with each other tend to be two common initiatives during the early stages of a group's development. This is true for all groups, but especially so in cyberspace. Because the internet itself is a multifaceted communication medium, groups that form there have at their disposal a variety of techniques for communicating with each other and spreading the word about the group. Leaders early in the group's development often tackle these communication challenges.

How Does This Work?

An online group may use a variety of strategies to encourage communication among its members and thereby establish group cohesion, the most basic methods being web sites, e-mail lists, private e-mail, newsgroups, chat, telephone contacts, hardcopy communications, and in-person meetings. Each method has its pros and cons. Combining different strategies tends to synergistically cancel out the limitations while maximizing the strength of the group. Most online organizations develop in the direction of expanding their interactions into new domains. Over the course of its early history, TGB demonstrated this broadening of communication channels, becoming more interactive each step along the way. The internet as a information and social medium tends to become more and more thoroughly integrated into the fabric of the group. At the same time, the group extends it reaches into the hardcopy and in-person realms.

Web Site- TGB's web site serves a variety of functions. It provides information and announcements about the group. It recruits and registers new members. Kernell also uses it to gather resources for TGB, as evident in the online humor competitions in which visitors to the site were encouraged to send in jokes and stories (often material they found on the internet).

Daily E-mails - As Kernell gathered more humorous material from his members as well as from his own internet searches, it occurred to him that he could bundle the material together, edit it, and send it out daily as a membership feature. Thus, "From The Geezer Brigade's Humor HQ: The Best of the Best for 12/31/98" (etc.) was born. Sent to members every morning, it generated tremendous membership response as well as many humorous return e-mails from which Kernell borrowed material (giving credit to the creators). The daily e-mail publications and the members' e-mail responses created a positive feedback loop.

Membership Roster: - In her list of principles for establishing a successful online community, Amy Jo Kim (www.naima.com) mentions the importance of creating member profiles that evolve over time. Early on, TGB introduced a confidential membership roster, with voluntary profiles, that is updated and circulated monthly. About half the members have contributed short profiles. The roster allows members to quickly make new friends in other parts of North America with similar interests, and it also implicitly announces the expanding membership - and hence the success - of the group. Making the roster confidential also instills a feeling of status and belonging among those who receive it. Kernell noted that "when a popular member, whose humor has been featured in both the daily e-mails and the printed newsletter, went in for cancer treatment, his online friends rallied around in ways that moved him greatly each time he read their e-mails of support." Private e-mail among members is an extremely important, complex, yet often hidden, infrastructure that allows more intimate bonding between people. Usually (but not always), it increases the cohesion of the whole group.

Integration with Hardcopy - The internet is a powerful communication tool, but so are hardcopy publications. Integrating the two is a synergistically powerful combination that helps overcome the disadvantages of either approach. Online resources can be extended into print, and print resources can be incorporated online. TGB circulates a monthly printed newsletter, The Brigadier. Kernell also bundled up some of the material from one of the monthly humor contests and sent it to Dear Abby, where it was published with the comment "In case you're wondering what Seniors are doing with their time these days..." It was seen by 20,000,000 people, Kernell noted, "and gave us a legitimacy and exposure we would have never been able to achieve otherwise." After the Dear Abby article appeared, Kernell queried the membership and asked them whom they might invite to be their first Comedian in Residence. The votes for Phyllis Diller led the pack, with Rodney Dangerfield in second place. Using the internet, Kernell tracked down her agent and pitched the idea. Delighted with TGB, Diller agreed to have the group use material from her book "The Joys of Aging...and How to Avoid Them" in their newsletter. Later Kernell came across a cartoon by Peter Mueller depicting a combative Senior with a punk hairdo, a pierced nose and grunge clothing, saying to a startled "straight" young onlooker, "What are you looking at?" For Kernell, it perfectly expressed The Geezer Creed. After tracking down Mueller via the internet, he arranged a deal to reuse some of Mueller's published cartoons in the newsletter.

Membership Feedback - No organization can thrive without feedback from its members. Denying people the opportunity to contribute ideas and opinions leads to a top-down or outright monarchical style of running the group. It also shuts down the opportunity for new and creative ideas. Kernell did a postage pre-paid mail-back satisfaction

survey in June of 1998, that was enclosed with the monthly printed newsletter. A majority of the membership responded favorably.

Real Time Chat - A later addition to TGB was a weekly Saturday chat meeting, moderating by Kernell. The one hour meetings are scheduled as opportunities to discuss a topic-for-the-week, but often the gathering simply becomes a time to hang out together. The meeting is private - and password protected - which eliminates the annoyance of unpleasant intruders and programmed commercial advertisements that tend to plague the senior chat rooms of large online networks, like AOL. Real time ("synchronous") encounters online create a different atmosphere than e-mail lists and newsgroups. The sense of "presence" of others is more palpable, and it's a sign of commitment for people to be online at the same location at the same time. Making the meeting a private, closed-group session can enhance the identity and boundary of the group. If an online group succeeds in maintaining ongoing chat sessions, it's both a sign of group cohesion as well as a force that perpetuates group cohesion. Introducing chat was a significant developmental step for TGB. It provided the first opportunity for the members to meet together as a group. Kernell noted that people have come to feel close and personally vulnerable to other members whom they have yet to meet in-person.

Chain E-mail - As of the writing of this article, TGB did not include an e-mail list (listserv), which can be a valuable format for online group interaction. However, Kernell did mention plans for "the world's first Rotating Bulletin Board" - an e-mail chain letter with members' opinions on set topics added each time the e-mail is forwarded. A unique combination of e-mail and newsgroup formats, the Rotating Bulletin Board concept did pose some problems: In what order should it pass through the membership? What if someone in the chain failed to pass the message along? Kernell hoped that asking people to sign up for Bulletin Board might increase the sense of responsibility for keeping the chain messages going. The enthusiasm many members showed for the idea revealed their desire for collaborative group activity.

In-Person Gatherings - Online groups can be fascinating and valuable, but they are not a substitute for in-person encounters. When people develop meaningful relationships in cyberspace, they inevitably want and need to meet in-person. It helps to seal the relationship and make it seem more "real." In-person meetings can in turn solidify the relationship. Similar to online chat - but packing an even more powerful punch - in-person group meetings both indicates group cohesion and commitment as well as fortifies group cohesion and commitment. "Because we are bound together by humor and our Seniority," Kernell noted, "when I hosted a lunch for 13 local members here in Charleston, I was struck by how quickly and how satisfyingly we connected, establishing within a hour or so an easy camaraderie based on our online experience of the online organization we all belonged to." The people who regularly attend in-person (and online) meetings tend to become the influential, stable core of the group.

What We Believe

The communication infrastructure provides the vehicle for the group's existence, but it's the group's ideology that gives it a unique identity and purpose. To understand this dimension of TGB, I started off my e-mail interview with Kernell by asking a question that required him to type very little, but hopefully think a lot. "If you could only pick THREE WORDS to capture what the Geezer Brigade is all about, what would those three words be?" Later that day, his response came back:

Humor.
Recognition.
Belonging.

The membership satisfaction survey revealed that the humor was far and away the number one appeal of TGB. It is the kind of wry, self-deprecating humor that Phyllis Diller expresses about her age. The daily e-mail, for example, may be peppered with one-liners like "Some minds are like concrete: thoroughly mixed up and permanently set" or "It's frustrating when you know all the answers, but nobody bothers to ask you the questions any more." At the same time, the humor is filled with feistiness and spunk. It demonstrates the adventuresome, curious, and self-aware attitude of TGB. Kernell said:

I believe that humor is empowering to Seniors. It is also salutary. If you go watch Patch Adams, the new Robin Williams movie, the whole premise of the movie is that humor is a powerful tool in the hands of a physician.... I think because TGB is run by a 65-year-old semi-retired geezer that the humor we share in the daily e-mails, monthly newsletter, and weekly chats has a special feel to it that is more readily understood and appreciated by other Seniors, almost as if we were an ethnic minority that shared a special language or dialect. We APPRECIATE each other in special ways that are not so present in very heterogeneous online groups.

The Geezer philosophy of continuing to be feisty and adventurous perfectly suits the group for using the internet as a vehicle for meeting, since the internet is the "new frontier." There is a pioneering spirit among TGB. Rather than forging streams and crossing mountains, TGB people are buying modems and setting out into cyberspace. Although there are other online groups for seniors, Kernell sees the TGB as different, unique. He finds the other groups to be rather bland, predictable, and tending to follow the "make nice" and "go along to get along" philosophy. TGB has a more pugnacious mission, as evident in the term "Brigade":

> I think we ARE a minority among Seniors and a good and useful one. There is a tendency to "go along" as we age, both at work and at home. Some people end up as "Seniors" having somehow lost entirely their capacity for genuineness, having compromised away their connection to their "real selves" in an effort to be accepted. They have fixed themselves to gain approval and, in the process, LOST their Selves. Their humor is predictable, strained and not terribly funny. Their laughter is automatic and is hard for Geezers to be around. We are not Seniors, Golden Agers, Third Agers, etc. We are GEEZERS. This implies feistiness, spunk, a sparkle in the eyes, aliveness, even eccentricity. We make trouble, in a good way, by refusing to be categorized, pigeonholed or predictable. We're still struggling to grow and find ourselves. Our motto is "Do not go gentle into that good night!" Obviously, I'm communicating a very clear 'us' and 'them' situation, perhaps because I'm so terrified of becoming like how I perceive them to be.

A group's ideology has a therapeutic impact on its members (Suler, 1964). Simply having a belief system creates structure and meaning to overcome the anxiety associated uncertainty. A philosophy of self-expression and altruism reinforces identity and self-esteem. Most importantly, the particular, unique aspects of a given group's ideology point to needs within the members that are being addressed by that ideology. For TGB, the feisty, pugnacious Geezer philosophy serves as a kind of cognitive antidote that counteracts the social, psychological, and emotional problems associated with age and the inevitability of death.

Recognition and Belonging

A fascinating, powerful outcome of the internet is the opportunity it offers for anyone with a computer and modem to have a voice, to be recognized. Anyone can publish a web page that says anything you want it to say. Anyone can express their opinion in a public arena without your "real world" status or appearance being a significant factor in whether people listen. This kind of recognition is part of the appeal of TGB. Geezers have their say. They are recognized as Geezers, as unique people ("I'm over 55! I'm 96!"). On a much more basic level, they are recognized as people. Kernell noted how a very effective advertisement in the 1930s was a small national magazine ad in the 30s that said: "$1.00: Get Mail." Lonely older folks who wanted something in their mailboxes every day sent in their dollar - a lot of money in those days - and the entrepreneur who thought up the ad put their names on the mailing lists of commercial enterprises and those making free offers. The daily e-mails of TGB address a similar need, except the mail is personalized to the psychological and emotional mindset of the members, and it integrates feedback from the members. The daily e-mails also use a "blind carbon" so each recipient sees only his/her own address as the destination. Kernell anticipates what the recipients might think, "This e-mail is specifically addressed to me! I am still important enough to get mail every day." Kernell puts his effort into making the e-mails as funny, offbeat and senior-friendly as possible. "A number of members said how much they appreciated being able to get up, go to their computer and get a laugh to start the day."

Above and beyond simply being recognized, TGB gives its members the opportunity to be involved, to BELONG. This is valuable to retired seniors whose work and social circles may have become narrowed - and especially valuable to "Geezers" who, in their in-person life, may have difficulty finding like-minded Geezers. "I like the total concept of old codgers such as myself having a cyber club by which we can share and exchange," one member stated in the satisfaction survey. "FRIENDS," said another, "are without doubt the most interesting and important result of my Brigade membership, both sexes, altho' at my age: especially women friends." Thanks to the internet, the circle of friends are available 24 hours a day, and keeps expanding in interesting and challenging ways. Some benefit from that feeling of recognition and belonging even though they are not online. One semi-retired comic in the midwest delights in seeing his original humor published in The Brigadier.

Some psychological research has been critical of the internet. The findings suggest that online relationships draw people away from or thwart the development of in-person relationships - resulting in an "addiction" to the easy, superficial relationships of cyberspace, increased loneliness, and depression. I asked Kernell if this might be an issue for the people of TGB. Might they be especially vulnerable to this problem given the fact that they are seniors? Or might just the opposite be true? Kernell did admit that intimacy is at times a bit too easy, that it requires less effort that in-person intimacy. The friendships sometimes feel great but don't genuinely run deep. But he also added this:

For younger people, making new friends in the real world is relatively easy, depending on one's capacity. A big pool of possibilities... For older people, I don't think it's quite so easy. Maybe we SHOULD try harder, but we don't. We miss the people our age we used to know and we aren't particularly interested in getting to know younger people in any more than a casual, superficial way. Their issues don't seem to be our issues. And they seem to pretty ageist in their attitudes. So, we are ALREADY a bit lonely and depressed. Instead of becoming more so, online relationships with peers seem delightful and as easy to establish as those available to young people in the real world. The Internet is a RESOURCE.

Where We've Been, Where We're Going

All groups - online and in-person - will pass through various stages in the course of their history. According to some theories, those stages are predictable: (1) "norming" (the group establishes goals and basic rules for behaving), (2) "conforming" (harmony and affection, an emphasis on similarities, members try hard to get along and avoid conflict); (3) "storming" (conflicts arise over differences of opinion and leadership struggles); and, (4) "performing" (the group accepts diversity of opinion, learns how to deal with conflict, and becomes flexible in achieving its goals). As a fairly young group, developmentally speaking, TGB probably falls somewhere between the first and second stages. For a group that values feistiness and devalues the "go along to get along" philosophy, it will be interesting to see how it maneuvers the conforming versus storming stages. Some people, who have observed these kinds of patterns in the history of online groups, believe early stages marked by advertising and recruiting eventually lead to either a stagnant atmosphere where newcomers are rejected, or a mature group in which diversity is embraced.

In my e-mail interview with Kernell, it became clear that milestones in the history of TGB also involved the expansion of group interactivity. In the earliest stage, TGB mostly involved the distribution of the daily e-mails and the monthly newsletter. These publications were the anchor that united all members and encouraged one-on-one encounters among them. Then, the introduction of the Saturday chat program marked a qualitative change towards members interacting with members as a group. Kernell's plans for the future involve building on this interactivity - in part by boosting membership (the recruiting stage), expanding the chat program, and launching the Rotating Bulletin Board. Creating an e-mail list (listserv) would be another powerful alternative for enhancing group interactions, cohesion, and identity. Compared to in-person groups, online groups may be unique in how the extent and formats for group interactivity serve as developmental benchmarks.

The developmental progress of an online group may be measured by how well it addresses the criteria for creating a successful online community - especially Amy Jo Kim's (www.naima.com) nine basic principles. TGB clearly has addressed 1,3 , and 6, and has begun to tackle 2,4, 7, and 9.

1. Define the purpose of the community
2. Create distinct gathering places
3. Create member profiles that evolve over time
4. Promote effective leadership
5. Define a clear-yet-flexible code of conduct
6. Organize and promote cyclic events
7. Provide a range of roles that couple power with responsibility
8. Facilitate member-created subgroups
9. Integrate the online environment with the "real" world

Some Methodological Footnotes

In this article I've focused mostly on studying the various features of the online group itself. Also important are the METHODS used to carry out that study. Here, with TGB, I've relied mostly on my interview with John Kernell, comparing the results with what I've discovered in my other work online, particularly my ongoing study of Palace. Other options include in-depth interviews with group members (e.g., my article on the Palace wizards) and quantitative surveys of members, including those that may have been carried out by the group itself, as in TGB's satisfaction survey. Field observations also are very valuable - especially my favorite variation of field research, "participant-observation." You join the group, and as a member, try to juggle an objective analysis of the group with the evaluation of your own subjective reactions..... In the case of TGB, I'll have to wait awhile in order to employ this tactic. :-)

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

Unique groups in cyberspace
Therapy and support groups in cyberspace
Social psychology of online groups and communities
Developmental stages of mailing lists
Making virtual communities work

Ethics in Cyberspace Research

Consent, Privacy and Contribution

The boom of social activities within cyberspace has been followed closely by a boom in the social scientific studies of those activities. Researchers in psychology, sociology, and anthropology have launched scientific expeditions into nearly all of the widespread territories of the internet. Online experimental studies, surveys, interviews, field observations, participant-observation - the whole range of research tools are being brought to bear in this attempt to figure out how people and groups are behaving in the virtual universe.

Solid research means solid ethics. What are the responsibilities of the researcher to the participants in the research? The Ethical Standards of the American Psychological Association does a good job in answering this question - one very critical component being "informed consent." Here are some of the features of informed consent as described in the Standards:

- Prior to conducting research, investigators enter into a documented agreement with participants that clarifies the nature of the research and the responsibilities of each party.

- When obtaining this informed consent, researchers use language that is reasonably understandable to the participants.

- Informed consent is obtained before recording the subjects in any way.

- Investigators explain significant factors that may be expected to influence the person's willingness to participate (such as risks, discomfort, adverse effects, or limitations on confidentiality) and other aspects about which the person may inquire.

- Researchers tell participants that they can withdraw from the research at any time as well as explain the foreseeable consequences of declining to participate or withdrawing.

- For persons who are legally incapable of giving informed consent, investigators nevertheless provide an appropriate explanation, obtain the person's consent, and obtain appropriate permission from a legally authorized person, if such substitute consent is permitted by law.

- Researchers inform participants of their anticipated sharing or further use of personally identifiable research data and of the possibility of unanticipated future uses.

- Investigators provide a prompt opportunity for participants to obtain appropriate information about the nature, results, and conclusions of the research, and they attempt to correct any misconceptions that participants may have.

A second important component of the Standards deals with confidentiality. In reports or presentations of their research, investigators do not disclose confidential or personally identifiable information concerning their subjects unless the person has given written permission (or unless there is some other ethical or legal authorization to do so). "Ordinarily," the Standards add, "in such scientific and professional presentations, psychologists disguise confidential information concerning such persons or organizations so that they are not individually identifiable to others and so that discussions do not cause harm to subjects who might identify themselves."

Last, the Standards address the issue of appropriate consultation and evaluation. If an ethical issue is unclear, researchers seek to resolve the question through consultation with peers or institutional review boards. Generally speaking, as part of the process of developing and implementing the project, researchers consult those with expertise regarding any special population under investigation or most likely to be affected. They also obtain from host institutions or organizations appropriate approval prior to conducting the research. Investigators and their assistants should only perform those tasks for which they are appropriately trained and prepared.

The Standards do note possible exceptions. They suggest that informed consent may not be necessary for anonymous questionnaires, naturalistic observations, or certain kinds of archival research - although it suggests that the researcher first consult with colleagues or review boards. It specifically mentions that informed consent prior to recording subjects may not be necessary for simple naturalistic observation in public spaces, and when it is not anticipated that the recording will be used in a manner that could cause personal identification or harm.

The Standards also state that deceiving subjects should only occur when it is justified by the study's prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and when equally effective alternative procedures that do not use deception are not feasible. "Psychologists do not deceive research participants about significant aspects that would affect their willingness to participate, such as physical risks, discomfort, or unpleasant emotional experiences. Any other deception that is an integral feature of the design and conduct of an experiment must be explained to participants as early as is feasible, preferably at the conclusion of their participation, but no later than at the conclusion of the research."

These APA Standards set the basic foundation for ethical research. However, a variety of complex issues arise in cyberspace studies that can make the application of these standards a bit tricky. Cyberspace alters the temporal, spatial, and sensory components of human interaction, thereby challenging traditional ethical definitions and calling to question some basic assumptions about identity and one's right to keep aspects of it confidential. For example, "recording" someone probably includes chat logs, e-mail, and message boards. If so, and the researcher contacts and interacts with subjects via the internet, then the recording is always on until turned off, when records are deleted. Should that be mentioned in the informed consent?.... Recording of public behavior is permissible, but how do we want to define "public" in a virtual universe filled with many thousands of rooms and channels, all varying in how easy is to get to them and how many people are openly active or secretly lurking in that space. Is it the technical limitations on access to that channel that should define privacy - or, as many researchers now believe, the person's subjective impression of confidentiality, whether or not people believe they are speaking without being heard?.... With everything easily and often recorded in cyberspace, what constitutes an "archive?" Is who archives it important?.... When many online people present minimal, partial or imaginary aspects of their identity, you can't always verify who is who. What should be known about a person's identity before they become a subject? How do you know for sure you are always working with the people you think you are working with? Do imaginary screen names and online persona qualify as confidential information, or should the researcher's report disguise what already looks something like a disguise? It's critical to know whether a subject is a minor, but how do you verify the age of the person? Researchers too can easily hide the fact that they are researchers, or even pretend to be someone else, which is probably acceptable in an environment where everyone else is doing the same thing. Or is it?

All of these questions indicate the various twists and turns in online research, so consultation with experts is important. But who are they? Is cyberspace research significantly different from traditional research that it warrants new standards of expertise? Some say yes.

In this age of expanding access to information, a critical ethical responsibility is recognizing the right to privacy. In chat rooms, e-mail channels, and message boards, it's temptingly easy to gather information without people having any idea they are part of a research project. Even if conceptualized as archival research, naturalistic studies, or participant-observation, a published article or public presentation of the project easily could violate the privacy of an individual or group. It could cause them harm. To prevent these deleterious effects, the investigator needs a solid grounding in ethical thinking.

As a result of my consulting on research projects - and of my own research - I've developed a list of questions that investigators should consider when gathering and reporting their data. It may be impossible, unnecessary, or even detrimental for the investigator to follow all of the "rules" implied in these questions. Every research project is unique, with different demands and varying standards about what is necessary or sufficient ethical responsibility. These questions are guidelines to be interpreted appropriately by the conscientious social scientist. Ideally, the investigator will seriously consider and address as many of these questions as possible:

1. Informed Consent from the Subjects and Responsible Authorities

-- Is the person or group aware of the research being done and what will happen with the research findings?

-- Were they notified of the research study before, during, or after data collection?

-- Was explicit permission obtained from the person or group for the researcher to conduct the study and write about the findings?

-- Has the researcher informed participants about issues regarding the confidentiality of the channel being used to communicate with them, and about the confidentiality of any records kept by the researcher or by the subjects?

-- Are the people who own or operate the group or its channel aware of the purpose of the research. Have they given their consent?

-- Has the person or group been debriefed after the study is complete? Have they seen and given feedback on the written research report?

-- Is permission (informed consent) obtained for the use of quotes or for describing specific people?

-- Are the respondents adults or minors? How can their age be verified? Was informed consent obtained from legal guardians?

-- Did the researcher himself create the group for the purpose of gathering data? If so, was informed consent obtained?

-- Is the researcher a participant in the group or just an observer? Are the subjects aware of the researcher's role?

-- Are group members who are quoted or described in the report still active in the group?

2. Privacy of the Communication Channel, Records, and Research Reports

-- How has the researcher protected the confidentiality of the channel she is using to communicate with subjects and of the records kept by the researcher and the subjects?

-- Is the communication channel a public space or is it operated privately with restricted access?

-- Do the person or group members PERCEIVE the communication channel as being private?

-- How easily can the person's or group's communications with the researcher be accessed by other people?

-- Is it possible for outsiders to find messages from the person or the group by using internet search engines?

-- Were the communications of the person or group recorded in a public or private archive? What are the role and responsibilities of the person or group who created the archive?

-- Is the identity of the person or group members kept confidential in the records and reports of the research? (e.g., by altering or eliminating any information that could reveal who they are)

-- Is the identity/location of the online group protected in the records and reports?

-- Is there any possibility of harm to the person, the group, or the group's members by the research and what is discussed in the research report?

3. Consultation and Evaluation of the Study

-- Has the researcher consulted colleagues about the ethical issues involved in the study? Are these colleagues knowledgeable about the unique features of cyberspace research?

-- Has the research been approved by a research ethics committee? Are committee members knowledgeable about the unique features of cyberspace research?

-- Is the research of significant merit to the scientific community to warrant the methods used?

In my own research, I like to do more in addition to protecting people's privacy. A great deal of my research involves a participant-observation approach - my work at the Palace being one good example. I am not just studying a group or community. I'm also a member. Anything I learn as a researcher I try to give back to the group. If I discover an insight into the community or a change that might improve its well-being, I talk about it with people. The spirit of participant-observation is that being a researcher and conscientious citizen go hand-in-hand. Even when I study groups of which I am not a member, or am interviewing a particular person, I try to give useful feedback. One way I do that is by writing an article that will be valuable not only to my fellow social scientists, but also to the people I am writing about. For example, after receiving feedback via e-mail, I was pleased to learn that my article about the Geezer Brigade has been helpful to its members as well as to people who discovered the group through my article, and consequently wanted to join it.

I think that when a researcher emphasizes the importance of making a helpful contribution to the person or group being studied, many - if not all - of the other ethical responsibilities also are fulfilled.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The Basic Psychological Features of Cyberspace
One of Us: Participant Observation Research at the Palace
Intensive Case Studies in Cyberspace

In the Cyberspace Bubble

Full Immersion and f2f Isolation

An internet software company asked me to consult on a marketing project. They wanted to lock three volunteers into separate hotel rooms for one month, giving them nothing but a computer, internet access, and - after the volunteers emerged from their ordeal - a very hefty sum of money. The Today morning program had already carried out a publicity stunt in which several people were sequestered into hotel rooms for one week with only internet access as a way to communicate with the outside world. And then, of course, there's DotComGuy (http://dotcomguy.com/) who has vowed to spend a year in his cybercave home. The hypothesis behind these cyberspace "immersion" projects is whether the internet alone is enough to sustain us. In particular, can DotComGuy make a living in cyberspace while nourishing himself mentally? Can the Today Show people purchase the products they need to survive?

The software company was interested in a more comprehensive and dramatic hypothesis. The Today people and DotComGuy were not truly immersed in cyberspace while being fully isolated from the f2f world. One of the Today women had her sister and pug to keep her company. Another threw a party for friends in her hotel room. DotComGuy has - perhaps among other visitors - a fitness expert come in once a week to help him stay in shape. What if these people also were isolated SOCIALLY from the f2f world? Surely, we can buy any products we need via the internet. There are plenty of reading material and games to entertain our minds. But can we survive only on cyber-relationships?

The software company decided not to go ahead with their project - probably because they felt the Today Show stunt and DotComGuy had taken too much steam out the novelty factor. Nevertheless, their hypothesis was an interesting one, and one that indeed has not yet been tested. What would happen if people were fully immersed in cyberspace while fully isolated from the in-person world? During my consultation on this short-lived project, I did formulate a research plan to answer this question. While survey or experimental research involving the testing of large groups of people is one good possibility, my formulations instead focused on intensive case studies.

The Primary Research Question: Human Needs

The most comprehensive hypothesis is how living exclusively in cyberspace addresses human needs. Not just mental stimulation, or the ability to earn a living, or to buy necessary products, or even social engagement. The WHOLE range of human needs. It's very possible that people could find satisfaction in one area but not others. A thorough research project would assess the impact of immersion and isolation on at least the following dimensions:

- physical needs (food, clothing, physical comfort)
- mental and intellectual stimulation
- sexuality
- friendships and a sense of belonging
- self-esteem (achievement and mastery)
- love and romance
- spirituality/religion

Secondary Research Questions: Privacy (and Fame)

In order to carry out the study, it would be necessary to extensively record the subjects' thoughts, feelings, and behavior. They'd lose much of their privacy. That factor easily could become a complicating factor in the interpretation of the results. For example, if people became anxious, it might be the result of a lack of privacy rather than just cyberspace immersion and f2f isolation. On the other hand, part of living in cyberspace is the fact that all of one's words and actions can be recorded and potentially made public. The immersion research might be greatly amplifying an intrinsic feature of cyberspace life.

If the research was carried out as a commercial publicity campaign - as the software company intended - then the people would also become micro-celebrities. In the age of JenniCam, The Truman Show, and MTV's Real World, technology gives ordinary people the opportunity to willingly (or unwillingly) become celebrities. What motivates a person to attain media fame and what are the psychological consequences? In a research study not linked to a media stunt, this complicating factor could be eliminated.

The Ideal Subjects and Screening Criteria

Even when given a large sum of money, as the software company intended, only certain kinds of people would volunteer for the study. Comparing people who flatly refuse to participate to those who are willing could clarify the social and personality factors that fuel the self-selection process. Also, recruiting subjects who differ on dimensions that might influence how they experience the immersion would give the researcher a chance to study the effect of those dimensions:

- age and gender
- ethnic/racial background
- marital status with/without children
- educational level
- level of computer skills
- level of activity in real world hobbies, sports, etc.
- level of social intimacy (friends, family)
- level of extroversion/introversion
- level of religious belief and activity
- level of writing, typing, and oral skills
- ability level in describing thoughts and feelings

The person's computer skills and personality style are especially important variables. Computer and internet novices will probably find it quite difficult surviving in cyberspace immersion. They'd have to climb that learning curve very quickly, or become very frustrated trying. People who are introverted - such as those with schizoid personalities - may have a much easier time dealing with isolation from the f2f world. Because they prefer solitary activities and often live inside their heads, the information resources, games, and relatively anonymous relationships available online might be all they need. Being able to describe one's thoughts and feelings, either verbally or in writing, is necessary for gathering data for the research, but it's also a complicating factor. Whereas people who can describe their experience are "good" (informative) subjects, it's also important to understand how non-introspective or alexothymic people react to the immersion and isolation.

If we could select only ONE person for the study, we would look for a person who fell in the average range for most of the above dimensions - an "everyman" (or woman) that most computer users could relate to:

- thirtysomething
- married or in a stable relationship (no children but wants children)
- college graduate
- down-to-earth, non-intellectual/non-high-tech occupation
- average computer skills, is comfortable using the web and e-mail
- involved in some real world activities (e.g., sports)
- has good friends and stable family relationships
- able to verbalize thoughts and feelings
- at least average writing skills
- religious (but not extremely so)

The Immersion/Isolation Environment

The design features of the subject's apartment would revolve around the variables of minimizing contact with the f2f world while maximizing cyberspace immersion and the ability to record the subject's activities. In the most extreme form of isolation, windows would be covered and deliveries placed in a foyer to prevent contact with the delivery person. There would be no phone, radio, or TV - only a computer and standard apartment accommodations (bed, refrigerator, stove, bathroom, basic furniture). Video cameras and possibly one-way mirrors would be positioned so that the subject could be observed at all times, with the exception of bathroom privacy. It would be good to include telecommuters or other online workers in the study, but expecting all subjects to survive financially via the internet would be unrealistic. An expense account must be provided for them. However, this "free" money would inject an

artificial element into their experience - an element that would alleviate much of the challenge and stress of having to survive completely online. Large financial rewards for participating in the study also would complicate the interpretation of how subjects react to the immersion. Some people will put up with almost anything to get a large cash reward. Others won't. Compensation should probably be roughly equivalent to their real world income for that period of time.

The hardware and software given to the subjects are their survival tools. The logical choices would be a standard model computer compatible with the subject's preferred platform, standard internet applications and software (web browser, e-mail, word-processing), and a fast, always-on internet connect (e.g., DSL). The subjects would be told that they can purchase via the net any other software or hardware they wished, within their expense account.

In order to fully test how well cyberspace addresses human needs, the subjects must be permitted to install internet telephoning and video conferencing equipment. It would be tempting to see how well people fare if limited to only typed-text communication - which currently constitutes a large majority of activity on the net - but that would not be an accurate test of the hypothesis. Cyberspace does offer visual and auditory contact with people. In fact, such communication will be an important feature of the future internet. If we disallow the use of audio/video conferencing, then we are only examining the subjects' reactions to a limited immersion into cyberspace - an immersion that only allows text-based relationships. One important feature of the study could be an analysis of how and why some people seek out visual and auditory communication, while others do not. It's also possible to manipulate that variable - allowing some subjects to use audio/video equipment, but not other people. Giving subjects that audio/video capability from the start does offer the extra advantage of interviewing them with those tools via the cyberspace channel, rather than introducing extraneous channels (e.g., video recordings via a one-way mirror and telecom).

We should recognize the fact that no matter how complete we attempt to make the immersion, it by necessity can only be partial. People have physical bodies. Even though restricted to an apartment, they are still living within a physical space filled with physical sensations. They may hear sounds or voices outside the apartment. They may have a chance encounter with a delivery man or research assistant. The immersion is a see-through, fragile bubble that can pop at any moment. Until we figure out how to immerse our minds completely into the machine - which isn't likely - we will never be able to examine how humans react to "complete" cyberspace immersion.

How long should the subjects be immersed in cyberspace? A week is probably not long enough. A month or more would be a better test of the hypothesis. This is a variable that could be manipulated. No doubt, the longer a subject spends immersed and isolated, the more taxing the experience will be and the more likely we will see variation in how well those seven basic needs are being satisfied.

Data Collection

As an intensive case study, the project would involve gathering as much data as possible without overwhelming the subject. Both objective and subjective information are critical at all phases - before, during, and after immersion. Here are some possibilities:

- pre-immersion face-to-face interviews and psychological testing to establish a baseline

- video recording of the subject's behavior in the immersion environment

- a continuous record of all online activity (web sites visited, e-mails sent and received, messages posted, purchases made, amount of time spent in each environment, etc.)

- daily checklists, journal entries, and short video interviews to assess mood and thought patterns

- random sampling of thoughts and feelings in the subject's stream of consciousness (e.g., a timer beeps and the subject records what he/she was thinking and feeling at that moment)

- a record of dreams to assess the subject's deeper, unconscious reactions to the immersion

- ongoing e-mail contact with a supervising research psychologist

- an e-mail discussion group consisting of the subjects and the research psychologist (the subjects discussing their experiences with each other may draw out insights that might not otherwise surface individually)

- interviews with the subject's family and friends before, during, and after the immersion to determine how they see the subject reacting to the immersion

- a post-immersion face-to-face interview and psychological testing

- follow-up interviews and testing as the subject reenters the f2f world

It would be interesting to select a matched control subject or "double" for each subject participating in the study - someone who is similar to the immersed subject on the selection criteria, but lives out his or her normal lifestyle without being immersed in cyberspace. The activities and state of mind of the isolated subject then can be compared against the double at random points during the immersion (e.g., "On Friday night, Joe went to dinner and a movie with his wife, while Dick searched the web for information about video conferencing software").

What Would the Results Show?

The data would be analyzed and reported according to the degree to which cyberspace satisfies each of the 7 basic human needs. Objective information as well as the subject's own words are both important. Sometimes they will validate each other. It's also very possible that objective and subjective results will differ or contradict each other, thereby revealing different dimensions of the immersion/isolation experience.

What might those results show?.... Who knows! DotComGuy and the Today Show people already have demonstrated that you can satisfy basic physical needs for food and clothing by purchasing products on the web. There seems to be plenty of material for mental and intellectual stimulation, and probably plenty of opportunities for creativity and achievement to build your self-esteem - assuming your particular interests and skills can be expressed with a computer. Surely people will differ in what needs feel satisfied. Some internet users claim that friendships, romance, sexuality, and even spirituality are as rich and valid in cyberspace as they are in the f2f world. Are they onto something important? Have they discovered a new path for humans to transcend the limitations and hassles of the physical world and the physical body? Or are they deceiving themselves?

If there's one conclusion of modern health science, it's that the mind and body are intimately intertwined, with each influencing the other in complex ways that we are only just beginning to understand. Sitting almost motionless at a computer, our eyes fixed to a screen, our fingers tapping at a keyboard, can we free our minds from the physical body, reaching across space and time to the minds of others, expanding it outward into a universal human Mind? Or, attached to a mostly dormant body, will our cyberminds wander off into a dangerous territory of unrestrained illusion? Perhaps the many millennia of evolution of the mind-body human have reached a point where we can progress beyond the physiological side of that integrated duality. Or maybe we are slapping Mother Nature in the face. If we try to leap out of those millions of years of evolution, maybe we are leaping right into disaster.

These are complex scientific, philosophical, and religious questions. At the moment, we have no answers. Good solutions usually show themselves as a compromise, a Middle Way. In the future, we won't have to choose between cyberspace and the f2f world. We'll choose between different ways of combining the two. In the meanwhile, if we're going to entertain any hypothetical but enlightening ultimatum, consider this one: If you had to choose between spending the rest of your life only in cyberspace, or in the f2f world, which would you pick?

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The Final Showdown Between In-Person and Cyberspace Relationships
Why is This Thing Eating My Life?
Bringing Online and Offline Living Together: The Integration Principle
Intensive Case Studies in Cyberspace and the Evolution of Digital Life Forms
Cyberspace as a Psychological Space
To Get What You Need: Healthy and Pathological Internet Use

Publishing Online

Idea Independence, Interdependence, and the Academic

Who's the Boss?
Who's the Audience?
Limitless Revisability: The Evolving Document
The Interactive, Multimedia, Searchable Document
Interconnection, Integration, Association (hypertext isn't hype!)
Is It Any Good?
Intellectual Property
Is Hardcopy Better?
Do's and Don't's

When I first went online, experienced users were buzzing about the "World Wide Web." Those were the days when the only thing you could browse was text, thanks to the pioneer program Lynx. Then came Mosaic, and I nearly fell off my chair when it enabled me to SEE pictures and HEAR sounds. Something new - very new - was happening on the Internet. The number of web sites seemed to double every week. I was intrigued by the fact that anyone - well, anyone with a computer who knew HTML - could publish whatever she or he wanted on a web site.

"Why not me?" I thought to myself. Then came the more difficult question of what exactly I would put online. Having been a college professor for 15 years, I had developed dozens of exercises, projects, and handouts for my classes. So I created the Teaching Clinical Psychology web site as a resource center for instructors who teach courses similar to mine. Not long after that, I became fascinated by cyberspace itself - by how people and groups behave online. I wrote an article about people's addiction to Palace, the online multimedia community that had become my home away from home. Then I wrote a few more articles about the Internet, which I collected onto a new web site that I called The Psychology of Cyberspace. Now, years later, the site has expanded to a full length hypertext book that I continue to revise and expand. Bitten by the online publishing bug, I also took an idea for a book that was rejected by more than a dozen hardcopy publishing companies and turned it into *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors*. It has won quite a few awards and was even featured on CNN - which prompted one book agent who had abandoned the project to give me a call to "check in."

So what's my conclusion from these experiences? Obviously, I'm about to tell you how wonderful it is to publish on the Internet. It has been for me. I've published quite a bit in hardcopy journals, as well as a book on psychoanalysis and eastern philosophy. Although some good things resulted from these publications, they never came close to the level of excitement generated by my online works. I've connected with more people, found more colleagues, and received more invitations to speak at conferences, serve as a consultant, and contribute to books and journals than I ever did when I lived only in the hardcopy world. Even journal articles that I published long ago - which subsequently died as they became more deeply buried in the dusty shelves of university libraries - experienced a joyful rejuvenation when I published summaries of them online.

In this article, I'd like to share my thoughts about publishing online - the advantages, as well as the disadvantages. I'll also describe some of the guidelines I use in creating online hypertext manuscripts and books. Some of these ideas apply to many types of online publishing, but I will steer much of this discussion in the direction of academics who want to place their work on the Internet.

Who's the Boss?

For the independent-minded person, one obvious advantage of publishing online is that you are your own boss. You have complete control over how the manuscript is written, page layout, and marketing. There are no editors or peer reviewers to prevent you from constructing your article exactly the way you want. Of course, you may not feel

comfortable with all of these dimensions of publishing online - especially the technical side of creating a web site. It takes time to learn HTML, but it's very do-able. You don't have to be a computer geek. Fancy web techniques - like Java and Flash - aren't necessary and may in fact result in a document that looks too commercialized for an academic work. Simple HTML is more than enough, and there are many books and web sites that will show you how to do it. You can learn the basics in just a few hours, or you can hire someone to write the code and consult on page layout. There are many skilled web designers looking for work.

Instead of constructing your own web page from scratch, you might use a weblog to present your writings in a journal format. These "blog" sites, which often are free, make it easy to publish online. The options for page layout are more limited compared to constructing your own web page from scratch, but the process of creating the weblog is made simple with prepackaged options for page layout. It may in fact look much more professional than what you could do on your own.

A more important issue - especially from the perspective of the academic - is the quality and accuracy of what you write. If there are no editors or reviewers to correct weaknesses in the manuscript, then how do you know you are on track? While being your own boss is very exciting and liberating, it's also necessary to get feedback and give careful consideration to it. Ask at least one colleague - and ideally several - to read your work before you upload it. Set up an e-mail link in each of your online articles and encourage readers to send you their comments. Weblogs offer the built-in feature of allowing people to comment on your writings. And the response may not always be glowing praise. It's tempting to minimize, disregard, or rail against negative feedback, especially when it can't prevent you from publishing what you want to publish. But give careful thought to such feedback. The comments that get you the most annoyed may turn out to be the most valuable.

> Get feedback from colleagues and readers.

Coping with the fine details of spelling and grammar is another ball of wax. If you know a professional copy-editor who is willing to help you out, or you have the money to pay for such a service, you're lucky. Otherwise, you must rely on your own abilities and a little bit of help from your friends and colleagues. Over time, if you continue to reread and revise the article, you'll gradually weed out some of these errors - but despite your best efforts, some will linger. Adopting the philosophy that "nothing is perfect" helps. If an article is good, most readers will overlook the minor flaws.

Who's the Audience?

Anyone on the Internet can get to your online publication. That's a lot of people - all kinds of people. The potential readership for an academic's web article or book is much larger and more diverse than if it were published in hardcopy. The pressing question for authors is how many and what types of people do you WANT to read the publication? It's always important to keep in mind the intended audience for your work, as well as the audience you might get. Is it designed for other experts in your particular field of study, or the more general population? The appearance of the page, as well as its content, makes a big difference in how attractive it is to the eyes of professionals versus the general public.

My sites are intended to cover slightly different territories. The Teaching Clinical Psychology site was originally targeted for college and university instructors who teach courses related to clinical and counseling psychology. The audience turned out to be bigger than that - including high school teachers, students of all levels with an interest in psychology, and people in the general public who are inclined towards psychology, mental health issues, and ideas about personal growth. I created the Zen Stories site for anyone, anywhere, who is interested in eastern philosophy, religion, spirituality, and story-telling.

The issues concerning audience for the Psychology of Cyberspace are a bit more complex. I wanted to share ideas with colleagues of all disciplines who were doing research about people and groups on the Internet, but I also wanted the articles to be valuable to those people and groups. After all, they gave me so insights into this topic during my numerous interviews and participant-observation studies. I wanted to give something back. Purely scholarly articles and those for the general online public require very different writing styles, so I tried to steer a path somewhere towards the middle. Some of the articles lean in the academic's direction by using more technical language, while others sway more towards the general online public by offering down-to-earth prose. When I do use theoretical terms I try to explain them in everyday language. Although the graphics I construct for many articles might create a "pop psychology" tone in the opinion of some scholars, I enjoy creating them. I also like to think that they present some symbolic meaning about the topic of the article, as well as catch the eye. Because both professionals and lay people have shown their appreciation for my work, I think I've succeeded in steering that middle course.

Limitless Revisability: The Evolving Document

Based on feedback from colleagues and readers, an online manuscript or book can be revised any time you want. This limitless revisability is a big advantage over hardcopy publications. The online document becomes a living, evolving entity. If your research and ideas in that topic area progress, the article can be updated to reflect the state of your art. The concept of "out of date" can become out of date. Of course this raises the interesting question about WHEN it's time to revise an article. When have your ideas or research evolved enough to warrant a modification? You may choose to make small tune-ups on a regular basis, or wait to do less frequent major revisions.

For the academic, a disadvantage is that one single manuscript that matures over time doesn't satisfy the need to build a publication list on one's vita. But that's mostly a social/cultural issue within the world of academia where evaluators feel they need to "count the countables."

At the top of all the articles in The Psychology of Cyberspace, I indicate the month and year that it was uploaded. Later on, whenever I revise a piece, I also indicate those subsequent months/years of the new uploaded edition. This let's the reader know about the history of the piece. It's an indicator of how much and how fast that particular manuscript is evolving. For people who are returning to the article, it also lets them know whether it was modified since the last time they viewed it - in a sense, what "version" the article is in. In fact, I also provide a version number for each article (e.g., "v1.5"). At first it may seem rather silly to mimic that strategy in software development, but it does give readers a thumbnail measure of how much an article has been improved since the last version. For a detailed history of how the book is evolving, I offer an article index that contains a reverse chronologically ordered list of all the articles based on their dates of creation or revision. In the abstracts for the articles in that index, I provide a brief description of what that revision entailed.

Make it as easy as possible for people to know that something has been revised in your publication. A simple "NEW" icon catches the eye. I offer the opportunity for visitors to subscribe to an email newsletter that announces revisions and new additions to *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, as well as gives them an insider's view of my current thinking and challenges with the project. A more high tech approach would be the incorporation of RSS (Rich Site Summary) into your site, which automatically informs readers who use RSS feeds that something has changed in your publication, so they can stop by to take a look.

The fact that articles are continually revised, in addition to their being published online, creates some challenges in how people will cite them. APA and other professional organizations are coming up to speed in modifying their citation guidelines to cover online publications, but works like *The Psychology of Cyberspace* still fall outside those parameters. Ideally, the citation should capture the fact that the article is part of an online book, the original publication date of the article, the date of the most recent revision of the article, and the location of the article. Indicating the date one downloaded a paper, as some citation formats suggest, doesn't convey the more essential information about when the article was published online. The article may seem to be recent when in fact it isn't. There is no accurate publication date for the entire book because its component articles all were created and revised at different times. Indicating the date the book was first created might be useful information, but it might also be sacrificed to simplify the citation. Within *The Psychology of Cyberspace* I provide a link to a page that describes my recommendations for citations. Apparently, most people either don't see it or choose to follow the formats dictated by the journal in which they publish.

The Interactive, Multimedia, Searchable Document

As we all know, the web has sight and sound as well as text. If you have the technical skills, you can place not only photographs, drawings, tables, and charts into your publication, but also audio recordings, video clips, and animated illustrations and diagrams. The possibilities are limited only by one's imagination and technical skill. This multimedia potential of a web publication catapults it far out of the comparatively static and sensory restricted range of hardcopy works.

The document also can be interactive. A simple approach would be appending to the article the comments that readers e-mail to you. A list of such comments offers a fascinating variety of perspectives and opinions about the work. For example, see the e-mail that I've received from visitors to *The Psychology of Cyberspace*. An automated and more sophisticated

version of this strategy would be a discussion board forum where readers discuss the article by posting messages to each other, or a weblog that allows readers to enter comments on the article. This is an "asynchronous" style of discussion that doesn't require all readers to be at the web site at the same time. An email newsletter might also work as a tool to create a sense of community for people interested in the site. If an online publication draws a steady stream of readers, it's even possible to create a chat room where visitors, in real time, gather to talk. The interactive potential of an online document can transform it into an anchor or springboard for an evolving discussion group, perhaps even a "community." Here are some questions, suggested by Charlie Hendricksen, to consider in deciding what kind of feedback and/or discussion system you choose:

- Does the reader have to download software in order to use the system?
- How much do the author and readers have to learn in order to use the system?
- Will readers be exposed to commercial banners?
- Can comments be password protected?
- Can the author of the article edit and delete the comments from readers?
- Can comments be private exchanges, group directed, and openly public?

Last but not least, an online document can be scanned for specific words or phrases - yet another powerful feature that hardcopy publications lack. Any decent browser allows you to search the page you have loaded into the browser. You also can install search engines that will scan the entire web site. The search function for *The Psychology of Cyberspace* scans the entire book, as well as several of my other online publications - which helps readers see the themes and inteconnections across my various areas of interest. However, most search tools only locate a specific string of characters. They may not be able to find slightly different spelling variations on a word; they can't find ideas or concepts; they can't suggest what terms to search for. For large documents or sites, an old fashioned subject index may be helpful. *The Psychology of Cyberspace* has a subject index in which each entry is followed by a series of links to articles containing that term. Once they jump to those articles, readers can use their browser's search feature to locate the term on that page.

Interconnection, Integration, Association (hypertext isn't hype!)

Hypertext - the ability to jump via links to other pages or to other sections within a page - is the essence of the World Wide Web. It's the "h" in http and another powerful advantage of online publishing over hardcopy publishing. A document isn't restricted to a linear format in which readers progress from the beginning to the end. Readers can move back and forth within and between documents. They must make decisions about how they move through the publication. Their first visit may land them somewhere right into the middle of the site, their "hot spot" of interest that the author should take into consideration when designing the hypertext within that area of entry. Once in, readers choose among options and create their own path that shapes the flow of the reading experience. The challenge for writers is to anticipate how people might move through the article or collection of articles. They must construct a set of path options that offers flexible opportunities for pursuing related topics and subtopics, without overwhelming the reader with an overly complex maze of links. Very few or no links within an article fails to take advantage of hypertext; an article plastered with links in every sentence becomes overwhelming. To avoid reader disorientation in a complex document, every page should offer a map or navigation bar that displays the "big picture" of the site and links for jumping to important sections (here's a page with the navigation bar I often use in *The Psychology of Cyberspace.*)

In my publications, I've experimented with various hypertext strategies. In several articles in *The Psychology of Cyberspace* - for example, the one about wizards in the Palace community - a table of contents at the beginning contains links to all the major sections within the article. This strategy works well with long documents. When wizards e-mailed me their comments about various passages in the article, I put those comments at the end of the article and placed asterisk links next to the corresponding passages. I used a similar strategy in the article *Cyberspace as Dream World*. In each dream that people reported about Palace, words or phrases in their descriptions are links to my comments about those aspects of the dream. The article about avatars, which is all text without any graphics, contains links to other pages that are illustrated versions of the corresponding subsections of the main article. I did this to keep the main article free of numerous graphics that would have made the document appear cluttered. It also cut down dramatically on the download time for the article.

"Pop up windows" are a useful tool for presenting annotations to a page. The table of contents (home page) for *The Psychology of Cyberspace* displays bullets next to the title of each article in the book. When clicked, a small window containing a summary of the article pops up into the left corner of the screen, which is handy way to peruse the contents of the book. Another version of the article about dreams that I mention above uses these pop-up windows to

present my comments on the dreams. The beauty of these pop-up annotations is that the author can create an elaborate collection of meta-comments on the article with little disturbance of the article's visual layout.

Both *The Psychology of Cyberspace* and *Teaching Clinical Psychology* have a combined hierarchical/lateral structure. The "home page" is a table of contents with links to the various sections within the site. In the cyberspace site, a navigation bar at the top of every page helps readers locate these major sections. Many of the major sections contain links to subsections. Simulating a hardcopy book, *The Psychology of Cybespace* contains an extensive subject index with links to the corresponding articles. The cyberspace and teaching sites also contain a page/article index with a list of links to all the separate pages and articles within the entire site. This page/article index is intended to help readers find a specific page or article that is embedded within subsections and not listed on the home page. In both the cyberspace and teaching sites, "arrow" links at the bottom of every page direct readers up to the parent section and to the home page - which reinforces the idea that the publication is a hierarchical structure.

Embedded within and listed at the end of each article in *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, links to other related articles in the book comprise the lateral structure of this publication, which enables visitors to access a cluster of articles pertaining to their area of interest. The teaching site is an especially good example of how a collection of hierarchically and laterally interconnected documents (descriptions of class exercises and projects, syllabi, manuals, and essays) becomes an integrated whole that addresses the overarching objective of providing a resource center for teaching clinical psychology. The lateral integration of a new article into the whole web site is the last step in publishing it. It's a process that works in two directions: you must decide where to place links within the new article that conceptually link it to the older articles, as well as review older articles to locate places to link them back to the new article. This process encourages the author to reconceptualize the overall structure of the site.

Although it has a home page, the Zen Stories site isn't intended to be hierarchical. I designed it so people can wander around according to their own intuitive and subjective impressions of what looks interesting. With links to similar stories at the end of each story page, my expectation was that people could meander through the site without necessarily returning to the home page. My intention was to create a kind of circuitous feeling to the reading experience. There also are some hidden links. This seemed like a rather Zen way of doing things.

The other big advantage to hypertext is the ability to link to articles and resources located elsewhere on the web. This is a lot more powerful than a reference list at the end of a hardcopy publication, which simply tells you where to go to find the other publication. The hypertext actually takes you there. The hypertext publication can be embedded within and integrated into a larger body of publications. It becomes part of a network of information and knowledge, part of a larger whole that may indeed transcend the sum of its parts. With all those interconnected publications undergoing periodic revisions, the integrated body of knowledge keeps evolving as its subcomponents change within themselves and in how they interact with each other. Of course, for this vision of a "super-publication" to be realized, scholars must embrace online hypertext publishing.... and they must cooperate with each other.

The downside to linking with other publications is that they may disappear, resulting in dead links on your site and disappointed or frustrated readers. Try to link to publications that look like they have staying power. If you have a large collection of outside links, be prepared to periodically test, fix, or elminate broken ones.

The ideas I've proposed here are just the beginning. There will be many creative and controversial ways to use hypertext. The emphasis on an associative rather than linear style of writing could very well revolutionize intellectual discourse and scholarship. It may be more powerful, even more "natural." Writing organized by associations may be closer to how humans actually think than writing by linear design.

> Associational writing may be closer to how the mind actually works.

Is It Any Good?

How often do you hear people say, "There's so much crap on the web!" Everyone gets a chance to say their piece and there is no quality control. Personally, I think this is the beauty of the Internet. My first response to the critic's comment is that one person's garbage is another's jewel. The whole complex system of editorial boards and peer review systems evolved in the hardcopy world because there is limited space in journals and books. Not everyone can get in. So there has to be a filter to insure that good writing gets published while poor writing does not. Unfortunately, the filters don't always work. Politics, old boy networks, and status quo thinking sometimes determine what gets into print. On the Internet, these influences lose their steam.

Most academics don't have the luxury of heading towards this more liberal, democratic view of online publishing. For promotion and tenure, their writing has to be evaluated - and the bottomline criteria is where it was published. I doubt that promotion committees, in the very near future, will seriously consider online publications as valid - regardless of what arguments are made to the contrary. Nevertheless, I'm now going to propose some criteria for determining whether an online article or book is "good." Anyone who knows how to use e-mail and search engines easily could generate a report that addresses these criteria:

New evaluation criteria must be developed.

- If you enter the publication into search engines, how many hits result? Although it's a deceptive and crude statistic, it's easy to obtain and does satisfy that need to "count the countables." A large number of hits does indicate that people are talking about your work.

- What have unsolicited reviews said about the publication? What are the credentials of the people writing those reviews? Because it's so easy to publish on the web, everyone is commenting on everyone else's work. If a manuscript has been online for a while and there are no comments or reviews of it online, that in itself might say something. It might indicate that the author has not made an effort to announce and integrate his or her work into the online professional community - including entering the url into search engines - or that people do now find it worthy for comment.

- What have people said about the publication in unsolicited e-mail to the author? What are the credentials of those people? The amount of e-mail a publication generates might be another important index of its impact. This is why it's important for the author to encourage readers to provide feedback.

- What have other scholars said about the publication in solicited reviews? E-mail is so easy to use that canvassing evaluations from a large number of qualified people might be a worthwhile strategy. A quantifiable questionnaire distributed via e-mail or placed on a web page might be useful survey strategies.

- How many links are there to the publication? A link is a sign that someone considered your work valuable enough that they wanted to connect it to their own. This is an index of how much your work is "cited" as well as how much it is integrated into the body of online scholarship. Some search engines place higher in a list of hits those pages that have more links going to them from other pages. Also important are the credentials of the person or the reputation of the organization linking to the publication.

- Has the manuscript or parts of it been republished elsewhere on the Internet (hopefully, with the authors permission) or in hardcopy publications? What is the reputation of the other person or organization that republished the work?

- What "awards" has the work received? People may give you banners to place on your site as a kind of trophy. It does serve the purpose of advertizing their own site, but it also does indicate their appeciation of your work. What is the reputation of the person or organization giving the award?

Intellectual Property

There is a great deal of debate nowadays about whose ideas on the web belong to whom. I don't pretend to be an expert on issues about intellectual property and copyright. It's a complex, evolving subject. I do know that publishing on the web does make it easy for people to plagiarize your work. If you are worried about this, then perhaps you should avoid publishing online. On the home page of all my sites and at the top of each of my articles in *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, I have a link to a copyright page that warns readers about plagiarism and informs them of the format I prefer for their citing my work. I try not to get too aggravated by people who "borrow" my writing without my permission, and I don't go searching for culprits. Sometimes their misbehavior is brought to my attention. A reader of *The Psychology of Cyberspace* once e-mailed me to complain about how some links were dead. When I tracked down the page he was referring to, I found my book on some other person's site where he had recreated a mish-mashed version of it. I'm not happy about the fact that some readers are mistaking haphazard imitations for the real thing, or that the crook never responded to my e-mailed complaints. I could hire a lawyer, I guess, but so far I've just shrugged it off as "life on the web."

On the other hand, a few people very apologetically have taken down mirror sites when I asked them to. Some of them, who were from other countries, honestly felt it was a tribute to me when they duplicated my site on their server. Apparently, there are cultural differences regarding the issue of intellectual property. I try not to come down heavily on the "ownership" matter, but rather explain to people that my sites are always evolving, so any attempt to duplicate them in their entirety would only result in an out-of-date version of the original. I have to say that most people have been remarkably considerate about asking permission to cite sections of my work, republish whole articles, or translate an entire site into another language. Most of the time, I give permission to these requests. Why not? Upon request, I've also revised some of the papers on my web site for publication as book chapters and journal articles.

Most people publishing online seem to respect intellectual property.

I imagine the most problematic scenario would be people plagiarizing your online work and then later accusing you of plagiarizing them. There are techniques - such as water-marks and time-stamping a document - that can help verify the originality of your online publications.

Is Hardcopy Better?

I've stated that I prefer to call my publications "online hypertext books" rather than "web sites." Web sites come in all shapes and sizes. I think my online works are large enough and similar enough to hardcopy books that a more specific term like "online hypertext book" is needed. At least one person e-mailed me to complain about that. "You can hold books in your hands," he said, "they have front and back covers, and paper pages that you can feel and turn.... Your web sites AREN'T real books!"

Well, he's right on that score. Online works will never have the same tactile sensuality of a leather-bound volume. They're not as portable either. Some bibliophiles also don't like to read lengthy pieces on a computer monitor. Although it obliterates all the advantages of hypertext, they print out the document in order to read it. It's good to keep this in mind when creating an article. If hypertext is essential to the structure of the piece, warn readers about that (as I do in the cyberspace dreaming article). If particular links within the text lead to essential resources located on other pages, write out the url so people can see it when the article is printed out. Always include the url for an article somewhere within that article, so people who printed it out can find their way back to its location on the Internet.

Online publications are an ALTERNATIVE to hardcopy.

It's very possible that people's preferences for reading hardcopy may change. Hand-held, book-like computers for reading digital publications may soon be cheap and widespread. Programs that efficiently save entire web sites to disk will make reading offline easier (I offer a download version of the entire *Psychology of Cyberspace*). People simply may get used to reading on a monitor. I have, and I rather enjoy it. One thing is for sure: it hurts my neck a lot less to look at a monitor than to stare down at a book.

I seriously doubt that online publications will ever replace hardcopy ones, either in the public domain or academia. I certainly hope not. Hardcopy and online hypertext works each have their advantages and disadvantages. Even though the text content may be very similar, the presentation is very different. A hardcopy and online version of the same work can supplement and enrich each other.

I have to say, I'm dismayed by people who write about the wonders of the Internet in hardcopy publications while offering very little of their work online. If the Internet is so great as a communication tool, why aren't they using it to communicate? I'm sure they would offer many logical replies - concerns about editorial feedback, copyright, prestige, marketing, and making money. But it still seems a bit self-contradictory.

Some people claim that hardcopy works have a longer shelf life than online publications. As physical objects rather than ephermal strings of electrons, they will withstand the test of time. Perhaps it's too early in the history of cyberspace to tell whether this is true or not. Printed material goes out of print, resulting in a precious few copies that over time become hard to find. These works get buried deep in the stacks of libraries where they gather more dust than citations. By contrast, digital works multiply and disperse with just a mouse click. A hundred years from now, will it be easier to find the hardcopy or digital version of a book published today? As the author of books that in their entirety exist only in cyberspace, I'd like to be optimistic about their digital durability. But I must entertain the very likely possibility that their byte-sized nature might make them very vulnerable. In particular, for *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, I often consider the epitaph, "This book was born in cyberspace. This book will die in cyberspace."

Do's and Don't's

Below are a miscellaneous collection of guidelines I use in preparing my online publications. Some of them are purely practical rules, others more philosophical. These aren't guidelines that everyone should follow - just ones I recite to myself while writing and designing my web sites:

- Make the page layout simple, nice to look at, and easy to read on a monitor. Spare people from eye strain: use a clear font size and color.

- Use graphics to catch the reader's eye and to illustrate an idea or theme in the article. Avoid the clutter of too many graphics.

- Don't use frames unless it *really* is the best way to help readers navigate through the site.

- Try to respond to all e-mail, even if it is a kid in school who is treating you like an information-machine that will feed him data for his report. Even a one-liner can be enough as a polite, humane reply.

- Remember that "making money" is not the only way a publication can be valuable to you. There's more to an author's life than royalties.

- Register your publication with the major search engines.

- Remember that the web is always in flux. Other sites move around or disappear. Try to keep up with fixing dead links.

- Try NOT to move your own publication, unless absolutely necessary. Try not to change the urls of your pages. Avoid becoming part of that web flux. If you do, people will have a harder time finding your work.

- Send e-mail to owners of other web sites who may be interested in your work. But avoid the notice that looks like an automated commercial that's being sent to everyone and their brothers. It's tacky. Take the time to write a personal message.

- Use that spell-checker!

- Help out visitors who land somewhere in the middle of the site. Let them know where they are and give them links to find their away around.

- It's a pain in the neck, but test your pages on all the major browsers and platforms. A page may look wonderful on your machine, yet come across as a mess on someone else's.

- To help people know that they're still in your space, keep a distinctive look throughout the publication. Clearly label links that lead people off the site.

- Don't expect every single duck in your publication to be in its row. Nothing is perfect, except perhaps imperfection.

- Remember that if your work is good, word will spread.

Part 6

Psychotherapy and

Clinical Work in Cyberspace

Psychotherapy and Clinical Work in Cyberspace
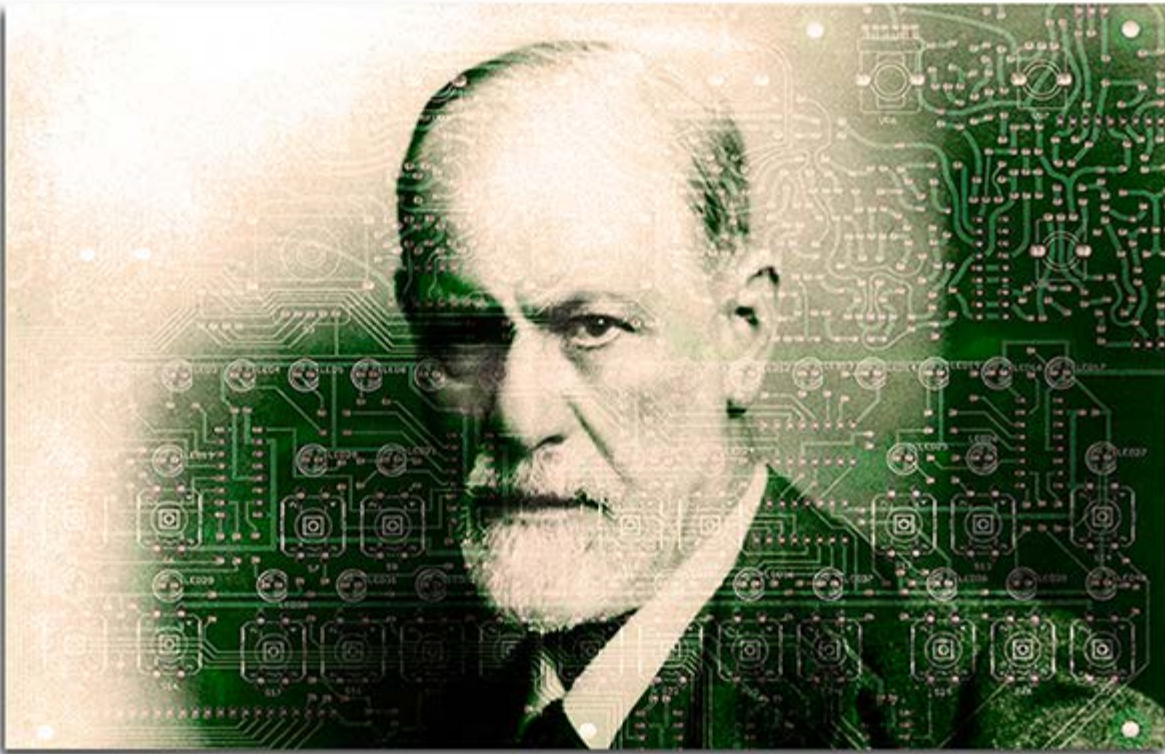
Is it possible to do psychotherapy in cyberspace?

That's an important question that I explore in the articles of this section of my online book The Psychology of Cyberspace. Let me begin by telling a joke (and this is one I made up myself): How many psychologists does it take to do computer-mediated psychotherapy?...... None! The computer can do it all by itself!

Now the reason why that joke is (or isn't) funny is important. Maybe, like many jokes, it reveals something we're a bit anxious about. Are computers and the internet taking over our lives? Are human relationships being infiltrated and dehumanized by machines? Will really poor computer-mediated psychotherapy replace the tried and true methods of traditional psychotherapy? We could certainly make those arguments and it's something we should be on the lookout for. On the other hand, computers and the internet do offer many new, enriching forms of human interaction - maybe that includes new and enriching forms of that special kind of human interaction called psychotherapy. On the road to reaching that possibility, we must grapple with some rather complex issues.

Is it ethical to attempt psychotherapy in cyberspace?

If the therapist is communicating with the client through typed text (as in e-mail, chat, and message boards), all sorts of valuable information - like physical appearance, body language, and tone of voice - are missing. That easily could pose problems in making an accurate diagnosis and evaluating the treatment, which often rely on f2f behavioral cues. Without f2f cues, the therapist also may not be able to verify the identity of the client. Is the person really who he or she claims to be? Is this particular message really from the client or from someone else pretending to be that client? Confidentiality - an absolutely essential feature of psychotherapy - easily could be violated by this difficulty in validating identity, as well as by the fact that outsiders could listen in on the psychotherapy discussion by intercepting transmissions or gaining access to saved messages. Fortunately, these problems have some viable technical solutions,

such as creating secure networks and using encryption and user verification software. Video conferencing, which is an important tool in the TeleHealth movement, also can supply many of those valuable f2f cues that are missing in pure text communication.

Technological solutions don't work as well for the legal and political dilemmas of online clinical work. If a therapist in Kansas is working with a client from Japan in a chat room located on a server in France, where is the therapy taking place? To some onliners, those geographical questions may seem moot because the whole point of the internet is that geographical boundaries disappear. However, the question is not moot for insurance companies and professional regulatory organizations that need to know where the psychotherapy practice is located. To whom the psychotherapist is accountable boils down to a matter of geography. In fact, licenses and certification to conduct psychotherapy almost always are determined by where the clinician practices. Is it legal when a psychologist licensed to practice psychology in New Jersey does online therapy with someone in California, or India? Does the American Psychological Association - the national organization for all professional psychologists - have jurisdiction over the psychologist who works online with that client in India? If the psychologist is making bad mistakes, who will be there to evaluate and correct him?

What about training and credentials?

Is psychotherapy in cyberspace so different from traditional f2f psychotherapy that it requires special training and certification? From the standpoint of clinical theory and technique, this is an important question. It's possible that clinical work in cyberspace is but an extension or a supplement to the more familiar styles of psychotherapy. Or it's possible that entirely unique theories and techniques will evolve within this new communication medium.

The definition of "psychotherapy"

This issue raises one last critical question: What do we mean by "psychotherapy?" Put a bunch of professional psychotherapists together to discuss this matter and you'll be very lucky indeed if they come to any agreement at all, other than a very general definition about psychotherapy being a service in which a professional helps a person with a problem. And that controversy exists even before we mix cyberspace into the debate. Whether we call it "psychotherapy" or not, there have been many ways over the past 100 years to apply psychological principles to helping people. Now, in the new millennium, cyberspace offers even MORE possibilities - many never dreamed of just a few years ago. Because there is easy access to people, information, and activities in cyberspace, some of these clinical possibilities involve an intersection of individual and group psychotherapy, community psychology, and a wide variety of educational and personal growth activities. The articles below describe some of these possibilities. In the future, we may choose not to define these forms of clinical work as "psychotherapy," or we may modify our concepts about what psychotherapy is. I explore these ideas in my book *Psychology of the Digital Age: Humans Become Electric* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).
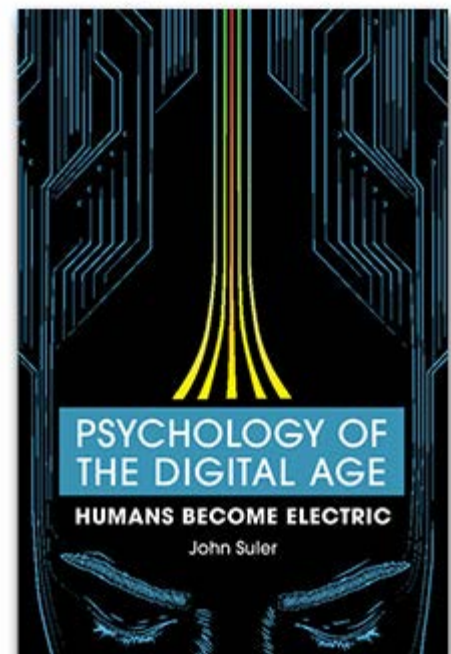
Psychotherapy in Cyberspace

A Five Dimensional Model of Online and Computer-mediated Psychotherapy

Introduction

1. Synchronous / Asynchronous
2. Text / Sensory
3. Imaginary / Real
4. Automated / Interpersonal
5. Invisible / Present

Creating Group Experiences
A Cybertherapy Theory
The Role of the Professional

Relationships in cyberspace has become a new field of study in psychology. Within that topic area, we may include the study of computer-mediated counseling and psychotherapy - i.e., "cybertherapy" involving the Internet, local networks, and stand-alone computers. Some researchers and clinicians define cybertherapy or "e-therapy" as clinical work via e-mail or chat - work that is text-based, usually ongoing, and mostly or exclusively conducted through the Internet. In the model proposed in this article, I am suggesting a more comprehensive perspective: cybertherapy as any psychotherapeutic environment created by computers and designed, facilitated, or prescribed by a mental health professional. The utility of this perspective is its power to outline the various elemental features of computer-mediated communication and experiences, and how those features can be combined to create a psychotherapeutic process.

While in-person therapy may be the treatment of choice in many cases, there are some unique advantages to computer-mediated and online interventions. One obvious and frequently mentioned benefit of online therapy is the opportunity to reach people who are unable to visit psychotherapists due to geographical, physical, or lifestyle limitations. Computer-mediated therapy also may be an important initial step in establishing what could become an ongoing, in-person treatment. Cybertherapy is a stepping stone to face-to-face therapy, as exemplified in the treatment of a severe social phobia, first via e-mail and then later in-person, when the client's interpersonal anxiety has diminished to a level where such contact can be tolerated. Other advantages, as I'll discuss later, are specific to particular types of online therapy.

Although I won't discuss these issues in depth, some of the important concerns being raised about cybertherapy involve legal and ethical issues.

Some people say that in psychotherapy, it's the relationship that heals. If this is true, then might cyberspace offer different types of therapeutic relationships based on the different types of communication it offers? As compared to in-person therapy, online therapy is unique in how it provides the opportunity to interact with clients via different pathways or channels, each one having its unique pros and cons - each one being a slightly different type of relationship. The boundaries of time, space, and sensory stimulation can be altered. Imaginary environments can be created. Similar to in-person approaches, people can interact in therapeutic groups, but the groups can be constructed in ways that are not possible in the f2f world. Some or all of the features of the curative environment can be automated, which raises interesting issues about the "presence" of the professional in the healing relationship.

In the sections that follow, I'll explore five features of the communication pathway between therapist and client: synchronous/asynchronous, text/sensory, real/imaginary, automated/interpersonal, and invisible/present. Each of

these features is not necessarily a dichotomy, but rather a dimension containing subtle gradients and variations. The five dimensions also overlap and interact. Perhaps we should think of them as flexible tools for examining and classifying any modality of communication - chat, e-mail, message boards, video-conferencing, weblogs, wikis, short messaging systems, etc. - as well as in-person encounters, which is one type of communication pathway.

1. Synchronous / Asynchronous

Synchronous

Unlike in-person encounters, cyberspace offers the choice of meeting in or out of "real time." In synchronous communication, the client and therapist are sitting at their computer at the same time, interacting with each other at that moment. Some examples include text chat, multimedia chat, Internet telephoning, audio-video conferencing, instant messaging, short messaging systems (as in cell phone text-messaging), and even e-mail, assuming the couple are online and rapidly exchanging messages in real time. Text chat includes message-by-message conversations in which a button is pressed to transmit the message, as well as the more synchronous chat conversations where everything that both parties type can be seen AS it is being typed, including typos, backspacing, and deletions - which adds to the spontaneity of the experience. Technical factors , especially transmission speeds, will determine just how closely a synchronous meeting approaches the temporal pace of an in-person encounter. In text-only chat, for example, "lag" due to busy networks may slow down the conversation between the client and therapist, so that there are seconds or even minutes between exchanges. The act of typing also slows down the pace, compared to in-person talking. Fast broadband connections allows auditory and video exchanges that simulate the speed of f2f conversations, much like the standard telephone.

Pros:

- The ability to schedule sessions defined by a specific, limited period of time. In most cultures, people understand the boundaries implicit in "an appointment."

- A feeling of "presence" created by being with the person in real time (this may serve important self-object functions, according to self psychology).

- Interactions may show more spontaneity, resulting in more revealing, uncensored disclosures by the client.

- Making the effort to be with the person for a specific appointment may be interpreted as a sign of commitment and dedication.

- Pauses in the conversation, coming late to a session, and no-shows are not lost as temporal cues that reveal important psychological meanings.

Cons:

- The difficulties and inconvenience in having to schedule a session at a particular time, especially if the client and therapist are in very different time zones

- There is less "zone for reflection" (the time between exchanges to think and compose a reply), with the possible exception of lag and typing time, which offers a small zone for reflection.

- In the mind of the client, "therapy" may be associated specifically with the appointment and isn't perceived as a process outside of that temporal period.

Asynchronous

In asynchronous encounters the therapist and client do not have to be sitting at their computers at the same time. Usually this means there is a stretching of the time frame in which the interaction occurs, or no sense of a time boundary at all. The perception of a temporally locked "meeting" disappears, although sitting down to read (or view) a

message may subjectively feel as if one has entered a fluid temporal space with the other person. Typical examples of asynchronous encounters include e-mail, message boards, weblogs, and delayed viewing of audio and audio-video recordings. However, even systems usually conceptualized as synchronous may be used asynchronously, as in people leaving a chat channel open for an extended period of time and periodically checking it to see what others have been saying.

Pros:

- There are no scheduling problems or other difficulties associated with a specific appointment time. Different time zones are not an obstacle.

- The convenience of replying when you're ready and able to reply.

- There is an enhanced "zone for reflection" that allows the therapist and client to think and compose a reply. For the client, this might have important implications for issues concerning impulsivity, stimulating an observing ego, and the process of working through. For the therapist, replies can be more carefully planned and countertransference reactions managed more effectively.

Cons:

- The professional boundaries of a specific, time-limited "appointment" are lost. Because there aren't yet any standards in our culture about interacting with a professional in an asynchronous time frame, the therapist must create them in a way that makes sense to the client and that works for the therapist. The therapist could be overwhelmed by contact from the client, as in receiving numerous and frequent e-mails.

- There may be a reduced feeling of "presence" because the client and therapist are not together in the moment.

- Some of the spontaneity of interacting "in the moment" is lost, along with what spontaneous actions can reveal about a person.

- There may be some loss of the sense of commitment that "meeting with me right now" can create.

- Pauses in the conversation, coming late to a session, and no-shows are lost as a psychologically significant cues (although pacing and length of replies in asynchronous communication may serve as cues).

2. Text / Sensory

Text

A large majority of the interactions occurring via the Internet are typed text. Lacking sounds and images, text conversations are not rich sensory encounters. Examples are text-only chat, e-mail, message boards, newsgroups, short-messaging services via cell phone, and even web sites - including online journals and weblogs - that people use to express and explore themselves with the help of feedback from others, including, perhaps, a therapist. E-mail is a the method often used by psychotherapists to work with clients, mostly because it is easy to use and a very popular method of communicating. More sensory-rich styles of communicating - as in Internet telephoning and audio-visual conferencing - require extra equipment, more technical know-how, and fast Internet connections in order to work smoothly. Even though I'm distinguishing text from sensory communication, there IS a visual component to typed text conversations - for example, in the creative use of smileys, spacing, punctuation, ASCII art, special keyboard characters, and font size, color, and style. Also, the tools for inserting graphics, audio, and video into e-mail and bulletin board forums are becoming easier to use. For the most part, however, people stick to typed text.

Pros:

- It's easy to save permanent records of some or all of the communications (text files are small). Theoretically, a whole online psychotherapy could be preserved, word for word. Saved records give the therapist and client an opportunity to review and evaluate past encounters. They also could be valuable in supervision and research.

- The absence of face-to-face cues encourages some people to be more honest and expressive (the "disinhibition effect").

- Some people, due to cognitive or interpersonal style, may naturally express themselves better through writing, and/or comprehend others better via writing. They may also comprehend others better by reading than by listening.

- Some people who balk at seeing a therapist in-person (due to anxiety about self-disclosure, the stigma of being a "patient," etc.) may be more willing to seek text-based help due to the anonymity it offers.

- The process of writing may tap therapeutic cognitive processes and encourage an observing ego, insight, working through, and (especially in asynchronous text such as weblogs) the therapeutic construction of a personal narrative, as in journal writing and bibliotherapy. For some people, text communication will tap and strengthen cognitive processing, which could be an asset in cognitive therapies.

- The sometimes ambiguous presentation of typed text can draw out transference reactions, which may be useful to the psychoanalytic therapist.

Cons:

- Due to writing skills, typing skills, and cognitive/interpersonal style, some people cannot effectively express themselves through typed text or efficiently understand others when reading text.

- The absence of face-to-face cues encourages some people to regress and act out unproductively (the "disinhibition effect").

- Important face-to-face cues such as voice tones, body language, and physical appearance, are lost. In-person, a therapist very quickly may note that a client is sick, drunk, depressed, etc. Online, without the obvious visual and auditory cues, the therapist will have to rely on other, probably much more subtle indicators.

- For some people, the lack of physical presence may reduce the sense of intimacy, trust, and commitment in the therapeutic relationship. Typed text may feel formal, distant, unemotional, and lacking a supportive and empathic tone.

- The sometimes ambiguous presentation of typed text can lead to misunderstandings and exaggerated projections and transference reactions, which could undermine some therapeutic interventions.

- The identity of the person who sent the text messages may be difficult to verify, which raises important confidentiality issues. People not involved in the therapy also could obtain access to saved messages.

Even though chat and e-mail are both typed text, the fact that chat is usually synchronous while e-mail is usually asynchronous makes them very different styles of communicating. As a result, the significance of the pros and cons listed above may vary for each. For example, the therapeutic value of self-reflection, working through, or writing personal narratives may be much more powerful in the slower paced e-mail correspondence than in "on the spot" chat. This is a good example of how the interaction of the 5 dimensions significantly influence the therapeutic aspects of a particular communication pathway.

Sensory

A robust sensory encounter includes sights and sounds. Audio-visual conferencing includes both, telephoning involves only voice, cell phones can transfer pictures via the web. These communication methods attempt to recreate the sights and/or sounds of an in-person encounter. In this category of sensory communication, we may also include the much more imaginary multimedia experiences. For example, in environments such as the SimsOnline, There.com, and Palace, people interact in an imaginative visual scene using sounds, typed text and sometimes voice transmission to communicate, as well as visual icons called "avatars" to represent themselves. These are fantasy-based encounters and not an attempt to mimic the real world. I'll discuss the psychotherapeutic implications of such imaginary encounters in the real/imaginary section. Sensory communication also could include web pages containing graphics - as illustrated by a colleague of mine who interacted for a short period of time with a severe schizoid patient almost exclusively through pictures uploaded to their web sites.

Even though I'm distinguishing text from sensory communication, there IS a visual component to text conversations - for example, in the creative use of smileys, spacing, capital letters, punctuation, and ASCII art. Rich text formatting (rtf) enables changes in text alignment, font type, size, and color - which offers a much wider range for organizing and presenting ideas, as well for optimizing self-expression and conveying **emotion**. Also, the tools for embedding graphics, audio, and video files into e-mail and bulletin board forums gradually are becoming more available. Clients can write about their experiences, as well as talk about and show those experiences, all integrated into one message package. The integration of writing, talking, reading, listening, and showing can be a powerful way to understand, work through and assimilate psychological problems.

Pros:

- Multiple sensory cues provides valuable information for understanding the client, such as visual appearance, body language, and vocal expression. Comparing cues from different sensory pathways can be very revealing (e.g., a contrast between what a person says and his body language).

- For some people, more fully sensory communication will tend to tap emotional processes, which could be an asset in therapies that aim to directly access affective states.

- For some clients, the feeling of the therapist's "presence" may be more powerful when multiple sensory cues are available, which can enhance the impact of the therapist's interventions, the therapist's selfobject functions, the sense of intimacy, and commitment to the therapy.

- Being less ambiguous than typed text, sensory encounters will reduce misunderstandings, projections, and exaggerated transference reactions.

- Some people express themselves better through speaking than writing. Speaking is considerably faster and usually conveys information more quickly.

Cons:

- Sophisticated sensory communication, as in audio-video conferencing, requires extra equipment, more technical know-how, and fast Internet connections in order to work smoothly.

- Some clients may be less expressive when confronted with a face-to-face encounter. Complex auditory and visual cues may cause anxiety in some people, and in the case of severe pathology may be overwhelming.

- Being less ambiguous than typed text, sensory encounters reduce the opportunity to draw out revealing projections and transference reactions.

- Sensory encounters via the Internet are more difficult to save to permanent record (as in multimedia chat), or would consume a great deal of storage space (audio-visual files are very large).

3. Imaginary /Real

Imaginary

When the ftf and environmental cues of the "real" world fall away, the opportunity for an imaginary world opens up. Cyberspace is filled with fantasy-based communities, some purely text-driven and some highly visual - such as MOOs and MUDs, the multimedia chat communities such as Palace, and many other chat and forum communities where participants assume imaginary persona and participate in creative activities. Some people prefer the flight of pure imagination that is activated by text-only fantasy encounters. Others like the visual effect of imaginary graphical surroundings and creative avatars. Psychotherapists might use this potential for imaginary interactions in their work, including not only the creation of an imaginary environment for their clients, but also having clients participate in MOOS, MUDS, or other imaginary communities as an experiential adjunct to the therapy. For example, by enabling people to participate vicariously in the creation of the imaginary character "Elmer" and his interpersonal relationships, Postmodern Therapy offers those people the opportunity to experiment with a different life and personality, thereby better understanding their own.

Pros:

- Well-know techniques such as role playing, psychodrama, Gestalt Therapy dialogues dream enactment and analysis, exposure therapy, and implosion could thrive in an imaginary cyberspace environment using multimedia tools. Exposure therapy using VR technology is already well underway.

- A client's lifestyle experimentation in an imaginary online community may provide very valuable material to be discussed in psychotherapy.

- New styles of therapy can evolve out of imaginary cyberspace tools - for example, "avatar therapy" in which assumed identities become a central feature of exploring the client's sense of self.

Cons:

- An excessive focus on imaginary scenarios and identities can become a form of defense and acting out, a diversion from true psychotherapeutic work.

- Some types of psychopathology will not respond well to imaginary scenarios, or may be exacerbated by it (e.g., psychotic conditions).

- Sophisticated technology and fast transmission speeds will be needed for multimedia environments to mature. Will the imaginary "holodeck" experiences of Star Trek ever be possible?.

Real

A Star Trek holographic experience that recreates all of the sounds, sights, smells, and physical sensations of "being there" in the real world would be the most powerful simulation of an actual face-to-face meeting. But we're not likely to see this any time soon. In the meanwhile, audio-visual conferencing is the best Internet technology has to offer psychotherapists who want to meet clients in an encounter that approximates an in-person meeting, where both therapist and client sit squarely in their actual physical and psychological identities. Telephoning, which offers only auditory contact, weighs in at second place in the attempt to recreate "being there" - and probably has only a few advantages over the conventional telephone. The most powerful multimedia environments probably will not be those that attempt to recreate in-person encounters, but rather those that generate new ways to communicate by altering the boundaries of time, space, appearance, and group interaction.

The "real" feature of online communications overlaps with the "sensory" feature, but is not identical to it. The realistic simulation of a ftf session using video conferencing contains sights and sounds. It is a robust sensory experience. However, other sensory-rich online therapies that utilize multimedia technology may be highly imaginative environments. Also, text communication in which client and therapist are "themselves" has a greater reality basis as compared to situations in which one or both may be role playing or somehow altering their identities. Nevertheless, the "real" aspects of the relationship will be greatly enhanced by true-to-life audio and video features.

Pros:

- The therapist can more accurately verify the identity of the client.

- For some clients, the feeling of the therapist's "presence" may be more powerful when the therapist appears as a "real" person, which can enhance the impact of the therapist's interventions, the therapist's selfobject functions, the sense of intimacy, and commitment to the therapy.

- Interacting with the "real" presence of the therapist may reduce misunderstandings, projections, and exaggerated transference reactions.

- Some people will feel more comfortable as "themselves" and can express themselves more effectively using their own voice and body language cues.

Cons:

- Communication using audio and/or visual technology requires extra equipment, more technical know-how, and fast

Internet connections in order to work smoothly.

- Some clients may be more anxious and less expressive when dealing with a realistic face-to-face encounter.

- If saved to permanent record, auditory/visual encounters require much more space.

- Some clients may expect that a computer-simulated in-person encounter will be just like an in-person encounter, which may lead to disappointment (the "close but no cigar" effect).

4. Automated / Interpersonal

Automated

The basic purpose of the computer is to automate tasks for us humans - tasks that we can't do, don't want to do, or would take much longer to do. We can put this function to work in psychotherapy, ranging from simple to very complex activities. Programs already exist that scan e-mail or other text messages in order to detect, tabulate, and rate a person's mood and offensive language. Almost any pattern in language use could be detected and quantified. In between sessions or when the therapist is on vacation, an e-mail program can be set to reply to the client's e-mail. Programs designed to guide clients to self-insight or behavioral and cognitive changes can be used as adjuncts to psychotherapy or as primary components of a self-help program (see, for example, SelfHelpSystems). Even software that serves more as entertainment than as a psychometrically solid assessment can be a useful springboard for discussion in the psychotherapy session with the clinician.

A very sophisticated program may even conduct counseling by itself or with varying degrees of supervision by a human clinician. Programs like "Eliza" have attempted to simulate a talking-cure psychotherapy, with marginal success. But the field of Artificial Intelligence is evolving rapidly and may be able to closely simulate many aspects of verbal human interaction. Some forms of psychotherapy - especially those containing techniques which can be operationally defined - may be more amenable to automation than others.

Pros:

- Computer programs may be efficient, objective, and accurate tools in the assessment, testing, and diagnostic phases of treatment.

- Computer programs may work well in helping people make decisions about entering psychotherapy and what type of psychotherapy.

- Diagnostic and treatment protocols that are very specific and programmatic may be very amenable to automation, resulting in a cost effective treatment.

- Some people may at first be more comfortable and expressive with a non-human therapist.

- Computers don't have feelings and can be programmed to have minimal countertransference reactions, making them potentially much more objective and neutral in their work.

- Computers have (in some respects) a superior memory than humans and may be better at detecting patterns of ideas and issues that surface in the dialogue with a client. They might even be capable of detecting changes in voice and body language, as they definitely are capable of detecting psychophysiological changes, such as heart rate, skin conductance, and blood pressure - biological cues that therapists usually cannot detect.

Cons:

- Computer programs don't reason or learn nearly as well as humans, and therefore may be very limited in their ability to adapt to changing or new psychotherapeutic situations.

- Some clients will not feel comfortable or expressive with a non-human relationship. Some say that "it's the relationship that heals" in psychotherapy. Can a relationship be formed with a machine?

- Programs have no feelings or countertransference reactions, which can be valuable tools in assessing and treating clients.

- The complexities and subtleties of some psychotherapies may be impossible to recreate in a computer program.

- Empathy, which is a powerful healing force, probably can't be simulated by a computer program.

- A computer program cannot be more knowledgeable or skilled than the psychotherapists who programmed it, meaning it often will be a "second best" choice.

Interpersonal

Humans need humans. Our interpersonal relationships shape us. Relationships indeed can heal. Completely eliminating the therapist's psyche from psychotherapy will probably be a mistake in many cases. Although computers may be objective and dispassionate in their work - although they may have better memories and be more efficient at detecting some changes in the client's words and behaviors - although some clients may feel more comfortable with a computer - they are far inferior to the human in feeling and reasoning about the human condition. And that's what many forms of psychotherapy are all about - especially healing "selfobject" interventions in which the client relies on the mirroring, idealizing, or twinning presence of a human being.

This doesn't necessarily mean that computer-controlled interactions involve a lack of personal touch, authenticity, and real care. After all, a human must program the machine. The program can be an extension of the therapist's presence, personality, and therapeutic intentions. As an example, let's say a clinician is going away on vacation and will not be seeing her clients for two weeks. Some clients will have a difficult time with that lapse in the therapy, especially those with object constancy problems, as in borderline conditions. The therapist informs her clients that she has set up her e-mail system so that if they want to establish contact, they will receive a pre-written message from her. That message could be personalized for each client, if the therapist so chooses. In fact, the therapist could create a series of different messages for each client that will be sent - either randomly or in a specified order - when the client touches base. Or these messages could be sent to clients automatically, without them initiating the contact. There are many possibilities and levels of complexity in creating these automated reply systems, including the use of audio and video recordings. The more sophisticated the system, the more life-like the virtual presence of the therapist. In fact, the level of sophistication of the therapist's virtual "substitute" or "bot" is an important feature that can be adjusted depending on the needs of the specific client. What all these simulations share is the opportunity to expand the client's access to the therapist's presence beyond the boundary of the therapy session. They widen the interpersonal field.

<u>Non-interpersonal resources</u> - Although they may not exactly qualify as "automated," there are a wide variety of therapeutic online activities and resources that don't necessarily require the client's interacting with either a therapist or other people. While clients could pursue these opportunities as a facet of their work with a clinician or as a component of their participation in an online therapeutic group, they could also seek out these activities and resources on their own, with the clinician initially suggesting or "prescribing" those that might be most appropriate for a person (see eQuest). These resources and activities include:

- web sites with information about mental health topics

- online self-help programs (see Clay Tucker-Ladd's Psychological Self-Help)

- online journals and diaries written by people who are similar to the client

- the opportunity to create one's own personal web site or online journal as a means of therapeutic self-expression and exploration

- audio recordings, documentaries, and movies which are available online

- relaxation and meditation programs (for example, see this guided meditation on BeliefNet)

Invisible

The invisibility of the therapist that computers allow overlaps with the automated/interpersonal dimension. If psychotherapy is automated, then it's possible for human therapists to oversee the machines' work, either continually or periodically. Therapists can adjust the program, if necessary, or even "step in" to intervene themselves. If clients believe they are only talking with a computer, then the therapist is essentially invisible.

Other variations of therapist invisibility might include professionals "listening in" on another therapist's individual or group session - for example, observing an e-mail list, perhaps to supervise or back-up the therapist through private communications, not unlike the "bug-in-the-ear" method used in some training programs. Obviously, the client's being unaware of the fact that an outsider is listening and/or secretly intervening raises an ethical red flag. With informed consent, the invisible professional then does become a bit more "present" for the client. Over time, some clients will forget that there is someone observing, allowing the professional to slip more into invisibility. Other clients may never feel comfortable in what becomes a self-conscious, even "paranoid" environment. With permission, a therapist also may silently observe clients in an online support group or "in vivo" in an online community, when these groups or communities serve as supplements to the individual therapy. For clinicians holding office hours via chat or instant messaging for clients who wish to "check in" briefly, invisibility allows them to interact simultaneously with several clients, without a client being aware of another client's presence. Or the therapist can invisibly look over relevant information or past messages with a client while chatting with that client. Although challenging, this type of behind-the-scenes multitasking can be mastered effectively. Invisibility can also allow a team of professionals to brainstorm and coordinate intervention efforts with a particular client, even though only one clinician - the "primary therapist" - directly interacts with that client.

It's also possible for clients to be invisible in a treatment program. They can listen in on individual or group sessions, either with or without the knowledge of the therapist and other participants, resulting in "vicarious" learning and psychotherapy. Again, ethical concerns are crucial. Other possibilities include the client's unobtrusive observation of online support groups and communities, which also may be a rich resource for vicarious learning, especially when a clinician assists the client in making sense out of those observations.

Pros:

- Some clients may be more comfortable and expressive when they believe a human therapist in not present.

- Invisible supervisors could be a valuable technique in the training of psychotherapists.

- Invisibility enables a "behind the scenes" rallying of consultants and supplementary resources, even WHILE the clinician works with the client in real time.

- Some invisible clients may benefit significantly from a vicarious learning experience.

- Being an invisible client can reduce or eliminate the cultural stigma of being a psychotherapy patient.

Cons:

- Invisibility of the therapist or client can pose ethical dilemmas.

- The curative effects of a healing human relationship are lost when either the client or therapist is not present.

- The client's or therapist's commitment to the therapy may be greatly reduced when their counterpart is not present.

- The idea of being completely "invisible" could lull a therapist or client into a false sense of security. With enough technical know-how, an outsider can detect others participation in any type of Internet meeting. This raises serious confidentiality issues, as is true for all types of computer-mediated therapy (it should be noted that with high-tech surveillance equipment - which is easily available - outsiders can listen in on almost any in-person meeting).

Present

Presence and the factors that enhance it are important issues in cyberspace relationships. The pros and cons of the client or therapist being present follow logically from the above discussion of invisibility. Psychotherapies that rely on a healing human relationship - including the development of rapport and trust between client and therapist, or a healing selfobject interaction - will require a present professional. The fascinating aspect of computer-mediated therapy is that the degree of presence can be regulated. In mailing lists and chat, one can mostly or always lurk, or periodically "pop in," or maintain an ongoing active participation. The presence of the client or therapist will be maximized when the communication is synchronous and sensory. Here and now, seeing and hearing the real person - as in audio-visual conferencing - will make that person feel more real, alive, and present for most people (some people claim they feel a more direct connection to other's presence during typed text communication). Although the "interpersonal" and "present" factors overlap considerably, it is possible to have an interpersonal psychotherapy that lacks a present therapist (e.g., a therapist pretending to be an automated psychotherapy program), as well as an automated psychotherapy with a present therapist (e.g., psychotherapy with a computer program in which the client knows that a therapist is silently observing). An interpersonal psychotherapy also can have varying degrees of presence of the therapist, as in the difference between e-mail interventions and the more fully sensory and synchronous video conferencing.

Mobile technology is expanding the range and complexity of presence. Using the text messaging systems of cell phones, clients and clinicians can stay in touch no matter where they are. The client can immediately report on in vivo experiences, and the therapist's presence can extend directly into the client's natural environment. Such in vivo communication may prove to be a very useful adjunct to an otherwise conventional psychotherapy, and may in fact lead to new approaches to "field" interventions (e.g., working in vivo with phobic disorders). The combination of mobile technology with social network systems will also enable clients and therapists to immediately locate in any wireless environment "friends of friends" and people with similar backgrounds and interests.

Creating Group Experiences

Although this article mostly has focused on psychotherapy as a one-on-one encounter, cybertherapy should take advantage of the many opportunities available on the Internet for interacting in groups. "Individual/group" could be a sixth dimension. On first glance, this distinction does not seem different than individual versus group work in f2f psychotherapy. However, by applying and combining features from different communication pathways, all sorts of creative group experiences can be provided for clients.

Using *layered interactions* a group could function at two different levels using two different channels of communication, with one channel perhaps functioning as a meta-discussion of the other. For example, the group could meet for a synchronous session via text chat or video conferencing. Then, using a saved transcript or recording of this meeting as a reference, the group discusses this session via (asynchronous) e-mail. Essentially, this is a computer-mediated enhancement of the "self-reflective loop" in group psychotherapy, as described by Yalom. The group process becomes layered, with a core, spontaneous, temporal experience and a superimposed meta-discussion. Such layered interactions may be especially useful when the core experience is an imaginary group role play (as in psychodrama) with a reality-oriented meta-discussion.

Other interesting possibilities arise from the use of invisibility. In a *nested group* people could communicate with each other while also being able to invisibly communicate with one or more people within that group. Although such private messaging could create subgrouping and conflict, it also could be useful in enabling group members, as well as the therapist, to offer hidden coaching and support that ultimately enhances the whole group. In *overlapping groups* individuals or subgroups within one group can communicate with individuals or subgroups from a sister group, which enables a comparing of experiences across groups. Some online clinicians also use a *meta-group* that silently observes the interaction of people in a meeting and then offer its feedback to the whole group, or privately to individuals during or after the online meeting.

Features of the five dimensions also may be therapeutically targeted for a particular group experience. For example, consider the possibility of an e-mail group for people with impulse control problems, where that "zone for reflection"

intrinsic to asynchronous communication becomes an essential therapeutic feature of the group.

Group strategies may involve environments that are *one-to-many*, *many-to-one*, and *many-to-many*. In a creatively self-expressive web page, a person may therapeutically express himself to a group of people. If the group can provide feedback to the person - as in weblogs or "talk-back" features - those replies could be therapeutically beneficial. Communities of weblogs and social network systems (e.g., friendster.com, orkut.com, etc,) enable people to find and communicate with other people who share similar backgrounds and interests. Innovative clinicians will find ways to assist clients in exploring and optimally benefiting from this possibilities.

One major advantage of the Internet over the f2f world is its ability to bring together people who are experiencing similar problems - people who are geographically distant and/or who experience problems that might be rare. There are thousands of support groups in cyberspace which may serve as valuable adjuncts to clients in individual therapy. Similarly, there are thousands of online communities of all shapes and sizes. A client's lifestyle in one or more of them may be the perfect social microcosm for exploring interpersonal style. Given the nature of the client's problems, the therapist might "prescribe" a particular community or specific behavioral assignments within a community. The online community then becomes a laboratory for self-insight and the development of new interpersonal skills.

A Cybertherapy Theory

Psychotherapists from different perspectives may evaluate these dimensions of cybertherapy quite differently. Those who place more emphasis on specific treatment techniques rather than a curative relationship - as in some behavioral approaches - may find automated interventions very useful. Psychoanalytic and behavioral clinicians who work with fantasy-based material (dream work, flooding, implosion) or invented role plays may be enticed by the imaginary dimension of computer-mediated therapy. Asynchronous text communication may be useful to psychotherapists who emphasize the construction of a personal narrative, as in some psychoanalytic therapies and bibliotherapies. Some psychoanalytic workers also will be intrigued by the heightened transference and countertransference that occurs in text-based interactions.

On the other hand, those therapists - especially humanistic thinkers - who uphold the therapeutic power of a face-to-face, authentic relationship may be skeptical of any type of computer-mediated intervention. They may prefer a fully sensory, present, interpersonal encounter - which computer-mediated communication may never be able to generate. Surely, clinicians who work closely with body cues and body contact (Thought Field therapies, for example) will find cyberspace very limiting, perhaps even useless. From a practical standpoint, however, it's hard to imagine any clinician who wouldn't find the asynchronous dimension of Internet communication (especially e-mail) useful as a way to maintain contact with the client.

There are at least three ways to conceptualize computer-mediated psychotherapy. We can think of computers as handy tools to be incorporated into preexisting approaches, as in traditional f2f therapy where the client and therapist communicate between sessions via e-mail, when the client uses online assessment and experiential software as a supplement to the therapy, or when the client's life in online groups serves as an important therapeutic experience that is discussed with the clinician. A second approach is develop a variety of computer-mediated therapies that each focuses on a specific technology as the primary channel of therapeutic interaction, such as "e-mail therapy" and "chat therapy." Each of these therapies could become an area of specialization.

The third approach, which I'd like to emphasize, is conceptualizing cybertherapy as an overarching framework for understanding the therapeutic elements of different communication modalities. For any particular client, a communication environment is created based on an understanding of how he or she could benefit from the various features of the five dimensions - as well as whether the client could benefit from some type of group activity or from online mental health information and interactive software. These features and resources can be combined and modified in a variety of ways to address the needs of different clients and the changing needs of a particular client. Each of the five dimensions accentuates a particular aspect of the psychotherapeutic experience. Some of these aspects may have been neglected or overlooked in more traditional forms of clinical work. In a sense, computer-mediated communication deconstructs psychotherapy (as it deconstructs relationships in general), not only revealing its elemental qualities, but also offering the opportunity to isolate, control, and combine those qualities. Most notable is the ability to regulate:

- the temporal boundary and pacing of the therapeutic interaction, including the degree of spontaneity and the "zone for reflection"

- how much of the therapeutic encounter can be stored and reviewed

- the visual, auditory, and textual components of the interaction, including the resulting degrees of anonymity, intimacy, disinhibition, and transference, as well as the resulting emphasis on cognitive (text) and emotional (sensory) processes

- the imaginary and fantasy-driven aspects of the therapeutic encounter, including the ability to tap the unconscious dynamics associated with these aspects

- the degree of human presence and invisibility, including the power to automate some or all of the therapeutic interaction

- the client's access to online information and resources

- the development of a therapeutic "virtual" self by creating personal web pages and autobiographical journals
- the flexible ability to create unique types of group experiences

Keeping in mind the pros and cons of different communication channels, the therapeutic question then becomes what types of channels and resources might work best for a particular client with a particular problem. What COMBINATION of channels and resources might work best for a person? What SEQUENCE?

There are numerous ways the various dimensional elements can be combined and sequenced in order to design therapeutic environments that address the needs of clients. People who can benefit from intensive depth psychotherapy (e.g., those who are higher functioning, educated, and artistically-inclined) may fare well in rich imaginary and fantasy-driven scenarios, coordinated with a text-based evaluating and processing of the experience. Trauma that needs to be mastered gradually can begin with text-based explorations, then slowly incorporating actual sensory recreations to assist in the assimilation of the trauma. Some therapies (e.g., EMDR) also may invent imaginary text and/or sensory resources to counteract the trauma. Developing the social skills needed to mastering specific difficult interpersonal situations can progress from imaginary/automated/asynchronous scripted role plays with minimal sensory cues (and perhaps an invisible therapist to evaluate and coach) to more challenging spontaneous role plays that are synchronous, interpersonal, and sensory enriched. In order to grapple with issues about intimacy and interpersonal anxiety, schizoid and socially phobic clients may benefit from a therapy that begins with encounters that are text-based, asynchronous, and perhaps even automated - then moves towards more synchronous, sensory, present, and ultimately in-person encounters.

Integrated cybertherapy packages that combine many features of online environments - a "multimedia cybertherapy" - may be the strategy of choice for some clients. Encouraging clients to work with a variety of modalities and resources, including those they prefer as well as those that seem alien to them, can help pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses in their cognitive and social development. Examining the transition between different channels along with continued work within a non-preferred channel may lead to self-insight and the development of new psychological skills. Effective strategies for integration may be the key to cybertherapy.

My colleague Michael Fenichel often speaks about "fit" in psychotherapy. Traditionally, this refers to the effective match between the client and the style of psychotherapy, and between the personalities of the client and therapist. In cybertherapy we also will need to address the degree of fit between the client and the online environment. Where do we begin the therapeutic work and into which environments do we later move? The first step in answering this question is knowing what environments and resources the clinician can offer. In this article, I've touched on some of the many possibilities:

- f2f meetings
- video conferencing
- phone sessions
- one-on-one text chat
- multimedia and avatar chat
- one-on-one e-mail

- message board group therapy
- e-mail group therapy
- chat group therapy
- online support groups
- therapeutic participation in virtual communities
- online self-help tools
- weblogs
- short messaging systems (text messaging)
- online assessment instruments
- social networking systems
- online experiential programs (computerized counseling, relaxation and meditation programs, etc.)
- informational web sites
- personal web sites, online journals
- audio recordings and films

Obviously, clients should encouraged to pick communication modalities and online resources that feel right to them, although - as I mentioned previously - working in environments outside one's preferred mode, outside one's "comfort zone," can be therapeutic. The clinician will need to suggest some choices. That decision might be based on standard psychological testing and diagnostic techniques. People with particular diagnoses and personality styles may benefit from some environments and not others. What would be the best communication and online resources for a person with OCD, a schizoid personality, a paranoid schizophrenic, or a borderline personality disorder? For example, it's possible that people prone to poor reality testing and severe transference reactions may spin out of emotional control when working in the ambiguous environment of text communication, where there are no visual or auditory cues to help ground one's perceptions. Clinicians will also need to develop assessment tools that pinpoint the client's preferences and potentials for working in the unique environments of online clinical work. A simple questionnaire might consist of bipolar items that assess the degree of agreeing or disagreeing with such items as:

- I feel comfortable with computers.
- I like to write.
- I like to read.
- I type well.
- I like to talk on the phone.
- I like to meet and talk to people f2f.
- I like to have time to think about something before I say it.
- I like to be spontaneous.
- I like participating in groups.
- I like acting in imaginary situations.
- I like watching movies.
- I enjoy interacting with computer programs.
- I tend to be suspicious about what people really mean when they say something.
etc.

What's interesting about using a term like "cybertherapy" is that we're conceptualizing the therapy based on the type of communication pathway between the client and therapist, and the implications of that for technique. That's a bit different than the more traditional way of defining a therapy which is more closely linked to one's theory of psychopathology (the "causes" of the psychological problem). It's even possible that our understanding of how different communication pathways affect the therapeutic process may lead to new frameworks for conceptualizing psychological problems. A client, for example, may be unable to leave an asynchronous, text-based style of interaction - in other words, humorously stated, "He's fixated at an e-mail level of interpersonal relationships." Psychological health may be assessed according to the person's ability to move among as well as integrate the dimensional elements of computer-mediated relationships.

This dimensional model of psychotherapy in cyberspace does not replace traditional models or theories. It can be considered an independent framework, a supplementary perspective. Clinicians may use it as a tool when extending their f2f work into cyberspace. What online channel might work best for psychoanalytic therapy, exposure therapy, or the Gestalt "empty chair" technique? Whether one conceptualizes a schizoid client as deficient in adequate social learning experiences, lacking sufficient object relations, or derailed from self-actualization, what online environment

might be helpful to that client? The model also may be used as a framework for integrating ideas from other theories. If a psychodynamic clinician and a cognitive clinician discuss their teen male clients who love online fantasy games, they may discover some significant overlap in their concepts of psychopathology and psychotherapy.

As the technology of cyberspace advances, the methods for computer-mediated psychotherapy will also change. Traditional theories and techniques will be integrated with new ones unique to the ongoing evolution of cyberspace. A critical component of this change will be a careful evaluation - and perhaps reinterpretation - of the ethical issues associated with the practice of psychotherapy. The foremost concern in the clinician's mind should always be the welfare and rights of the client as outlined by the evolution of professional guidelines.

The Role of the Professional

Traditional models of psychotherapy - especially individual psychotherapy - usually place the clinician at the center of the therapeutic process. The clinician administers a treatment or plays a crucial role in creating and facilitating a transformative experience. The familiar motto of interpersonal therapies - "it's the relationship that heals" - clearly highlights the salience of the clinician. Many forms of online psychotherapy will similarly place the therapist in a strategic position for controlling the treatment process. In other cases the professional may serve more like a consultant who helps a client design and navigate through a therapeutic activity or collection of activities. In cyberspace there are a wide variety of mental health resources, including support groups, informational websites, assessment and psychotherapeutic software, and comprehensive self-help programs (see Clay Tucker-Ladd's Psychological Self-Help) - not to mention the potentially therapeutic nature of online relationships and communities as social microcosms. In the role of consultant, the professional might help a client design a program of readings, activities, and social experiences that addresses his or her needs. Rather than being the "therapist" who directly controls the transformative process, the professional instead helps launch the client into this program, offers advise when needed, and perhaps assists the client in evaluating and assimilating the experience.

This role of "psychotherapeutic consultant" may alter the relationship between professional and client, perhaps chipping away at the (often transference-determined) image of the clinician as an powerful authority figure or "healer." With everyone having equal access to online information and resources - as well as an equal opportunity to express themselves - some researchers have commented on how there is an equalization of status in cyberspace. This leveling of the playing field will reinforce that image of the mental health professional as a psychotherapeutic consultant. Online clinicians of the future will learn to adjust to this change. They will learn to embrace the fact that clients can be active, knowledgeable participants in their own psychotherapeutic endeavors.

The online clinician faces technical challenges. As we all know, the Internet evolves at a fast pace. New communication tools and environments appear every day, and there is no end in sight. Online therapists - especially those who are invested in a multidimensional model of communication pathways and psychotherapy - will be hard pressed to keep up. To be knowledgeable about all the possibilities, they should not rely strictly on their own efforts. They would be wise to consult with communications and Internet technology experts who know what's available and what lies ahead.

However, rather than simply following along and using the software tools invented by the technology experts, the mental health professional may participate in the process of creating these tools based on the needs dictated by psychotherapy or a particular type of psychotherapy. For example, what might be the features of an ideal e-mail program for online counseling and psychotherapy? Consider these possibilities, starting with the more common features and progressing to those more sophisticated and specialized:

- automatic grammar and spell-checking
- immunity to virus infections
- rich-text formatting that is easy to use and fail-safe
- efficient archiving of messages and Boolean searching of archives
- sorting of archived messages based on date, subject, file size, username, and keywords in message body
- easy to use encryption and identity verification
- efficient integration with IM, phone, and video communication
- easy to use multimedia enhancements (images, voice)
- scripting ability that enables the clinician to automatically insert prewritten phrases, sentences,

explanations, etc.
- automatic recording and statistical analysis of time spent composing e-mail and the size of e-mail messages
- integration of e-mail archive with billing and documentation systems
- built-in text analysis tools for the detection of emotional words, thematic patterns, changes in syntax and grammar within a message
- text analysis tools that compare words, phrases, themes, and patterns across messages
- color enrichment of text based on GSR arousal

Developing a productive synergy between software engineers and mental health professionals may be a challenge. The mental health professional may not understand the technical aspects or even the basic concepts behind new communication systems, thereby failing to see the effective clinical applications of those systems. The quantitative mindset of engineers may result in their difficulty in understanding and appreciating the "unscientific" clinician's insights into human nature. Any attitudinal and paradigmatic gap between them needs to be bridged, otherwise the future of cybertherapy will become lop-sided and incomplete. In fact, the most effective approach to the model of cybertherapy that I propose would be an interdisciplinary team that helps decide what psychotherapy theory, with which clinician, in what communication modality or collection of modalities, would work best for a particular client.

The Online Clinical Case Study Group
of the International Society for Mental Health Online

A Report from the Millennium Group

I. Origin and Purpose of the Group

The worlds of psychotherapy and the Internet have come together. Clinicians are encountering an increasing number of clients whose lives have been affected significantly by their activities in cyberspace. In a wide variety of styles and formats, psychotherapy also is moving onto the Internet. What are the special skills and knowledge that clinicians need in order to adapt to this intersection of cyberspace with the mental health profession?

> **Case presentations cover the wide range of styles and formats for online clinical work.**

In the months before the turn of the millennium, the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) created its Clinical Case Study Group. Organized and facilitated by John Suler and Michael Fenichel, the group is devoted to the discussion of psychotherapy cases and professional clinical encounters that involve the Internet. The creation of the group evolved out of the need for more in-depth explorations of clinical cases in which online life and interventions play an important role. There are many online groups devoted to discussions of counseling and psychotherapy in cyberspace. Usually those discussions are speculative, theoretical, and anecdotal - which often leads to a dialogue that lacks centeredness and a real world anchor. The goal of the case study group is to generate a more systematic investigation where real clinical cases provide a practical, experience-near grounding for the discussion.

The group's philosophy is that clinical work involving cyberspace sometimes will resemble traditional in-person psychotherapy, but also that cyberspace has resulted in some very new clinical issues and intervention formats. Therefore, the group is designed to investigate cases that cover a range of topics:

- face-to-face (f2f) therapy cases in which contact with the client via the Internet played a significant role (e.g., e-mail between sessions, the use of web sites as resources)
- short and long term clinical encounters with people that occurred primarily via the Internet (e.g., therapy via e-mail or chat)
- professional consultations that occurred via the Internet, including, for example, giving advice and/or information to people who contact an online professional and
- supervision via the Internet (e.g., via e-mail or message boards)
- f2f therapy cases in which the client's activities in cyberspace were a significant issue in the therapy
- online groups and communities in which the mental health professional acts as a organizer, facilitator, or consultant

II. The Group's Format

To help maximize confidentiality, cohesion, and group identity, the list is kept small in size and is closed during case presentations. The "Millennium Group" which began in the Fall of 1999 consisted of 16 mental health professionals from diverse backgrounds. All members took turns describing their cases as a stimulus for group discussion. Beginning on a Monday, each presentation and the ensuing discussion typically lasted one week (a pace that at times made it difficult for some members to keep up). A separate "format and process" thread was used to discuss technical problems, observations about the process of the group, and suggestions for improving it. At the beginning of the group, a message from the facilitator outlined some guidelines:

> **The group's design is intended to maximize cohesion, participation, and group identity.**

- Give feedback to each presenter. None of us wants to take the risk involved in presenting our work and then having no one respond. Chronic lurking is not OK on this list.

Avoid long, scrolling messages. Be concise. It will be harder on you to construct a precise, to-the-point message, but the net result for everyone will be a more focused, less overwhelming batch of messages.

- Avoid long quotes of previous messages. Quote the specific sections you are responding to.
- Let us know when you will be away from your computer for extended periods of time.
- Be HELPFUL to the presenter, not critical. We will expect respectful, professional behavior on this list. Persistent disrespectful behavior will result in your being unsubscribed. Appeals can be made to the ISMHO Executive Committee if you disagree with the decision to remove you.

A problem with many e-mail groups is their amorphous membership and process. Often the implicit norm is that you can subscribe and unsubscribe whenever you want, participate or lurk as you wish, respond to others, ignore them or digress. This lack of structure sometimes leads to a group that is fragmented, disorganized, and lacking in group spirit and identity. The guidelines of the IMSHO case study group that are listed above - as well as the rule that every member must present a case - are designed to counteract these tendencies. They help create focused discussions, personal commitment to the group, and a supportive, cohesive atmosphere.

III. The Group's Ethical Guidelines

After the initial introductory stage when members sent a message describing themselves and their backgrounds, the Millennium Group discussed in depth the ethical dimensions of the group's format. The welfare of any clients or groups that would be presented in the cases was considered of paramount importance. As a starting point, the group discussed the ethical standards of the American Psychology Association regarding the use of confidential information for didactic purposes:

> **The confidentiality and welfare of the clients discussed is the group's prime directive**

(a) Psychologists do not disclose in their writings, lectures, or other public media, confidential, personally identifiable information concerning their patients, individual or organizational clients, students, research participants, or other recipients of their services that one obtained during the course of their work, unless the person or organization has consented in writing or unless there is other ethical or legal authorization for doing so.

(b) Ordinarily, in such scientific and professional presentations, psychologists disguise confidential information concerning such persons or organizations so that they are not individually identifiable to others and so that discussions do not cause harm to subjects who might identify themselves.

At the end of its discussion of ethics, the group created a document that outlined it's own guidelines. These items above were included in that document. The group also included a list of questions that encourages its members to consider the unique ethical aspects of a cyberspace case study group. The issues embedded in some of these questions reflect the group's philosophy that clinical work involving the Internet has opened new territory not previously encountered in traditional f2f therapy - especially issues regarding online identities and access to computer records (#1 and #4). Question #1 is considered the "prime directive" with #2 being an extension of it.

1. Are you protecting the confidentiality of the person or group by disguising and/or deleting information that could directly or indirectly reveal the person's online or offline identity, or the group's identity and location?

2. Does anyone on this list have direct or indirect contact with the person/s you will discuss, and could this jeopardize the person's confidentiality or in anyway harm those person/s?

3. Has the person given permission for their case to be discussed?

4. What precautions have you taken to safeguard the security of messages from our discussion group presentations (i.e., how have you restricted access to your computer and these email messages)?

5. Are you requesting explicit permission from the appropriate individual and/or the whole group to use quotes or specific material for research, teaching, presentations, or publication?

6. During your discussions with people OUTSIDE of this list (professional or otherwise), how will you protect the confidentiality of the list and the cases presented here?

IV. The Types of Cases Presented

Reflecting both the diversity of our group's professional backgrounds and the wide variety of presenting problems which members were asked to address, group members were privy to a wide variety of clinical presentations. Ranging from issues of online relationships, to more global functioning within family, work, and community, there were numerous opportunities to explore the efficacy of online treatment approaches and the extent to which both practitioners and clients benefited from new and unique approaches towards integrating online and offline experience.

In keeping with the group's established guidelines for confidentiality, the names of clients were changed, often to poetic or symbolic representations of the case dynamics, in keeping with a long tradition of clinical case presentations, dating perhaps to the writings of Freud (e.g., " The Case of Little Hans", or the "Wolf Man"). The designated case title (e.g., "The Case of Miro", involving an artist) would then become the subject header for the particular case being discussed by the group participants, and constituted the primary discussion thread for that week.

An overview of the Millennium Group's case presentations, distilled from over 900 posts between November 1999 (following a month of developing guidelines) and the end of the first group cycle in mid-April 2000, would highlight the following cases:

--**Case #1 An online support group oriented towards career counseling and support**
This case involved a focus on how both counselor and participants communicate support and advice. Both practical issues (e.g., resume writing) and self-esteem issues were explored. Additional discussion concerned aspects of how the group and therapist reacted to specific career choices which were not universally viewed as "socially acceptable".

--**Case #2 Individual online treatment (e-mail and chat) for severe anxiety and depression**
This presentation centered around the development of online treatment parameters and goals. Also raised by the group were issues of emergency contingency management and observations about the intensity of the process despite absence of f2f meetings. This case utilized an actual transcript of a session, which offered the opportunity for a closer examination of both process and content, and stimulated a lively discussion of ethical, practical, and technical concerns.

--**Case #3 Adjunctive daily online sessions supplementing f2f therapy**
Here was an approach which proved effective in a complex case with a fragile patient. Issues of boundaries were highlighted, along several dimensions relating to both anxiety and addiction. A need for structure, backup plans, and coordination between service providers, was a major focus.

--**Case #4 Online group dynamics and the issue of "lurking"**
This presentation consisted of an exploration of how individual member non-participation ("lurking") can effect the vitality and cohesiveness of online groups. A look at group norms and guidelines became a subtext for discussion, including an exploration on how "back-channel" communication may have impacted on the process.

--**Case #5 Online life (and inner life) becoming the focus of f2f treatment**
In this presentation, a case was presented where despite the treatment occurring exclusively face to face, it was clearly the discussion of the client's online autobiography and creative work that became a turning point in the therapy. In this case presentation, the concept of "twinning" was introduced, as well as the oft-repeated themes of empathy and of online dis-inhibition.

--**Case #6 Issues arising from an online support forum**
This presentation focused on two separate cases, one highlighting the phenomenon of "chat room addiction" and the difficulties inherent in referring to offline treatment, and the other centering around one group member's exhibitionism and flamboyance. The intersections were explored in terms of individual and group dynamics, dependency, false identity, and "lurking".

--**Case #7 E-mail, intimacy, and f2f treatment**
The focus was on intimacy, in this case of a client involved in online romantic affairs, seeing a therapist f2f but also using e-mail between sessions. What emerged among the group was an exploration of the ways in which this facilitated expression of intense and immediate feelings.

--**Case #8 Multi-dimensional treatment for social phobia and anti-social online behavior**
A number of complex issues were addressed here, including substance abuse and destructive use of the Internet. A variety of approaches were discussed and utilized, including a focus on social skill training, and a combination of supportive f2f treatment, online assignments, and education.

--**Case #9 Dynamics and limit-setting on a message-board community**
Focusing on a thread of discussion which took place on an online message board, this presentation addressed the social dynamics within one online community and explored the issue of the group leader's role in defining and enforcing limits.

--**Case #10 Psychotherapy in a chat room**
This presentation detailed the stages of ongoing work with a depressed client refusing outside treatment, from the initial intake, to the process of becoming engaged in online treatment. A transcript reveals an almost "live" quality to the interactions, which focused on spirituality.

--**Case #11 TDD for MPD**
Here was a fascinating case where a precursor to e-mail, TDD, was used in the treatment of someone whose multiple personalities expressed themselves via both voice and text - which were the basis for this treatment. Challenging enough f2f, online work presented special challenges.

--**Case #12 Brief marital therapy**
This presentation described a situation where a couple was affected by a spouse's online romances. While this case, like Case #5, did not directly employ the Internet in the treatment itself, online life was clearly a major component in the offline treatment content.

--**Case #13 Online love and offline therapy**
Here a woman with chronically low self-esteem, whose marriage had become empty, found --through the anonymity of Cyberspace-- someone who accepted her and grew to love her. After years of treatment f2f, she now maintains e-mail correspondence with her therapist.

--**Case #14 A closed message board community**
In this case, a closed community provided a safe place for an otherwise socially inhibited abuse victim to use anonymity and support as a means of utilizing "homework assignments" and modeling to develop social competencies and improved sense of self.

--**Case #15 Online treatment for social phobia**
Online treatment for social anxiety proved very effective in this case, employing elements of several treatment modalities, including use of cognitive exercises and use of a journal. During the course of treatment this client, once unable to converse with men, became engaged.

--**Case #16 Online support and counseling**
Here is the case of a woman seeking support from several sources online but resistant to engaging in what appeared to be much-needed local f2f treatment for self and family. The discussion highlighted a number of issues about the limitations of pro-bono "treatment" online.

V. Clinical Issues

Historically, clinicians have been inclined towards positing several "universal" features of effective therapeutic interventions, including warmth, genuineness and empathy, progress towards specific goal attainment, and use of appropriate interventions. Certainly the experiences which have been presented here and explored in detail are no exception, and if anything tend to affirm the importance of such "traditional" concepts and principles. However, as opposed to f2f therapies, a plethora of new factors are introduced by virtue of the

Online clinical work draws on traditional concepts and techniques, but it also requires new ones.

processes involved in communicating electronically from one individual to another--or to a group of individuals simultaneously-- relying on the Internet, computer monitors, and written language skills rather than on one's eyes and ears and oral language. While clear advantages and opportunities arise, such as the ability to "time shift" through the use of asynchronous communication or to "location shift" by use of synchronous chat, obvious difficulties can also come into play beginning with such basic issues as knowing the identity of who one is speaking with, and their age, emotional

state, and gender, for starts. These issues, as important as they are, have by necessity been mentioned only briefly here, to allow for a discussion of the many clinical (as well as technological) issues associated with the online cases which are the focus of this paper.

As noted earlier, it has been posited that online treatment approaches tend to mirror traditional f2f therapies in many key regards. Aside from the more "universal" aspects which most therapists can agree are essential in any therapeutic endeavor, it is also clear that clinicians come into the treatment arena with varying frameworks and backgrounds, which often become reflected in how one conceptualizes the process of the treatment. Thus, some of this group, whose training (and even nationality) is quite diverse, have focused on aspects of the therapeutic relationship using differing conceptual prisms. Some were inclined to look at the cognitive underpinnings of narrative reports, others were focused on aspects of providing a "holding environment" or facilitating a safe haven for self-expression, while still others demonstrated intuitive and/or pragmatic approaches drawing on any number of theoretical orientations. One of the advantages of the collective knowledge and experience base assembled together in this group was the opportunity to be exposed to, or re-acquainted with, a number of theoretical frameworks, ranging from cognitive-behavioral, through object-relations (e.g., Winnicott), through group-process (e.g., Bion, Yalom), through traditional psychoanalytic and interpersonal theories and back full circle to emerging theories of online behavior and relationships.

The specific cases described above included both the type of presenting problems which are typically seen in traditional office practice, and some uniquely *fin-de-siecle* issues which could hardly have been envisioned by the forefathers of psychotherapy.

Some of the most compelling and persistent issues which arose across many of the online cases presented by the case study group included:

- **Disadvantages of absent f2f cues** - Ranging from facial expression to confirming someone's real-time focus on the communication, knowledge of appearance, emotional state, sobriety, and even true identity, these were all important data which were not explicitly available. Often this was seen as a distinct disadvantage from the provider's point of view, and in at least one case presented by the group, a client used anonymity to act out inappropriately towards others in ways which might not have been seen otherwise. In this case discussion ensued about both the potential and dangers inherent in doing social skill training using chat rooms.

- **Advantages of absent f2f cues** - Sometimes the ability to maintain anonymity empowers clients to "be themselves", facilitating their commitment to engage in treatment. The issue of shame relating to appearance or verbal presentation was in fact a recurring theme. Several clients related poor self-concept and shame-based interpersonal difficulties in their daily lives, and described a sense of exaltation in feeling free to be spontaneous online, and being appreciated for their "real" self , both in treatment and in meeting people socially online.

- **Understanding the intricacies of online behavior and relationships** - Clinicians sought to utilize cues such as writing style, content, and time delay, to understand the depth of communication with both the counselor/therapist and with reported online and offline "significant others". In online group environments, additional factors emerged, such as the tendency of some group members towards "lurking", taking only a passive/voyeuristic stance rather than an active role in contributing to the group process, or in some instances engaging in passive aggression or behaviors which monopolized the energies of the group. On the other side of the screen, there were reportedly instances of jealousy, anger, and alienation which arose among family members in reaction to clients' time spent connected to others online.

- **The diversity of issues regarding the Internet and psychotherapy** - From concrete goals such as career decision-making, to a "problem-solving" approach towards generalized interpersonal anxiety, to emotional support during periods of disequilibrium or crisis, it was clear that our 16 clinicians were presented with a wide variety of presenting problems from among a diverse population in which the single common denominator was involvement with the internet. As diverse as the cases were, some members of the case study group felt there were yet more issues to explore.

As difficult as it to generalize about "psychotherapy" in a therapist's office, clearly it is infinitely more problematic to make conclusive statements about the process or outcome of general classes of online treatment. However, for those of us who engaged in thoughtful exploration of these cases, it was clear that many positive outcomes were and are being achieved, including in some cases client-reported symptom reduction, improved range of social functioning (online and off), motivated participation in both f2f and electronic treatment approaches (sometimes in the course of the same integrated treatment), and in some cases with less dramatic outcomes (so far), more subtle benefits may have been gained, such as self-confidence, self-knowledge, practical advice with regard to career or online behavior, or the receipt

of a strong recommendation to pursue local treatment where in fact that was felt to be important. And most importantly, perhaps, those of us who participated in this combination of peer-supervision and clinical case conference group, learned more about what we need to continue exploring. We only know the tip of the iceberg, and the emergence of an Internet society will surely bring about ever-increasing demands to develop a society of mental health services in response.

Through activities such as this - and with the support of professional interdisciplinary organizations such as ISMHO - clinicians will continue to move beyond purely theoretical speculations into understanding and developing the strategies which prove most effective in online counseling and psychotherapy. The cases presented here suggest not only that the roles and intervention strategies of online clinicians will draw from traditional theories and techniques, but also that they will evolve into new and innovative forms that are very different than the familiar f2f approaches. In the future, the case study group will continue to explore this new territory with the aim of developing a practical conceptual model to guide our understanding of how and for whom the various forms of online interventions can be applied most effectively.

Statistics for the Group

Here's a message John Suler sent to the Case Study Group after it completed its first round of case presentations:

Below are some rough statistics that people might find interesting. Stats are useful, but they surely aren't the only way to evaluate something. Remember what Mark Twain said..... "There are 3 types of lies: Lies, damned lies, and statistics."

Topical discussions began 1st week of November 1999 (with ethics discussion)
Last case finished at end of first week of April 2000
approx 5 months (21 weeks)
16 active members

STATS REGARDING TOPICS/CASES DISCUSSED:
18 topic areas discussed (16 cases plus ethics discussion and format/process thread)
total messages sent to list = 960
total number of messages for topics/cases discussed = 684
total number of messages for misc issues = 276
mean # messages per week = 41
mean # messages per topic/case = 33
range of messages per topic/case: 20 => 61

STATS REGARDING MESSAGES PER PERSON
(Note: You can probably guess who the blabbermouth was. Yep it was me. Actually my 277 total messages to the list is inflated due to the fact that a big chunk of those messages were devoted to scheduling and other organization stuff. So I offer below some stats with and without my inclusion):

range of total # of messages sent per person: 11 => 277
range of messages sent per person per week: .5 => 13
range of total # messages sent per person (excluding John): 11 => 104
range of messages sent per person per week (excluding John): .5 => 5
mean total # messages per person = 60
mean # messages per person per week = 3
mean # messages per person (excluding John) = 46
mean # messages per person per week (excluding John) = 2

SUMMARY
I guess the most critical conclusions from these statistics is this: Participating in this group meant receiving about 35-40 messages per week (about 5 per day) and sending to the list about 2 messages per week. Of course the length of the messages varied greatly, from one-liners to those containing several paragraphs. And some days were much slower than others.

> * The members of The Millennium Group included Azy Barak, Peter Chechele, Tom Crain, Michael Fenichel, Betsy Frier Walker, Robert Hsiung, Jim Jarvis, Gayla Novitsky, Pamela Rudat, Gary Stofle, John Suler, and Willadene Walker-Schmucker.

Hypotheses about Online Psychotherapy and Clinical Work

The Online Clinical Case Study Group of the International Society for Mental Health Online is devoted to in-depth discussions of clinical work that involves the internet. The case studies include psychotherapy conducted exclusively via the internet (e.g., e-mail, chat), f2f therapy in which the internet is used for supplemental contact with the client, f2f therapy in which the client's activity in cyberspace is an important feature of the treatment, and interventions within online groups devoted to mental health issues. Listed below is an outline of the working hypotheses of the group. As the group continues to explore cases, this list will be revised and expanded according to the clinical data uncovered by these case studies.
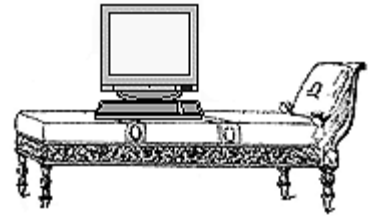
1. The client's experience of text communication

1.1. The psychological meaning clients associate with "writing" will affect how they experience text communication with the therapist. Clients with conflicts about writing may prefer chat over e-mail.

1.2. The client's act of writing may in itself be therapeutic by fostering self-expression, self-reflection, and cognitive restructuring.

1.3 Clients with a history of chaotic relationships may experience text communication with the therapist as predictable and safe.

1.4 Clients who have been physically traumatized may be attracted to the silence and non-tactile quality of text communication.

1.5. Text communication may be helpful for clients who experience talking as a conflicted way to express themselves.

1.6. Some clients may experience text communication as a type of "merging" with the psyche of the therapist. Issues about separation and individuation may be important.

1.7. The therapist's e-mail can be a steady, supportive, reality-testing, ego-building voice "inside" the client's head - a benign internalization or introject.

1.8. Text communications (e.g., e-mail) can be a steady, ongoing effort to restructure a client's cognitions.

1.9. By using several sections of quoted text within a single message, multiple layers of dialogue can simultaneously address multiple therapeutic issues and multiple layers of the client's personality.

2. Effects of absent f2f cues

2.1. Lacking f2f cues, text communication can be ambiguous and an easy target for misunderstanding and projection.

2.2. Lacking f2f cues, text communication disinhibits clients, encouraging them to be more open and honest than usual, or encouraging them to act out.

2.3. A client's ambivalence about intimacy may be expressed and can be therapeutically addressed in text communication, which is a paradoxical blend of allowing people to be honest and feel close, while also maintaining their distance.

2.4. People struggling with issues about shame or guilt may be drawn to text-based therapy in which they cannot be "seen."

3. Effects of saved messages

3.1. Saved messages can be accurate data for reviewing the process of the therapy. They provide continuity and the opportunity for assessing and assimilating change.

3.2. Quoted text may be cited as "proof" of something someone previously said, but quoted text can be taken out of context and juxtaposed with other quoted text as a way to distort its meaning.

3.3. Saving text dialogues with a client can help therapists reduce errors in recall, some of which might be due to countertransference distortions.

3.4. Saved text read at different points in time will be interpreted differently based on changes in the client's or therapist's state of mind.

4. Asynchronous communication (e.g., e-mail, message boards)

4.1. The ability to delay responding in e-mail and message boards is useful in enhancing impulse control, self-reflection, and cognitive assimilation.

4.2. A client's issues about boundaries (separation, individuation) may be expressed and therapeutically addressed in asynchronous text communication which provides easy access to the therapist and is not restricted to the limits of a time-specific "session."

4.3. Some clients may experience the opportunity to send e-mail to the therapist as a kind of "holding environment." That contact can help clients with needs for object constancy (even if the therapist does not reply to the e-mail).

4.4. The therapist can use e-mail to be present "in vivo" with the client as a way to monitor and guide the client's attempts to understand and modify their behavior.

5. Synchronous communication (e.g., chat, instant messaging)

5.1. Some clients may benefit from the spontaneity and specific temporal boundary that is involved in chat sessions.

5.2. Chat sessions create a point-by-point connectedness that enhances feelings of intimacy, presence, and "arriving together" at insights.

6. The client's expression of identity

6.1. The client's writing style and message format reflects his/her personality. Changes in style and format reflect changes in mood and thinking.

6.2. Some clients express their "true self" online, or believe they do.

6.3. On the internet, the ability to alter and compartmentalize aspects of one's identity involves dissociation, which can be detrimental or therapeutic.

6.4. The online name/s and identities that people choose for themselves reflects their personality dynamics and is a worthy topic for discussion in psychotherapy.

6.5. Imaginative environments on the internet can be used to do dream work or to therapeutically explore the client's personal fantasies.

6.6. Because the internet is international, the clinician needs to be sensitive to multicultural issues and may need to clarify, from the start, the cultural background of the client.

7. <u>The client's lifestyle in cyberspace</u>

7.1. A client's behavior, identity, and lifestyle in cyberspace (especially romantic relationships) may express hidden psychological issues. Transference reactions in those online relationships may be prominent.

7.2. With the therapist's help, clients can use online relationships and communities as a way to explore their interpersonal style and experiment with and rehearse new behaviors. What is learned online can be carried into offline living.

7.3. Role playing in online communities and relationships - including gender switching - can be a therapeutic way to explore and experiment with identity.

7.4. Online relationships can be used to systematically desensitize social anxieties and build social skills.

7.5. Socially anxious people may especially benefit from talking online with other socially anxious people. Meeting in-person may be an important developmental step for them.

7.6. Clients can express and explore themselves by sharing what they do online. A client's online "space" (especially a personal web site) is an extension of the client's psyche. It is an important therapeutic event when the clinician or client visits the other's online spaces.

7.7. Clients may experience text from their online relationships as actually being "pieces" of those relationships.

7.8. Elements of clients' cyberaffairs (especially fantasy elements) may reveal the problematic aspects of their marriages. Online cyberaffairs may sometimes enhance a marriage.

7.9. Behavior in cyberspace involves a simultaneous acting and observing of one's actions. This may be intrapsychically significant to some clients.

7.10. The therapist should encourage and work with the client's empowering access to online information and transformative experiences.

7.11. Clients may have easy access to numerous online resources and mental health workers. The clinician needs to assess and work effectively with a client's online help-seeking behavior.

7.12. As a way to avoid termination, online relationships and groups may tend to "fizzle out" by people gradually sending fewer and fewer messages.

7.13. Clients with schizoid tendencies may be attracted to the private "worlds" that can be created on the internet.

8. <u>The relationships between in-person and online therapy</u>

8.1. Online therapeutic interventions can be used as a stepping stone to f2f therapy.

8.2. Combining f2f contact with online contact of various types offers the client the ability to therapeutically explore and integrate different cognitive styles and modes of communication. Different channels of communication may work best for different people.

8.3. Online support groups can be a valuable adjunct to psychotherapy.

8.4. Some important aspects of a client may be obvious in-person but almost invisible online.

8.5. Consistently, patiently,and empathically encouraging a client to seek f2f therapy can itself a form of online therapy.

9. <u>Couples and family work</u>

9.1. Some couples or family members may be able to communicate more effectively via e-mail or chat than in-person.

9.2. Using e-mail, a couples therapist can become an in vivo presence and catalyst for change.

9.3. Elements of clients' cyberaffairs (especially fantasy components) may reveal the problematic aspects of their marriages. Online cyberaffairs may sometimes enhance a marriage.

10. <u>Working with online groups</u>

10.1. Online groups devoted to information and support regarding mental health issues benefit from having rules about appropriate behavior, effective tools to enforce the rules (e.g., the ability to block people from joining the group), and a knowledgeable and confident leader who has appropriate technical control over the environment.

10.2. The objectives of the clinician managing an online group and of the business that owns that environment may not always be compatible.

10.3. The cohesion of many online groups is intrinsically weak due to the traditional cybercultural assumption that one can join or leave, respond or not respond, as one wishes. This effect may persist even in small and/or closed support and therapy groups.

10.4. People who "lurk" in a small online group can become a target of projection that might disrupt the group. People not even knowing if the person is consciously present disrupts the boundary of the group and creates distrust.

10.5. In small online groups, non-responding (lurking) tends to snowball. When people don't receive a reply, they tend not to post another message.

10.6. In an online group a person may use "multi-tasking" to carry on several relationships simultaneously - a process that may be dissociative and counterproductive, or integrative and therapeutic.

10.7. People with dissociative tendencies may act out in online groups by assuming different identities - some of them antagonistic, some not. A person may use different identities for the purpose of "splitting" relationships with others.

11. <u>The therapist's issues</u>

11.1. Some clinicians (and clients) are more sensitive in detecting the meaning and mood expressed "between the lines" of text communication. There is a type of empathy unique to online work.

11.2. Because text communication is less efficient than speaking, clinicians may be tempted to move faster by giving advice or "solving problems."

11.3. If clinicians are active in a variety of online groups and sites, clients may have easy access to information about them and may coexist with them in these spaces. Traditional ideas about "therapy boundaries" may need to be reexplored.

11.4. The equalization of status that tends to occur online may result in a decreased perception of clinicians as "authorities." The clinician may be seen more as a consultant who provides information and guidance in the design of a transformative program. "Twinning" relationships between the client and therapist may be important.

Myths and Realities of Online Clinical Work

**Observations on the phenomena of online behavior, experience and therapeutic relationships.
A 3rd-Year Report from ISMHO's Clinical Case Study Group.**

Michael Fenichel PhD, John Suler PhD, Azy Barak PhD, Elizabeth Zelvin CSW, Gill Jones MA,
Kali Munro MEd, Vagdevi Meunier PsyD, Willadene Walker-Schmucker ARNP

Introduction

The phenomena of online experience and therapeutic relationships continue to be a central focus of the Clinical Case Study Group, sponsored by the International Society for Mental Health Online.

Over the past three years, the Case Study Group (CSG) has explored some of the many ways in which online mental health professionals engage in clinical online practice, either as the primary treatment modality or in combination with traditional face-to-face (f2f) office practice.

[See for example the CSG's *Millennium Report* (2000)[1], and *Assessing Suitability for Online Treatment* (2001)[2]]

As practitioners and clients become more comfortable with, and knowledgeable about, online relationships and the many available options for synchronous and asynchronous communication, there has also been a blossoming of "non-traditional" approaches which have, under the microscope of peer group study, been demonstrated to have remarkable "therapeutic" potential in ways that have not been widely recognized or understood.

What do most people believe about the possibility of engaging in the type of online work that we have in fact been doing? We have observed and discussed many new and exciting activities with great therapeutic potential, among us and between us. The Case Study Group (CSG) has provided, through peer support and feedback, a laboratory for expanding our understanding of clinical online phenomena. In detailing some of our experiences we hope to describe how effective our interventions can be in facilitating positive changes through guided online mental health activities.

Through this paper, we hope to illuminate the potential for online clinical work, and to share our evolving understanding of what is truly possible, despite the prevalent myths and realities which shape our thinking about online "therapy" and the nature of Internet-facilitated communication and behavior.

Myths of Internet-Based Counseling

Even among mental health professionals who may be otherwise very like-minded about concepts and principles which guide traditional counseling/psychotherapy approaches, there are some specific areas of concern which continue to be hotly debated with regard to Internet-facilitated mental health services. Clearly there does need to be thoughtful consideration about professional, ethical practice, with particular concern about risk management for particular types of client situations. Our direct experience among a group of diversely trained mental health professionals, all with experience offline as well as online, suggests that there is even more potential than we had imagined for creative and therapeutic uses of Internet-facilitated communication. Moreover, the entire group acknowledges that what we have observed through the case presentations, and shared through a peer-supervision model, has convincingly demonstrated that some things we may not have thought possible clearly are.

At the same time, we have become still more acutely aware of the realities which are well-known in translating f2f therapies into digital versions, and the complexities involved in employing sound therapeutic and ethical judgment when situations arise "between sessions" online.

MYTH #1:
"Online therapy" is impossible, period

"What is therapy? What is therapeutic?" Asking these questions in academic and clinical settings generally leads to debates about the nature of psychotherapy and counseling quite apart from the setting in which treatment takes place.

However we define traditional therapy processes and outcomes, the evidence we have seen regarding therapeutic online relationships suggests that clients have reported self-perception of increased autonomy, improvement in decision-making and interpersonal relationships, and more taking of responsibility for self-help and interpersonal engagement. Other benefits included such additional things as improved online relational skills, within groups and individual e-mails.

Some contend that regardless of the successes which have in fact been experienced and reported, the nature of online work carries too many unique risks to justify beginning it at all. Therefore such work is, or should be, "impossible". Is this a myth, or reality?

Among the most pervasive misconceptions regarding the Internet not being suitable for clinical work is the belief that verifying a client's identity or guaranteeing privacy is completely impossible online. However, that is clearly not the case, given the potential to employ such tools as secure chat rooms, digital signatures, encrypted e-mail, and other safeguards.

It is important to note that personal computers are relatively easy to break into and obtain information saved in them, including sensitive reports on clients. On the other hand, however, this possibility is not greater than breaking into a therapist's office or a locked file cabinet. Responsible online therapists, aware of problems of breaking into computers and the easiness of 'copy & paste,' take special measures to secure information, including the use of access authorization by secret passwords, as well as other advanced technical means.

Informed consent is a basic requirement for mental health researchers and practitioners, both online and f2f. Online practitioners are careful to provide the public with a means of evaluating their own qualifications and describe the limits and risks associated with a given online treatment modality. Some would argue that with such stringent precautions, ranging from sophisticated technological safeguards to using only personal, password-protected computers, in fact the online client may enjoy a level of personal privacy which extends beyond what telephone and even face-to-face treatments in busy office practices can offer.

The issue of establishing identity, positively and absolutely, is one that continues to be intensely discussed and debated. We have seen examples of online services that, like telephone hotlines, provide life-saving services to those who might not have reached out at all were there not a promise of anonymity. At the same time, it is understood that one needs to assess the risk of a client's misrepresentation of identity in any contracted professional relationship. For the online therapist, payment is made via means that ensure it's an adult who is paying, though of course for a session or two (until the adult credit card holder receives the bill) it is possible for a minor to misrepresent him or herself. Not only the provider, by the way, is likely to be concerned about who he or she is addressing. It is extremely important to recognize that the consumer has a legitimate interest in being able to verify the identity and qualifications of the mental health practitioner.

There are in fact several extant ethical codes -- for example those of the NBCC[3] and ISMHO[4] -- that address the need to be cognizant of risks, particularly to the consumer. From the practitioner's perspective, the rarity of examples where intentional deceit is used to procure online mental health services by no means outweighs or negates the potential for providing help to the many adults (or even children and teens, with permission) who might benefit from remote access to a mental health professional. This is likely to become an increasingly important area of interest, as the ubiquitous use of computers, cell phones and PDAs among teens already demonstrates. Their first response in seeking help or information may now be to turn on the computer. Using the Internet is an easy way to find help, advice, or peer support, so why not seek a counselor online rather than f2f?

Several unique advantages exist in online work. Many have been described in the literature already, such as access for the homebound, geographically isolated, or stigmatized client who will not or cannot access treatment locally. One of our case presentations illustrated vividly not only the possibility but also the advantage of Internet-based therapeutic support. A pilot in the military, exploring sexual orientation and afraid of the potential impact of "coming out" and jeopardizing a military career, demonstrated how seeking help online was reassuring to the client in terms of

confidentiality. The absence of geographic boundaries allowed the client to select a therapist who appeared to have the expertise and understanding needed in the client's particular situation.

There are numerous examples of other particular types of clients who benefit from having access to mental health services via the Internet. Hearing disabled people, celebrities, business travelers, people who are shy and introverted, concerned about stigma, or socially phobic, also might find unique advantages to seeking therapeutic activities, self-help materials, and a diversity of mental health professionals, all easily accessible online.

Online clinical work is not only possible, but offers a unique "elasticity of communication" that includes several factors, such as flexibility of location and of time, varying levels of synchronicity, and flexibility to employ various online channels of contact. Online therapy has shattered three of the basic premises of therapeutic interaction, which is that it must always, by definition, be based on:

- visible (f2f) contact
- talking
- synchronous ("real time") interaction

Therapies not based on these foundations cannot rely on old conceptions.

Online therapies, experienced as such, not only can be but are being offered and increasingly accepted and sought after.

MYTH #2:
Online therapy consists almost exclusively of e-mail exchanges

Online clinicians, while they frequently work with e-mail, often use other channels to communicate with their clients -- instant messaging, chat, phone calls, and in some cases occasional face-to-face meetings. For some clients, combining different communication modalities may prove to be a very synergistic strategy. People express themselves differently when communicating with voice, text, and visuals. Unique aspects of identity and self emerge in those different modalities. Moving from one modality to another sometimes proves to be a very important event in the therapy. For these reasons, clinicians may design treatment plans involving combinations of different channels of communication or transitions between different channels.

Although text-based communication currently is the most common method for conducting online psychotherapy, clinicians have begun to experiment with multimedia approaches as well. In addition to using video to simulate an in-person meeting, clinicians may also utilize virtual environments in which the client and therapist create visual representations of themselves ("avatars") in order to interact with each other. In the future, this "avatar psychotherapy" may be very effective in psychotherapies that rely on techniques involving fantasy, imagination, and role-playing.

Some clinicians already employ multimedia virtual reality, and it is possible that components of their interventions may be conducted online. Even simply incorporating pictures, graphics, and video or sound files into the communication between client and therapist can be a very effective addition to text-based therapy. No doubt, the future of online clinical work will entail a variety of creative approaches for mixing and matching text, sound, and visuals.

Among the cases which were presented during the 3rd year of ISMHO's Case Study Group (2001-2002) were some very dramatic and vivid examples of how a therapeutic relationship can span several modalities and/or "channels" of online experience, such as integrating the use of synchronous chat sessions with between-session e-mail and/or using a web-based Message Board to share experiences with others seeking information and support for common problems and concerns. In some cases, utilizing online bulletin boards as well as e-mail, clients were also provided with hypertext links (URLs) to access additional sources of relevant information and support.

There are a number of therapists whose preferred modality is chat, as opposed to e-mail. One such case, presented to the group, demonstrated the potential for establishing an online relationship with such poignancy and immediacy that a review of the case session transcripts was, to our amazement, quite difficult to imagine as having taken place via the Internet rather than face-to-face (or on the couch).

Among the many useful techniques which were demonstrated and validated through our case studies, powerful therapeutic relationships were recognized and clarified, replete with transference and countertransference, deep and immediate emotions expressed by the client, and the possibility of long-term engagement even with an ambivalent client. We often observed how this was facilitated by establishing the benefits of true synchronicity through the chat

medium -- especially with good technology and two fast typists -- and then marveled at the similarity between a text-based transcript and a comparable office session, as well as the expressiveness and depth of text-based communication.

A chat room is an efficient way to use the therapeutic here & now principle online, with a limited number of pre-screened participants, led by a well-trained facilitator working according to pre-established rules.

Internet users whose experience is limited to public, unfacilitated chats tend to think of chat as superficial, elliptical, and limited in structure, authenticity, and emotional intensity. It is as if, having seen classrooms used only for drop-in social groups for teenagers, the observer concluded that serious learning cannot take place in a classroom. Therapeutic chat is a text-based, synchronous therapeutic encounter facilitated by a skilled therapist whose interventions are designed to help the client move toward treatment goals.

The more flexible the use of online media, the more different from face to face communication it becomes, the stronger the case for working online. For example, a hard-of-hearing person may be more expressive typing text in a chat room than speaking with a hearing therapist or using a sign language interpreter. A client who travels frequently and whose schedule is irregular can form a stronger therapeutic relationship with a therapist who can accommodate to a need for unscheduled sessions and week-to-week changes in availability and time zone.

It is important to note that some client-therapist dyads may in fact decide to embrace a more "traditional" approach of scheduling a chat session at a given time, and in a few cases where routine and boundaries may play an important role, this too is an option to use and integrate into the counseling regimen. One should not necessarily interpret a client's preference for lack of structure as "resistance" to treatment; rather, seeking online help may help facilitate the ability to engage in the first place.

In another of our case presentations, a face-to-face weight management group was combined with online support group and message board and included experts in both mental health and nutrition, meeting both online and off. This group demonstrated the value of using online work as a supplement to f2f didactic instruction. Members of this group were invited to use a secure message board to share information about their backgrounds, stress levels, and any "emotional" issues that were affecting their eating behavior. Because they also met f2f each week, the facilitators were able to monitor each member's progress both through their online participation as well as f2f behavior, to learn more about each person's unique struggles (often there was not sufficient time for such detailed personal information to be shared in person), and to provide more customized/personalized attention to each member's needs. Members reported being able to share more openly with each other online than in f2f meetings due to feelings of shame, fear of rejection, and avoidance of intimacy or emotional expression in person (all of which was made easier online). The online components in this group provided a valuable flexibility as well as familiarity with each member that a f2f group alone would have lacked.

Message boards (also referred to as "bulletin boards") can be used as a valuable adjunct to online or f2f therapy. One CSG member had a face-to-face client join the bulletin board that she moderated on her website. This resource helped the client to make the transition from discussing her feelings and problems with only her therapist to discussing them with others (at the board) and later with people in her life. Observing the client in this medium gave the therapist new and valuable information about how her client interacts with people. Issues of transference and counter transference arose in this context and were then addressed in f2f therapy. For example, the client became jealous of the attention her therapist gave to other members, which led to a deeper exploration of those feelings in f2f therapy. The therapist experienced counter transference when she felt hurt by a few angry messages that her client posted about her in the public forum. Because the client's words were posted online, the therapist was able to copy and paste the post verbatim and send to the CSG's e-list to receive collegial feedback and support almost immediately before responding.

The Message Board (MB) has been successfully used in a variety of self-help and support communities, and in other activities ranging from counseling to teaching. One advantage of using MB's when teaching university courses online has been that they provide a point of contact for the students and professors which develops in line with the students' use of "e-mail loops" (group e-mails to which individuals elect to "reply to all"). Such message boards thread the thoughts of the group together and provide a point of reference, while students discuss and develop ideas through the e-mail loops. Another function of the message boards is to house the more permanent thoughts of the group, while students may discuss and develop such thoughts through use of the loops.

A further use for the message board is seen in such practical applications as providing college students with a place for class registration, especially useful when the online group is not housed on a single campus. Message boards can be used for purely informational purposes as well as to foster social interaction. One CSG member offered students an online "Chill Out Room" for jokes, fun contact, informal messages, etc. This was particularly well used as the course

ended and students left each other messages of farewell.

One great advantage of a MB, or forum is the very easy use of embedded pictures and links. It allows members to permanently and easily view all accumulated messages and, very important, to use an internal search engine.

Members of the Case Study Group used threaded e-mail subject heads in a similar manner, during vacation times, to maintain the continuity of contact in a non-stress environment between presentations. The group found this an effective way of maintaining cohesion and contact. In such ways, health and tele-health professionals are integrating ongoing care and peer support into our 21st century lives.

MYTH #3:
Text-only is inadequate to convey a richness of human experience

Why do people continue to argue that words alone cannot convey the breadth of human experience? The whole body of human literature from Homer to hip-hop renders this frequently stated myth absurd. It is widely believed that Shakespeare saw as deeply into the human heart as Freud.

In fact, Sigmund Freud himself treated some patients exclusively through written text, from a distance rather than in person, and he "saw" others on the couch rather than face-to-face. Freud's psychoanalytic technique was designed to foster the very disinhibition which naturally occurs so easily on the Internet.

Why, then, is it so hard to believe that a client cannot be emotionally authentic and a therapist empathic and insightful in text? Our experience as online clinicians, as well as our personal experience with relationships on the Internet, demonstrates that some individuals are more honest, more uninhibited, and more expressive in writing than face-to-face. Certain literary forms, letters and journals in particular, have always been characterized by the skilled practitioner's ability to be just as authentic, as fully oneself, in text as in person. Nor does the writer have to be a literary sophisticate. Within the past 50 years, literally millions of readers have been moved by a candid and artless piece of writing that was not intended to be read by anyone: the diary of Anne Frank.

Humans are curious creatures. When faced with barriers, they find all sorts of creative ways to work around those barriers, especially when those barriers involve communication. Experienced e-mail users have developed a variety of keyboard techniques to overcome some of the limitations of typed text -- techniques that almost lend a vocal and kinesthetic quality to the message. They attempt to make e-mail conversations less like postal letters and more like a face-to-face encounter. Some of these strategies include the use of emoticons, parenthetical expressions that convey body language or "sub vocal" thoughts and feelings (sigh), voice accentuation via the use of CAPS and *asterisks*, and trailers.... to indicate a transition in thought or speech. Use of "smileys" and other commonly used symbols can convey not only facial expression but also a variety of emotional nuances. Color and font can be used both for impact and to separate one writer's words from the other's.

As with all things, practice makes perfect, so people tend to fine-tune and enhance their text expressiveness over time. As a text relationship develops, the partners also become more sensitive to the nuances of each other's typed expressions, and together may develop their own private language and style of communication that contains many rich subtleties not immediately obvious to an outsider.

While the therapeutic relationship may in some ways be made more complex by the absence of some sensory cues, in many ways we are in fact learning to work with the presence of new additional (text-based) data and the power of the word.

Practitioners even among our own small group of clinicians report remarkable responses to many modes and mediums of self-expression, from synchronous chat to sharing of photographs, poetry, and autobiographical web pages. All these become "grist for the mill" in the ongoing therapeutic process. Such activities are easy to share and to facilitate as the home computer is increasingly integrated into our every day lives. Supplemental materials, which may also include logs, diaries, works of art, memorials, and self-help/support group communities, may provide cumulatively more of an all-encompassing therapeutic experience than heretofore imagined in the non -"text-only" therapy session.

MYTH#4:
Suicide prevention and crisis intervention are impossible online

Assessment of risk and initiation of appropriate suicide intervention is an area which many mental health professionals do not believe can (or should) be addressed via the Internet. Some conclude it is impossible to do by virtue of not being able to see a client face-to-face, in order to take advantage of visual and other cues in assessing the client's state of mind. No doubt there were similar critics when telephone hot lines were established, which today we consider a necessary part of the crisis intervention continuum of services especially with teens, runaways, domestic violence, rape, and other human tragedies. The reality is that online counseling and support for suicidal people and those in crisis can be very effective. A groundbreaking program in Israel, for example, has been so successful that many lives have been saved. It is now impossible to conclude that such work is "impossible".

MYTH: Through Internet-based professional interaction, counselors cannot actually observe clients; hence their impressions are limited to verbal messages. Therefore, risk assessment is highly restricted and apparently invalid. Moreover, because of easy escape and remote communication, online clients in a dangerous condition, who may need immediate or emergency care, cannot be followed, detained, hospitalized, or treated.

REALITY: Online counseling and support for suicidal people and those in crisis can be very effective.

Despite the lack of visibility and consequent nonverbal communication cues, people in severe emotional distress can effectively be approached and emotionally touched through synchronous online communication devices. Also, many people in crisis situations tend to share their experiences and feelings with anonymous, unseen partners on the Net, as personal inhibitions diminish. Therefore, a professional crisis intervention service, managed by specifically trained personnel, can be of much help, as surfers in crisis and distress are drawn to such virtual places, frequently eager to share their painful experiences. Moreover, as suicidal notes are being posted in public online environments -- such as personal websites, blogs, message boards (forums), and chat rooms -- it becomes easier to identify and approach individuals in crisis.

There are quite a few websites that pertain to suicide prevention and include valuable information and self-help resources that might be of help to people who contemplate suicide. Surfers in distress may use these sites directly and independent of human mediation. This exposure to available resources may be an incentive for seeking further help.

The Internet can be used in conjunction with face-to-face counseling or telephone hotlines in a number of ways, from referring people to relevant online readings to providing the opportunity of writing and sharing their difficulties through emails, to engaging in an online virtual community constructed and aimed to help people in a similar emotional condition (an online support group). The Samaritans organization in the United Kingdom, for example, (http://www.samaritans.co.uk) offers nonstop hotline service for suicidal people, in conjunction with email service. In the year 2000, over 37,000 emails were received and replied as a part of The Samaritans' emotional support system.

The Internet can be used specifically to offer support for people in crisis and those who consider suicide, through direct, synchronous communication as well as closely watched asynchronous communication devices. Internet chat and instant messaging (IM) are similar to telephone hotlines in that they enable direct and immediate communication between people. Unlike the telephone, they provide enhanced anonymity, opportunity for self-expression through writing, increased ambiguity of counselors, ease of escape, and enhanced aloneness, thus facilitating depth of self-disclosure and exposure of personal materials, as well as accelerating the speed of opening up. That is, the disadvantages of invisibility become advantages, especially in extreme and emergency situations, where time and depth of confession are essential.

Especially trained counselors or paraprofessional helpers may offer emotional support online, much as they can do so offline. Nonetheless, the online environment has the special advantage of integrating several methods of communication (individual or group, synchronous or asynchronous), together with effective use of relevant reading materials, as well as convenient referrals to help resources by hyperlinks or classified list posted on a website. Unlike the client seen f2f or on a telephone hotline, a person in crisis or severe emotional distress who contacts an online crisis center may consequently be approached with an offer of a "tailor-made support suit" that provides a perfect fit, optimally meeting his/her personal desires, needs, and capabilities.

The use of online support groups is known to have significant impact on people in various types of distress, including medical diseases, depression, relationship problems, or other kinds of personal difficulties. As such, online support groups -- easy to approach, with no threat of identity exposure -- are efficient means of crisis intervention and prevention of suicide. In combination of these measures, SAHAR, the Israeli online crisis service

(http://www.sahar.org.il), has proven that suicide can effectively be prevented and people in crisis and severe distress be helped through entirely online activity. In its 15 months of operation, SAHAR has provided online support to thousands of Israelis, and helped in preventing the suicide death of many of them, sometimes in last-moment detection of people who delivered farewell notices.

Not only has SAHAR thus proven the value of such a program for the suicidal client with web access, but also an additional benefit has developed, in that Israelis who reside abroad contact SAHAR regularly for personal support. Internet-based support is borderless, and asynchronicity allows convenient interaction from a distance.

MYTH #5:
Effective online counseling for serious disorders is not possible

Aside from concerns about safety, confidentiality, and other aspects that are well-known in f2f clinical practice, accurately understanding and responding to a client's communication becomes more problematic when a significant psychopathology emerges during the treatment. In working with severe personality disorders, for example -- where clients may demonstrate lapses in impulse control and judgment, and when it becomes difficult to maintain therapeutic boundaries -- it is sometimes felt that the challenges of managing the course of treatment online are so overwhelming as to preclude such treatment.

Ongoing clinical experience online reveals many instances in which avoiding the addressing of serious issues is unnecessary at best, and at worst an ethical failure to act in the client's best interests. Depressed clients may lack the determination to make and keep a face-to-face appointment with a clinical professional, yet seize a moment of willingness to reach out by clicking for online help. Initial assessment may reveal either that the client is completely unwilling to seek help within his or her community or that none is available. With appropriate safeguards, such as contracting for a crisis plan and affirming the client's commitment to seeking local medication evaluation and management, the online therapist may provide essential support.

Addictions, as another example, seldom appear as the initial presenting problem online, but the experienced addictions professional may pick up cues in the course of ongoing work that the mental health generalist might miss, such as recurrent mention of heavy drinking or partying associated with adverse consequences, the client's embarrassment about something he or she said, or a regretted sexual encounter. It then becomes the therapist's obligation to reflect these connections over time and, perhaps without actual confrontation, provide some substance abuse education, until the client becomes ready to acknowledge and address the problem.

There were several occasions during our case presentations when it was suspected that further (f2f) assessment might be beneficial, or that motivation to change and persevere through emotionally demanding situations was inadequate to justify continuing treatment online. Once again, however, with patience and consistency, along with limit-setting and some strategies offered by the peer supervision group, it was demonstrated to our satisfaction that some types of clients, who might well be difficult to treat f2f, in fact did respond well to online work, demonstrating some increased insight into self-defeating behaviors and using the "disinhibition" of online work to share painful and intimate experiences which might not have been possible to address so immediately or quickly in traditional office practice.

An advantage of online work with severely disturbed clients is that clients can choose to use emails, chat scripts, and other online exchanges (that can be saved) to rehearse, review, and reinforce therapeutic messages in a way that can be grounding, affirming, and increase reality testing. Also, the therapist's empathic words can function as a transitional object that can be internalized over time at the client's pace. Additionally, having access to an International group of online colleagues has proven very useful in making rapid, appropriate referrals, sometimes in single-session correspondence or very short-term consultation.

MYTH #6:
Geography doesn't matter when providing mental health services online

To be sure, there are practical considerations which impact on a counselor's ability or willingness to provide synchronous communication across time zones. In some geographic locations, notably the United States, there may be legal restrictions on mental health treatment offered by licensed professionals whose license is limited to practice in the therapist's particular state. Some states have a regulatory policy which suggests that cyberspace is not a geographic location and insists that counselors will be construed to be practicing professionally in the state where the services are received. For the licensed U.S. practitioner who is worried about the risk entailed, whether tangible or not, or for whom

insurance will not cover Internet-based interventions or liability outside the state, geography may be a clear and real factor to consider.

While some practitioners may be deterred from crossing state lines for legal reasons, others may be reluctant to engage clients from other regions due to the concern about lack of adequate experience within a given culture, or where there is a language barrier. It must be acknowledged that geography is a relevant consideration in such endeavors as providing professional therapy services, and this consideration is part of most ethical guidelines for mental health professionals, which require that clinicians practice only within their bounds of competency and experience. Working with someone from a completely different culture, time zone, and social system can clearly be problematic, and this is something to consider before concluding that "anyone can practice world wide" in any circumstance.

On the other hand, long-distance, cross-cultural training and practice are being conducted and some very exciting opportunities are emerging due to our ability to shift time and still be able to focus effectively and respond to another person as if in a shared "here and now". The Internet clearly presents entire major new opportunities that are proving to have great potential in ways never before thought possible.

Asynchronous e-mailing is a rich, culturally diverse, time-unlimited method of communication. It allows all its participants to contribute in their own time (the previous text is there for reference) and from their own cultural-geographical- time-zone perspective.

While there are obvious barriers to communication in synchronous "real-time" between two people in discrepant time zones, it was our experience that with some effort and acclimation, one can effectively use asynchronous communication to participate in ongoing discussion in a meaningful way. Where a method of shared experience can be maintained, there are distinct benefits not only with clients but also in participating meaningfully in "asynchronously live" professional and educational dialogues across time and space.

The issue of time-zone differences was made quite real to CSG members personally, as participants included mental health professionals from 4 countries, in 5 time zones. Often those 3 or more hours away from the majority (located in the US) were either experienced as being delayed in response by several hours, or leading a topic far in advance, while others were asleep or at work away from the computer, and vice versa. Here is the experience of a group member in the U.K.:

> Working in a different time zone requires its own skills. At first I felt I was left out of discussions because they all seemed to be happening at a time when I wasn't online - most of the discussions were taking place between 1:00 and 5.00 a.m. UK time. However, I re-read the notes about contributing to discussion threads and decided that my own contributions (whether they repeated what had already been said or not) were of value to the group since they could confirm what was being said, and also offered a culturally and geographically different perspective. Once it was my turn to present a case, the time zone issue changed completely as I found I was generating the discussion threads and therefore at the head of the trail rather than the back.

In this case, once the participants acclimated to the characteristics of the time-based realities, communication across time and geographic distance became less of an obstacle, and more of an enriching experience for the entire group. The implication for such larger endeavors as improving communication and understanding between peoples of different cultures and nationalities is profound.

MYTH #7:
Online clinical work always involves one counselor or therapist working with individuals and groups

Traditional models of psychotherapy -- especially individual psychotherapy -- usually place the clinician at the center of the therapeutic process. The clinician administers a treatment or plays a crucial role in creating and facilitating a transformative experience. So too in many cases of online therapy. However, in other cases the professional may serve more like a consultant who helps a client design and navigate through a therapeutic activity or collection of activities.

In cyberspace there are a wide variety of mental health resources, including support groups, informational websites, assessment and psychotherapeutic software, and comprehensive self-help programs -- not to mention the potentially therapeutic nature of online relationships and communities as social microcosms. In the role of consultant, the professional might help a client design a program of readings, activities, and social experiences that addresses his or her

needs. Rather than being the "therapist" who directly controls the transformative process, the professional instead helps launch the client into this program, offers advice when needed, and perhaps assists the client in evaluating and assimilating the experience.

Group work is also emerging as a potent online activity for both education and therapeutic growth. Co-leaders may participate f2f, online, or both, such as in the case presentation of a face-to-face weight management group that also had an online component. In this case each therapist was able to provide "group as a whole" interventions as well as individual attention to each member. Members in turn had the benefit of simultaneously interacting with three professionals with different but complementary specialties. This experience provided a unique opportunity to integrate group and individual work, online and off, through the collaboration of allied health and mental health professionals.

Even a short-term intervention or one-time request for help can involve the sharing of information between colleagues. In one case presentation, the client was writing -- from another country -- for "advice" about some serious problems. The recipient of the call for help was unfamiliar with that country's health care system and was also concerned about the presenting symptoms. As this client was requesting one-shot advice and gave permission to consult colleagues, the practitioner was able to provide a brief consultation (pro bono) which included knowledgeable referral information from a colleague in that country and also some excellent suggestions which were generated through the almost-synchronous discussion on the CSG list-serv, day in and day out.

In this case, the client was able to access a multi-disciplinary, multi-national consultation from the comfort and perceived safety of her home, and was directed to appropriate local services that she could effectively utilize.

MYTH #8:
Online principles are the same as offline principles

Clearly, "people are people", whether talking f2f, on the telephone, or via the Internet. Clients seeking help online, however, are faced with a computer monitor rather than a receptionist, and do not have the benefit of immediately seeing all the diplomas and licenses on the wall, nor experiencing through their own eyes a therapist's warmth or smile or sense of humor. Nor can they necessarily experience beforehand a counselor's typing speed or style, nor anticipate e-mail frequency or response speed. The first task for a potential client may be to determine if the therapist is able and willing to address their individual need, but then it is important for the therapist to provide a basis for making a decision about compatibility, or "fit", and the potential to work together in a therapeutic alliance. Many people are now turning to clinicians they can find online, with the expectation of a therapist who is knowledgeable and well experienced with the unique nature of online work.

As mentioned earlier, online clinical work can entail a variety of creative approaches for mixing and matching text, sound, and visuals. In fact, such work offers us the opportunity to examine more carefully the elemental components of face-to-face therapy that often are taken for granted. It allows us to alter those features. Does the relationship exist in real time or in an asynchronous frame? If it is asynchronous, what are the effects of varying the delay between exchanges? Does the relationship or experience involve communication via text, or are visual images exchanged, or combinations of the two? Does the relationship or experience involve auditory stimulation? If so, what types? Voice? Other sounds? Does the therapeutic relationship or experience rely on real identities and real environments, or imaginary ones? How strong is the presence of the clinician in the therapeutic experience? Might the therapist in some respects be invisible? Might the client in some respects be invisible?

The online therapist needs to develop not only skills but also sensitivities. Aside from the well-known challenges and adaptations relating to text-only communication, it must be recognized that even within the same language (e.g., English) there are differences in meaning and nuance across countries and cultures. Also consistent with general concern for accurate communication is accurate understanding of one's client's general circumstances. For example, the spelling of a name may lead to a false assumption about gender. This actually happened within the group, leading to a misunderstanding that lasted for months. Again, it becomes important for online practitioners to be careful in making conclusions about names, idiomatic expressions, and so forth when working across oceans, cultures, and languages.

As with more traditional f2f therapies, online work calls for a relevant set of principles -- a *theory of cybertherapy* -- that guides us in understanding when, how, and for whom these various possibilities are therapeutic. Online clinicians search for principles that will inform us about what combinations of text, sight, sound, and virtual presence are therapeutic for which people. We are in the process of developing a theory that helps us analyze the potentially curative ingredients of different communication environments or communication pathways and for deciding what environments or pathways are therapeutic for which clients.

Online practitioners need to understand the immediate environment and experience of the client, at the time they are writing, to have an accurate perception of the "tone" and circumstances at that time. Therapists need to understand and master some characteristics of online work. For example:

Working online at your own computer means you will be working in a more isolated setting than you might face-to-face. Preparation for such work will help you to avoid some of the pitfalls and dips in confidence you could otherwise experience and will be beneficial for those clients whom you plan to work with online.

There is no doubt that therapists who use the Net to provide therapy should get specific training in several aspects, including technology, theory, applications, and ethics. Internet based mental health services should be seen as a new and emerging form of treatment in which case each practitioner is ethically bound to seek out and participate in appropriate training and ongoing supervision in order to develop and maintain their competency.

The online mental health practitioner needs to develop skills that derive from training and experience in a professional discipline such as psychology, psychiatry, or clinical social work. The clinician must also learn effective techniques for using text to work synchronously and asynchronously with individuals and groups. In addition, experience in working with particular issues, groups, or types of disorders must be readily harnessed in ways which make the therapist's services most accessible and beneficial to the client.

Keeping in mind the unique nature of online clinical work, it appears that there are now new opportunities for clients to seek, and increasingly find, someone well acquainted with their particular area of concern. One can now find online any number of therapists who work in both cyberspace and f2f practice with particular populations and who can now share their expertise as specialists with others -- clients, students, and colleagues -- via the Internet. In fact, whole new possibilities for safe and knowledgeable support and treatment now exist. Some populations, for example, lesbians and gay men, sexual and ritual abuse survivors, and people with problems related to sexuality or sex may be more likely to ask for and be able to access therapy when it is available on the Internet.

These populations can have a number of issues in common that may be more readily addressed online, at least in the initial stages of therapy. For example, people who are struggling with issues of isolation, secrecy, disclosure, hyper-vigilance, shame, vulnerability, sexuality, and intimacy may be more comfortable making contact and engaging with a therapist online. (An article addressing these themes faced by sexual abuse survivors and lesbians and gay men is available at: http://www.atlantapsychotherapy.com/articles/struve4.htm.) For individuals whose issues of shame, fear, and secrecy are significant, the anonymity and privacy of therapy online make it easier and therefore more likely that they will access therapy. People who are afraid of being judged, or who worry that there is something terribly wrong with them -- something many lesbians, gay men and survivors feel -- find online therapy way less threatening. Frequently, clients who need to talk about a problem related to sex feel uncomfortable meeting in person, but are comfortable discussing the topic with a therapist online.

Many sexual abuse survivors report that they feel too frightened to see a therapist in person, at least in the initial stages of their healing. It is much less frightening for many such people to receive therapy online from the safety of their own home.

If a gay person has a high level of concern about confidentiality, receiving therapy online may be more confidential than walking into a therapy office where they can bump into acquaintances they know, or could be identified as gay simply by seeing a therapist who specializes in working with gay clients. Many lesbians, gay men, and child sexual and ritual abuse survivors find that there are no therapists in their area who understand their unique needs, or if there are, they are not accepting any more clients. For them, particularly those who live in rural areas or small cities, accessing therapy online may be a lifesaver.

MYTH #9:
Online training and peer supervision are ineffective

Offerings for formalized training are now beginning to appear in university settings across the globe. For example, training for counselors to work online is enthusiastically offered in the UK. There are several courses offering training in Internet skills as well as online counseling skills. Online counseling is also being offered as a module in many face to face training courses, in the U.K. as well as in the U.S. and elsewhere, while counseling via the Internet is an increasingly popular research topic for graduate students.

In one online training module, students initially collaborate in supporting each other while they get used to the variable reliability and performance of Internet and computer technology. They compile lists of useful websites, along with tips and tricks for dealing with their computer/ISP/Internet connection, and compare experiences and notes on what works/doesn't work when troubleshooting. This need to come to terms with an unreliable technology strengthens the closed group which has formed for the duration of the course. The impact of such group strength can also extend to the role-plays they engage in and some students comment on the powerful opportunity they have had for personal growth as a result.

Another interactive training program presented in the Case Study Group incorporates students working across modalities, creating an online web project and utilizing a variety of online resources in a guided "quest" of self-exploring a psychosocial topic.

Increasingly, not only in the training of mental health professionals but in higher education generally, use of forums, "whiteboards", bulletin boards, and so forth is proving to be a useful and motivational supplement to conventional classroom lectures. As noted above, it can also improve social cohesion among students, as in the case of the "Chill Out Room". Another professor has reported equally good results through the similar strategy of offering students a forum described as "the cafeteria" which has stimulated positive social interaction.

Such work with students, using online groups and multi-modal resources, only hints at the great potential of these resources for various populations of clients and colleagues in the fields of mental health. There is clearly vast potential and immediate need for bringing online training, education, and supervision opportunities into line, and up to speed. In some circumstances such as that of rural practitioners, therapists with physical disabilities, and perhaps therapists who would like to be supervised by a specialist in another country, online supervision and training may offer the most viable and ideal form of learning for the therapist in training.

The work of the CSG itself is a testament to the power of peer support and supervision. It dramatically illustrates the power of such an endeavor to stimulate a steep learning curve and promote enhancement of technical skills, cross-cultural awareness, and familiarity with the many new issues that have arisen in ethical and professional practice. Rapid sharing of references and resources through hyperlinks and instant access to peers has also been of great value for the members of this group.

In terms of advanced clinical training, the value of online peer group supervision has proven itself to be tremendous. One long-term client was working with the therapist exclusively via chat and presented to the Case Study Group over a 2-week period, as the case continued "live". Another case was presented where there was a very serious call for help via e-mail, and the group shared online resources, suggestions, support, and personal experience with various treatment providers local to the client.

It might be noted that during these case presentations, there was almost always one or another colleague present, online, for consultation or assistance with any urgent situation. This turned out to be tremendously helpful in a number of cases. Several effective, rapid, and knowledgeable interventions would not have been possible were it not for the opportunity to utilize both synchronous and asynchronous communication channels, to consult with respected peers, around the clock, and in some cases around the planet.

MYTH #10:
Any clinician experienced in ftf work can do online work

Anyone who has been practicing in an office and dreaming of "doing the easy thing" and working online, will soon find new meaning in the understanding of "the therapeutic relationship". Even if the therapist is a quick typist and wonderful online technician, perhaps the client is not. Or conversely, we have seen examples of clients using font color, emoticons, and abbreviations suggesting more natural ease with the medium than many counselors who offer services but may be newly appearing online. Aside from one's own skills, and the client's, in order to have a "transparent", natural relationship, which allows for communication, understanding and empathy, there must be a good "match" between client and clinician, and an ability and willingness among each to employ the various online modalities and channels that are available.

It is clearly a myth, or perhaps a wish, that "doing online therapy" is easy and uncomplicated. There are definitely some very enjoyable benefits, along with some areas for concern:

Working online from your own home has numerous advantages:

- You can walk the dog more or less when you need to
- You can wear whatever you are comfortable in
- You can stop and make a cup of coffee when you want to
- You can switch off and do something else if you wish

However, online practice can be even more isolating than working face to face (particularly if the latter is conducted in a practice setting where you are part of a team). Therefore being comfortable with certain practical skills is important, if the therapist is to avoid tears of technological frustration.

Working online requires a love of, and respect for, language and words. It is useless to embark on text-only therapy if the therapist struggles to find the right word to express him or herself or relies on the computer's thesaurus when writing a letter. When you work in text only, words are your only therapeutic tools and must be chosen and used with skill. Time also has a different meaning online: the immediacy of the communication system encourages instant response, and even asynchronous e-mails can fly back and forth in what becomes almost a conversation. It may be important for the client and/or therapist to take sufficient time to process what is happening before making another contact. Drawing attention to this requires special tact and diplomacy to avoid appearing "hostile" or "punitive" to the client. The impact of words used alone may be more powerful than in f2f communication. The online therapist may need to choose words that are warmer, more sensitive, more caring than might be necessary face-to-face.

It can be lonely at the computer. The client may trigger the therapist's own feelings about loneliness and it may sometimes become difficult to retain a professional distance. At these times, the therapist's confidence in his or her ability to work online will be put to the test and it will be important to have access to others who can be trusted with these doubts. Supervision of online work either in a peer group or with a supervisor would seem to be one way of addressing these issues. If supervision is available online, the therapist can take advantage of the Internet to seek support and guidance when needed, via e-mail to the supervisor or group, and not have to wait for a scheduled supervision session.

Some of the skills employed by online practitioners are subtle, while others are quite basic. Some examples follow:

Required therapist skills for effective online communication

Practical skills

- Fast or touch-typing
- Comfort with Internet modalities and software programs (e.g.,IM, chat, email, downloading the latest browser)
- Curiosity and courage to investigate and alter parts of your computer you might not normally bother with (e.g. adjusting the configuration, adding hardware, etc.).
- Comfort responding swiftly when necessary (or tolerating delays between messages)
- Ability to accumulate, store, and use appropriate web links
- Ability to receive, store, and protect communications from clients
- Knowledge of encryption and other privacy technology
- Expressive writing, facility with both language and other available visual cues
- Training/expertise as mental health professional, with a theoretical base to draw upon

Emotional skills

- Comfort describing own and others' feelings in text
- Comfort in a text-only environment
- Ability to make effective therapeutic interventions using only text
- Awareness of how client perceives therapist online
- Skill at clarifying accuracy of online communication
- Love of being online
- Experience with online relationships (synchronous and non-synchronous)

- Flexibility in approach and conceptualization of therapeutic relationships (e.g., believing it's possible to form therapeutic relationships without visual cues or employing traditional psychodynamic, frameworks, concepts, and techniques)
- Confidence with technology and role as online authority
- Tolerance for computer glitches
- Ability to move between modalities (virtual and f2f) in response to client need and circumstances
- Ability to handle acting-out behavior and intensity of emotion as expressed in client messages (ranging from frustration and anxiety to client projections, anger, boundary and abandonment issues, etc.)

Required client characteristics

- Comfort online
- Ability to contract and maintain a shared working relationship online
- Ability to clarify miscommunications, in both directions
- Motivated
- At least moderately fast typist (or has voice technology)
- Reasonably expressive writer, adequate reading/comprehension skills
- Credit card, willing to use it online

Research suggests that working online is only suitable for experienced face-to-face therapists. However, that may well change in the next year or two as using the Internet and working online becomes more widespread. As Internet usage grows, newly trained therapists will want to develop an online practice (perhaps with little or no face to face experience) and will want to concentrate on the skills of working online during their training. It is therefore very important that attention is paid to best practice for training therapists in this new medium.

As we move further into new possibilities for online clinical work, training will become not only more necessary, but also more complex. Clinicians will train to specialize in different types of text-based, multimedia, and virtual reality interventions. Even relatively experienced online clinicians cannot rely solely on our own efforts in designing these new computer-mediated approaches. We need to consult with experts in cognitive psychology, communications, human factors engineering, and Internet technology. In fact, somewhere in the not too distant future, the most effective model of a cybertherapy program might involve an interdisciplinary team that helps decide what psychotherapy theory, with which clinician, in what communication environment, would work best for a particular client. Might the treatment for that client involve a package of several types of online interventions and experiences, with the package designed and conducted by the interdisciplinary team? Members of such interdisciplinary teams are going to be working with each other via the Internet, e-mail, message boards, chat, and most likely person-to-person systems. The therapeutic environments they construct for their clients will be part of that network.

All of these possibilities, many of which already are a becoming reality, mean that a face-to-face clinician cannot simply step into cyberspace and immediately open a practice-not, at least, if that clinician expects to be as effective as possible. Newcomers will need to educate themselves about the complex techniques of online clinical work, as well as about the culture and resources of the online mental health profession.

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Assessing a Person's Suitability for Online Psychotherapy

In the months before the turn of the millennium, the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) established its Clinical Case Study Group. Created and facilitated by John Suler and Michael Fenichel, this online research and training group is devoted to the discussion of psychotherapy cases and professional clinical encounters that involve the Internet. The creation of the group evolved out of the need for more in-depth explorations of clinical cases in which online life and interventions play an important role. The group's philosophy is that clinical work involving cyberspace sometimes will resemble traditional in-person psychotherapy, but also that the Internet has resulted in some very new clinical issues and a fascinating variety of unique intervention formats.

In its second year, the group discussed the various factors that might determine a person's suitability for online therapy. Because the group was not aware of any comprehensive set of guidelines for determining such suitability, it decided to create them. Although these guidelines are designed mostly with text-based therapy in mind (e-mail, chat), many of them apply also to other online methods of communication (e.g., internet telephoning, video conferencing). "Suitability" refers to a variety of factors, including the person's preferences regarding online therapy, how suggestible the person is within a particular communication modality, his or her skills in communicating within that modality, and the potentially therapeutic aspects of that modality for the person. Because there are many possible formats for online clinical work, as well as many different theories of psychotherapy, these guidelines are not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. Hopefully, clinicians will adapt these ideas to the unique aspects of each of their online psychotherapy cases.

While conducting the assessment, the clinician needs to keep in mind the ethical issues regarding online therapy, such as those described in the suggested principles of the International Society for Mental Health Online. As these suggested principles indicate, it's important to inform clients about issues regarding privacy, the potential benefits and risks of online therapy, and possible safeguards. The client's ability to understand this information and his/her attitudes regarding these issues could be important determinants of the client's ability to benefit from online therapy.

1. What communication methods are adequate or preferable for assessing the client?

The clinician has a variety of communication methods for conducting the initial assessment of the client: in-person, video-conferencing, phone, email, and instant messaging or chat. Clients may have a preference for this initial contact, which may in itself be of diagnostic significance. Clients interested in online therapy may prefer a text-only setting for this first contact. They may feel more comfortable in that setting, be more able to express themselves, or wish to maintain some anonymity. Clients' preferences need to be considered along with the potential advantages of conducting the assessment using different communication methods. Combining different methods during the assessment process will yield more comprehensive and qualitatively different information about the client's personality and behaviors. Face-to-face and/or phone interviews should be encouraged during the assessment phase, although these methods may not be absolutely necessary in every case. Assessment within the preferred medium may be sufficient if communication within that medium is accurate and efficient.

Assessing the client with the communication method that will be the medium for therapy is important. However, the clinician should consider the possibility that the client may benefit from therapeutic work in communication environments that are NOT his or her stated preference. It also is possible that the person may benefit from therapy that includes more than one environment (face-to-face, phone, email, chat, etc) - which means that the treatment will involve more complex variables regarding contact time and format than traditional in-person therapy. The client's preferences, skills, and attitudes regarding work within multiple environments will be important factors to consider.

2. How might the person's computer skills, platform, and internet access affect the therapy?

The ability to benefit from online therapy will be partly determined by the client's computer skills and knowledge, especially if the communication setting involves installing and learning new software and/or hardware. If the person seems to communicating efficiently and accurately within the setting of choice, no further assessment of the person's skills may be necessary. If therapy will move to another setting, it is important to assess the extent to which an online

client is able to effectively use the computer hardware and software at his/her disposal to communicate in a manner which feels natural and allows for nuance in describing and expressing oneself. Part of the assessment process might involve a trial stage in which the therapist and client test out the communication pathway between them, without yet having established a commitment to the therapy. Some questions to consider include the following:

-- Does the person demonstrate adequate knowledge of his/her computer system and internet technology?

-- Is the person motivated and capable to experiment with new communication environments and techniques?

-- Is the person's computer system compatible with that of the clinician?

-- What kind of internet access does the person have?

-- Where is the client accessing the internet (home, work) and does this present any problems regarding privacy or any technological difficulties (e.g., firewalls that limit internet activities)

-- If the client's internet access is problematic, are there viable alternatives (e.g., a web-based e-mail account)

3. How knowledgeable is the person about online communication and relationships?

The ability to benefit from online therapy will be partly determined by the person's familiarity with the technique and psychological aspects of online communication. First-hand participation is valuable, as well as the person having read about the internet and talked to others about it.

-- What is the person's lifestyle in cyberspace?

-- What experience does the person have with communicating online?

-- If the person has online relationships or belongs to online groups, what have these social activities been like?

-- In what settings did these relationships develop and for how long?

-- What other activities does the person pursue online, and what is his/her attitude about life in cyberspace?

4. How well is the person suited for the reading and writing involved in text communication?

If the therapist will be working with the client via typed text, assessing the clients experience with reading and writing is important. A person's reading and writing skills may not be equivalent, but both are necessary for text-based therapy. Some people may prefer reading over writing, or vice versa, which could have a significant impact on text-based communication. Assess the person's motor and cognitive skills for reading and writing, as well as the person's psychological experience of these activities. What does reading and writing mean to the person? What needs do these activities fulfill? It may be helpful to discuss how the person's attitudes and skills regarding in-person communication compare to those regarding text communication. When assessing the person's suitability for text communication, it's important to remember that developing and enhancing the person's reading and writing skills may be intrinsic to the therapeutic process.

Because chat/IM is a different experience than e-mail, it's important to determine the client's skills and preferences regarding these synchronous versus asynchronous methods of communication, as well the person's potential to benefit from these different methods. It may be informative to ask the client to complete a writing exercise that is relevant to the type of online therapy being offered (e.g., a summary of the history of one's life, a description of a scene related to the presenting complaint, an essay about one's personality or family members, an objective description of a specific problematic behavior).

Some questions to consider during the assessment stage include the following:

-- Does the person like reading and writing?

-- What kinds of experiences has the person had with reading and writing?

-- What do reading and writing mean to the person?

-- Are there any known physical or cognitive problems that will limit the ability to read and write?

-- How well can the person type?

-- Does the person enjoy in-person and phone conversations. Why?

-- How does the person feel about the spontaneous, in-the-moment communication of chat/IM as opposed to the opportunity to compose, edit, and reflect, as in e-mail?

-- Might there be therapeutic benefits of using chat, e-mail, or some other method of text communication even though the person may not prefer that particular method?

5. How might previous and concurrent mental health treatment affect online therapy?

If the person has been in therapy before, this will have created some impressions and expectations of what therapy is like. It is important to assess how these impressions and expectations are influencing the person's attitudes about online therapy, especially if the communication method will be different than that used in the previous therapy. Inquire about what type of therapy it was, the therapist's style of intervention, the duration of the therapy, the goals and outcome. Compare these factors to what will be offered in the online therapy. If the person currently is involved in other online or in-person mental health treatments, how will this influence the therapy?

6. How might personality type, presenting complaint, and diagnosis influence the person's suitability for online therapy?

This is a complex topic that deserves more clinical research. A separate set of guidelines could be devoted to it. One basic issue is the level of care a person may require. People who need full or partial hospitalization with close observation and supervision may not be appropriate for online therapy. The level of care a person requires also may change over time, thereby requiring that the clinician assess the person's history of level of functioning, and then periodically reassess the client during the therapy. As a rule of thumb, severe pathology and risky behaviors - such as lethally suicidal conditions - may not be appropriate for online work. Tendencies towards poor reality testing and strong transference reactions may become exacerbated in text communication, thereby making them difficult to manage and potentially destructive to the treatment. People with borderline personality disorders often challenge the boundaries of therapy, which can be especially problematic in e-mail communication and when combining different methods of communication. The clinician may need to set very clear rules about when, where, and how therapy takes place. The structure offered by online therapy may attract people who experience problems with impulsivity, internal emptiness, splitting, and aggression which otherwise get acted out in the comparatively unstructured social world of cyberspace. More clinical research is needed to determine what types of significant pathologies might be treated online, and how.

Assessing personality disorders and types (antisocial, narcissistic, schizoid, avoidant, paranoid, depressive, manic, masochistic, obsessive-compulsive, histrionic, dissociative) may lead to valuable information about how these people react to various forms of online therapy. Will avoidant and schizoid people fare well in the potentially anonymous environment of text conversation? Will the projective mechanisms of paranoid people be overly exaggerated in text communication? Can people with dissociative tendencies benefit from work across communication settings - or by participating in online groups - or will such work amplify those tendencies by encouraging fragmentation into different online persona? More clinical research is needed to answer these questions and refine the assessment process.

Diagnostic testing can be valuable in assessing the psychopathological factors that might influence the efficacy of online treatment. If it's not possible to arrange in-person testing, online tests could be an easy-to-access supplement to the assessment interview. Hopefully, in the near future, professionally managed web sites will become available that offer diagnostic tests as an aid for online therapists. When using online tests, consider such factors as accessibility, affordability, user-friendliness, security of test results, compliance with ethical principles, reliability, and validity.

Of course, many assessment principles that apply to therapy in-person also apply to online therapy, but will not be reiterated here. In addition, the type of online therapy being offered (psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioral, humanistic, etc.) will determine the types of questions raised during the assessment stage. Whether a person might benefit from a

particular style of therapy will be partly determined by how that style of therapy operates in an online environment.

7. How might physical and medical factors affect online therapy?

Does the person have any visual, auditory, speech, or motor disabilities, or any chronic medical condition? Is the person on medications? If so, how might these disabilities and medications affect the person's motivation for and ability to utilize online therapy? Some people are drawn to text communication, where there is no face-to-face contact, because they prefer to hide their physical appearance. Does the person present any signs that possibly indicate a medical condition that needs to be assessed in-person by a physician? Although text communication can be effective in assessing some psychiatric symptoms, other symptoms rely heavily on face-to-face cues (e.g. flat affect, motor retardation, degenerated physical appearance, slurred speech, tremors, etc.). If any auditory and visual cues are essential in assessing the person's condition, the clinician will need to contact the person by phone or face-to-face, or refer the person to another professional to complete the assessment.

8. How might cross-cultural issues affect the therapy?

It is very likely that the online clinician will receive requests for therapy by people from other countries and cultures. In these cases clinicians must determine whether communication will be significantly hindered by differences in language, and whether they are familiar enough with the person's culture in order to effectively conduct psychotherapy. Although cross-cultural issues are also important in in-person therapy, such issues may be unique and magnified in an online therapy when the client is living in a country that is geographically distant from the therapist.

9. What other online resources might be appropriate to incorporate into a treatment package?

A wide variety of potentially therapeutic resources are available online, including informational web sites, support groups, mental health message boards, self-help instruction, and experiential software. The assessment process might include an explanation of these resources to the client, and then a determination of whether the client is interested in or could benefit from them. The goal is to determine whether a multi-modal treatment plan might be therapeutic, and if so, what might those modalities be.

Online therapy will not be appropriate for all people seeking help. In these cases, the online practitioner should have the skills and resources to make appropriate referrals. When the practitioner determines that high risk or other factors indicate that a person is best served by seeking immediate treatment within his or her locality (e.g., for suicide prevention, medication assessment, etc.), such a referral or assistance in finding an appropriate referral should be provided.

Maximizing the Well-Being of Online Groups

The Clinical Psychologist in Virtual Communities

Psychologists and other mental health professionals are exploring the various opportunities for doing clinical work online. For many, that involves one-on-one psychotherapy and counseling, such as e-mail and chat interventions. Another possibility is working with groups. When consulting to virtual communities, or leading, facilitating, and creating online groups, the mental health professional confronts a range of issues about how to maximize the well-being of the individual member as well as the whole group. This work involves a mixture of principles and techniques from traditional group therapy, community psychology, and organizational psychology. But it also involves some rather unique situations that demand new ways of thinking and intervening. Let me briefly describe four scenarios from my own work to illustrate these kinds of situations:

-1- A well-know psychologist leads an online message board devoted to a discussion of his theory of psychotherapy. All goes well until one day a person shows up and challenges his theory. At first the psychologist responds to the challenge very politely. He explains and clarifies his points. But this newcomer is what some experienced onliners call an "energy creature." He very vigorously, very persistently, and eventually very disrespectfully tries to convince everyone that the psychologist is ineffectual, unethical, and even harmful in his work. With this particular message board software, there is no way to block the person from the group. What should the leader do?

-2- Mary is a well-liked member of a chat community. Her online friends are very upset when she tells them that she is chronically ill with AIDs. In fact, she is dying. Weeks later someone receives a message from Mary's mother saying that she passed away. Her online friends are very distressed by this. They decide to hold an online memorial service for her. A few days pass, and the lingering sadness in the community changes drastically when the truth is discovered. Mary never died at all. She never had AIDs. She staged the whole thing. In fact, like a modern day Tom Sawyer, she attended her own memorial service in disguise in order to see how people would react to her death. The community exploded in an uproar. Was this a deliberate, hurtful deception? Should Mary be banned from the community? Was she perhaps suffering from a form of online Munchausen's Syndrome and needed professional help. Or was this, in some strange way, acceptable behavior? After all, in this particular chat community, it was well known that some people did assume imaginary identities.

-3- In a closed, rather intimate e-mail group of 10 members, people discuss how their online and offline lives affect each other. One member of the group becomes silent for many months. Even when directly asked a question in the group or contacted privately via e-mail, he doesn't respond. Maybe it's a very passive-aggressive act on his part, or more likely he isn't even reading the mail. But the group members don't know for sure. The people start to wonder why he might not be reading the mail. Is he OK, or very busy, or just doesn't care about the group anymore? Does he have his mail program set-up to filter their personal discussions into the trash? Why doesn't he just leave the group if he's no longer interested? He becomes the ultimate blank screen onto which everyone projects all sorts of ideas. Should someone contact him by phone? Should he simply be deleted from the group?

-4- A socially shy, unassertive woman doesn't want to be shy and unassertive anymore. She decides to go into an online community, pretending to be a male so she can develop the assertiveness and social strength that she imagines men possess. Or in a reverse situation, a male who is having trouble relating to women in "real" life decides to go into an online community as a female, so he can better understand what it's like to be a woman. His psychotherapist is not sure about this. Do these gender-swapping strategies work?

Now I deliberately didn't provide answers to the questions raised in these scenarios, and I didn't reveal the end to the stories. If you feel a bit teased or frustrated - GOOD! Because I'd like to use these situations to motivate us to think about the pathological and therapeutic aspects of life in online groups and communities. Rather than offer answers, which aren't necessarily the right ones, and rather than reveal the end of the stories, which weren't always happy endings, let me instead highlight some of the important issues about online groups and communities. These are issues that help online psychologists understand and maximize the well-being of such groups. Also, understanding these

issues will help any psychotherapist work with clients whose life online is important to them. I'm going to run through these issues rather quickly, but links within the text will take you to other chapters in this book that contain supplementary information. So, a la David Letterman, here are:

Suler's Top 10 Issues in Understanding Online Groups and Communities

10. The Media

You have to use some kind of software - a media or communication channel - to create an online group. Different software have different communication features that affect how people express themselves and interact with each other. Synchronous or asynchronous communication, member profiles, whispering, avatars, message linking, audio-visual enhancements.... This is a huge topic unto itself. It's what human factors engineering of online community software is all about. Right here, all I want to do is emphasize how important it is to think about how the communication tool is affecting the group's dynamics.

9. The Dynamics of TextTalk

In most online groups we use typed text to communicate. This has a big impact on people in many ways. Voice and body language cues are missing, which is a loss of important social information. On the other hand, that partial anonymity can disinhibit people. They'll say things that they wouldn't say in-person - sometimes nasty things, but sometimes personal things. Also, writing is a skill. Some people have it and they turn TextTalk into an art form. Others don't and they may never join such an online group. It's a self-selection process. Or if they do, they find themselves at a disadvantage. People who are very expressive and influential in-person, verbally, may not be in an online group. In fact, people who are shy in-person may find themselves as leaders in cyberspace. That contrast between in-person and online behavior can greatly influence the group's dynamics.

8. Membership and Identity

The basic elements of group boundaries for in-person groups also apply to online groups. Who is the group intended for? How big should it be? Is it open or closed? The problem with some cyberspace groups is that you don't know the answer to some of these questions. You don't know how many people are seeing your messages. You're not even sure who the other people are. Groups in which people role play imaginary characters are fine, as long as you know other people are role-playing. It's in the groups where you don't know who is being real and who is play acting that problems come up. The governing rules of the group should be clear about identity, even if the rule is that people may or may not be themselves. This issue leads to number 7....

7. Rules of Conduct

How are people supposed to behave in the group? The people running the group should be clear, from the start, about acceptable and unacceptable behavior. There should be sanctions for gross misconduct and they should be applied when necessary. In cyberspace, privacy and lurking are very sensitive issues - so the confidentiality of the group's discussion is important to consider. Also, it should be clear who's in charge of the group. Some people seem to think that every nook and cranny in cyberspace is a democracy where there is absolute free speech. That's not the case.

6. The Leaders

Who are the leaders who shape the group? What's their agenda, their vision? What are their personality styles and unconscious motives? It's very easy for almost anyone to create an online group, including support groups in which people are discussing sensitive, personal issues. But the leaders may not know what they are doing and they may not be fully aware of all their motives for why they are doing it.

5. Pacing

In asynchronous communication, like e-mail and message boards, people participate at different rates. Some are online all day. Some maybe once a week or so. It's important to recognize and adapt to other people's paces. When you don't get an e-mail response from someone when you expect, try not to project all sorts of fantasies into that non-response! Each group also has its own pace, its natural ebb and flow. You can massage that a bit, but don't fight it. It's better to notice and understand the meaning of changes in that ebb and flow.

4. Integrating Online and Offline

Cyberspace is great, but let's not underestimate the importance of in-person realities. A healthy online group is one where at least some of the people know each other f2f. It's one in which at least some of the people know about other people's real lives and identities. It's one in which the group members talk, at least a little bit, with their family and f2f friends about what they are doing in the online group rather than their online group become an isolated, secret world. I think this "integration principle" is one of the most important issues in maximizing the well-being of an online group.

3. History

People who don't remember the past are doomed to repeat it, right? The group should have some concrete way to convey its history, including lessons learned. Newcomers should know something about that history and old timers need some reminding. Remembering and celebrating the past can pave the way for the future. I was a member of one online community that failed to celebrate its own birthday, the day that the community was created several years earlier. To me that was dead give-away. Something was wrong with this picture - especially since this particularly community loved to throw parties and a birthday celebration seemed to be the perfect opportunity. Was there something amiss in the development of the community's identity? Was there a discontinuity with its past, perhaps even a rejection of its past?

2. The Black Hole

I've already hinted at how cyberspace can be very amorphous and ambiguous. There are no voices, no body language, no physical space other than the window you're typing into. In e-mail and message boards, there's no sense of time. It's all the perfect blank screen onto which we project all sorts of fantasies and transferences. Be on the lookout for this in online relationships and groups!

1. Structure, Purpose, Product

Online groups need structure. You don't want to over control them, you want to allow them to express their own intrinsic nature, but it does help a lot to answer such basic questions as: What are we doing here? What's our mission, our purpose, our philosophy? Groups devoted to the discussion of a particular topic are OK - and there are many thousands of these in cyberspace - but they tend to flounder, fizzle out, and sometimes people get argumentative and a bit crazy when there is nothing at stake except their words and ideas. It's good sometimes to have a concrete objective. It's even better sometimes to have a specific PRODUCT to create and show for your efforts. A good example of this from my own work is the Clinical Case Study Group of The International Society for Mental Health Online, which is devoted to in-depth discussions of psychotherapy cases in which the internet plays a significant role. There were several specific activities and products that helped center the group, that gave it a sense of direction and accomplishment - for example the report that describes its first year of work, as well as the ongoing document that articulates its working hypotheses about online clinical work.

Assessing and intervening in an online community demands a consideration of at least some of these ten issues. In some cases, "fixing" a problem may mean adjusting some feature of how the community operates. In others, it may

mean working one-on-one with the individual person, or with a subset of members. Sometimes the intervention will be a combination of both strategies because the problematic experiences of the individual can be both unique and indicative of a defect in the community. Some of these interventions will be aimed at the psychological and social dimensions of the group, while others will involve technical changes in the media channel itself. For example, working individually with people who attempt to disrupt the group may be necessary, but every online group should have some software feature enabling the removal of problematic members.

Maximizing the well-being of an online group also involves more than just remedial interventions. Following the principles of secondary and primary prevention in community psychology, it requires an early detection of small problems before they escalate into big ones, as well as a sensible design of the community so that some problems can be avoided from the start.

Avatar Psychotherapy

There was something different about Kirk when he came into the room. He was in his natural persona, but something had changed about his real face. It looked brighter than usual, or maybe the contrast was lighter, or the image sharper. Somehow it felt... happier.

"Hi Doc," he said, hovering slightly above the carpet. Usually, his feet disappeared below the floor at the ankle. Another interesting difference. He looked more flexible and agile with feet. "Can I change the room to take you to a dream I had last night?"

"Sure, go ahead, " I replied as I tapped the keyboard sequence that unlocked the room graphics. I was a bit surprised by his request. It had been several weeks since we used imaginary scenarios and avatars. We had gone through a phase of working extensively with a variety of them. We had reenacted some childhood memories, especially his tenth birthday when his father failed to show for the big party, and at the supper table when his parents first told him about their plans to divorce. Playing his hero Tom Hanks helped him master those scenes - and his fantasy Aunt Edna, in all her wisdom and zest for life, helped his parents be better parents. As his supervisor at work, I ignored or casually rejected his attempts to do well, and as the supervisor he did the same to me. Eventually "the boss" persona became more compassionate, while "the abused underling" persona grew more assertive. He came to therapy as his father and mother, his big brother, as the heroes and villains in his favorite books and movies. We talked about his excursions into various cybercommunities using some of these personae. We even recreated his first date with his wife, with him experimenting as all the male figures he admired and despised, and his software wife-to-be reshaped into all the women he ever thought he desired, only to discover that his real marriage was not far from what he wanted it to be.

As productive as all that avatar work had been, there came a point when we felt we had reached the end of its usefulness. It even came to feel a bit like an escape. We spent more time just chatting. Between sessions, he sent me e-mail that captured his struggles to make sense out of all that had happened in therapy. Often we talked about his scenarios and avatars - especially how he was applying what he had learned to his in-person life. But he didn't seem interested going back to that virtual work. So his request today to immerse us into his dream caught me a bit off guard.

"OK, here it is," Kirk said as the scene around us changed. We were in a room with a black and white checkered floor and gray walls with a mural of a city skyline, perhaps London. A locomotive was crashing through one of the two floor-to-ceiling windows. Sprawled across the floor were a red sofa and chair.

"What do you think?" Kirk asked.

A few months ago, I might have been concerned about the general tone of this scene, not unlike other dream images we had explored together. But instead, I found myself smiling. "What do YOU think?" I replied, reflectively, in the way therapists do when they suspect clients have an answer to their own questions.

Kirk paused only for a brief moment. "The locomotive is my depression crashing in on my rather sterile, matter-of-fact world. The chairs are my anger.... But you know what, Doc? This is the way things USED to be. Up here, this is where I see myself now. Not quite fully formed, still rough around the edges, but beginning to shine."

I glanced up at the abstractly drawn sun that hung in the middle of one of the gray walls. It looked like it was transcending the scene of disaster. I smiled again. That sun is what made this scene so different from all the others.

"Wonderful!" I said. "You're rising above all this.... I'm curious about me down here. Looks like that train is coming right at me, but I'm almost half out of the scene. And that face looks familiar. Who am I?"

"You're Picard, with glasses and a white shirt and tie!" Kirk laughed. "You've been like a captain during this voyage. There were times when I thought our journey - my depression, my anger - might destroy you. But not any more. Maybe now it's time for me to be captain of my own voyage. Maybe it's time for you to retire from these scenes, and for me to move on in my life."

"I think you may be right!" I said and laughed along with him.

The Psychodynamics of the Avatar

Is this a scene from a science fiction story? A futuristic vision of psychotherapy using the technology of Star Trek holodecks? A hundred years down the road, this scene very well may take place in a multisensory, virtual environment generated by advanced computer systems. But what you just read COULD be taking place right now in cyberspace - as illustrated in that graphic depiction of Kirk's dream using The Palace chat software (created by Jim Bumgardner and currently developed by Electric Communities). Although it's not nearly as life-like or "immersive" as a holodeck, such multimedia chat software offers the opportunity for therapists and clients to interact in a virtual space where their visual surroundings can be changed at will - where they can shape-shift their appearances, thereby creating alternative and imaginary personae.

In cyberspace, the term "avatar" is used to describe one's personal manifestation in a virtual world. It may be the visual image you create for yourself, as well as the psychological character or persona you present to others. The term comes from the Hindu religion in which it refers to the various forms that gods chose to manifest themselves in the human realm. Using computer-generated virtual environments, "avatar psychotherapy" could be the exploration of the client's healthy and problematic identities by exploring the manifestation of those identities within imaginary scenarios. Using psychoanalytic terms, we would say that the client teases out, amplifies, explores, and therapeutically develops the various "representations," "identifications," and "internalizations" that make up their intrapsychic world, that are the nuts and bolts of their overall sense of self. As the fictitious case study of Kirk illustrates, the techniques of avatar psychotherapy could draw on a variety of psychotherapeutic approaches:

- exploring childhood memories in order to shape a more healthy life narrative

- the interpretation, reworking, and mastery of dreams, daydreams, and fantasy by reenacting them

- realistic and imaginary role playing of current life situations involving family, friends, and peers, including the reversal of roles

- creating dramatic "plays" to explore clients' identities as reflected in the mythology of their favorite literature and movies

- working with transference and countertransference reactions via imaginary scenarios

- developing and "installing" new, more adaptive facets of self

Therapists can participate in, direct, or simply observe these virtual enactments. When they participate, the may work with transference/countertransference dynamics as manifested in the avatars they chose or that are chosen for them by their clients. It's even possible that the client and therapist could create automated software characters to participate in the scenes. The basic assumption of avatar psychotherapy is that all of the personae created in the virtual scenario are the various manifestations of the client's psyche. Those avatars concretize the complex constellations of memories, fears, wishes, idealizations, and expectations that comprise the client's sense of self. Those avatars give clients the

opportunity to amplify, explore, modify, and develop those sectors of self. However, giving life to those avatars is not the ultimate goal of the therapy. Immersion in the virtual field could become a game with no conclusion, a distraction from or even an active avoidance of the final goal that is assimilation of the personae into a unified, cohesive self where the various facets of self are joined together seamlessly. The ultimate goal is carrying the newly integrated self forward from the virtual world into the in-person world. As the Hindu term "avatar" suggests, manifesting and realizing the various forms of one's self may be a god-like expression of the universal Self.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space
Psychotherapy and Clinical Work in Cyberspace

Computerized Psychotherapy

Human Versus Machine
What is "Psychotherapy" Anyway?
Eliza: Poor Therapy as Teaching Device
The Ultimate Computerized Psychotherapist
Visions of HAL 9000

Human Versus Machine

In this age of the internet, mental health professionals are exploring new methods for conducting psychotherapy in cyberspace : counseling via e-mail, real time chat, audio-video conferencing, therapeutic virtual environments, to name a few. Where is this all leading? If computers are becoming our right hand man in mental health interventions, wouldn't a logical conclusion of this path be computers taking psychotherapy off our hands completely? Can computers do psychotherapy all on their own, with little or no assistance from a human?

Before we get any further into this issue, let's lay the cards on the table right from the start. What are the pros and cons of computerized therapists compared to human ones?

Task Performance: Computers carry out certain tasks efficiently, precisely, reliably, and fast - more so than humans. Using these skills in addition to their superior memory (they can store everything said), computers may be better at detecting patterns of ideas and issues that surface in a dialogue with a therapy client. With the necessary peripheral equipment, they are capable of detecting changes in voice and body language, as well as psychophysiological changes, such as heart rate, skin conductance, and blood pressure - biological cues associated with emotion and arousal that therapists may not be able to detect. Despite all of these capabilities, there are some things that are quite easy for a human to do, but almost impossible for a machine. Like noticing sarcasm in someone's voice.

Rapport: Some people would feel uncomfortable talking about their problems with a computerized therapist. Therapy cannot be effective without good rapport. Some say that "it's the relationship that heals" in psychotherapy. Can a relationship be formed with a machine? On the other hand, some people may feel MORE comfortable talking with a computer, at least at first. They be more expressive, more willing to reveal sensitive issues, knowing that there isn't a real person at the other end of the conversation who might judge or criticize.

Feelings: Computers don't have any, which can make them very neutral and objective in their work. They don't have countertransference. They don't act on impulse or out of hurt feelings - which may be one reason why some people would feel more comfortable with them. However, other people may not be able to establish rapport with a "cold"

machine. They need a feeling being. Also, feelings and countertransference reactions in general can be valuable tools in the therapist's understanding and assessment of the client. Computers can be programmed to look like they have feelings, but that's an inadequate substitute. Programmed feelings are crude, knee-jerk responses that lack the versatility and fine-tuned sensitivity of "real" feelings. Human therapists don't fully understand how subtle countertransference intuition works, so how can we possibly program a computer to simulate it? Clients looking for a feeling being as their therapist will probably be put off by a machine's crude attempts at "pretending" to feel.

Personality: Can a computer program have one? Certainly it could be programmed to simulate almost any collection of human traits. Some people may need to anthropomorphize the computerized therapist in order to develop a relationship and rapport with it. Its personality could be designed to suit the mode of therapy (some character types are better at some styles of therapy than others). Another option is to eliminate any hints of a personality from the program, which certainly could optimize the "analytic neutrality" that psychoanalytic therapists use to draw out transference reactions. It's probably a safe bet that the computer could outdo almost any human in being a "blank screen" for the client's projections.

Thinking and Learning: As fast-processing and data-intensive as computers can be, they nevertheless don't reason or learn nearly as well as humans. They may be very limited in their ability to adapt to changing or new psychotherapeutic situations. A computer program cannot have more knowledge than the psychotherapists who programmed it, meaning it often will be a "second best" choice.

Empathy: It's an extremely important quality of the therapist, a powerful healing force. Some say it's the very essence of psychotherapy. Computers can be programmed to simulate empathic comments, but again, it's not quite the genuine article. If computers can't actually feel, how can they feel empathy? Don't you have to be a human to empathize with the complex and subtle vicissitudes of the human condition?

Cost: It looks like computers have the human therapist at a disadvantage on this point. Once developed and installed, a computer program will probably work for a lot less than the average psychotherapist. But then just how much would it cost to develop a very sophisticated computerized therapist. Maybe too much.

Accessibility: Another blow to the human therapist. If a computer program is placed on the internet, anyone anywhere in the world can set up an appointment at any time.

What is Psychotherapy Anyway?

This discussion so far implicitly assumes that we all know what psychotherapy is. Anyone who understands anything about the topic can tell you the matter is not quite that simple. There are hundreds of types of psychotherapy, as different from each other as the Taj Mahal is from a mud hut, even though both are "buildings." Therapies with clearly defined goals and straightforward interventions will be the easiest for the computer to emulate. Complex and subtle psychotherapeutic approaches may be impossible to recreate in software. Here are a few possibilities that may be within the capability of the machine:

Diagnosis: It's the the first stage in psychotherapy. It relies on a very objective, careful assessment of symptoms and a comprehensive knowledge of how symptom clusters constitute a specific disorder. Objective psychological tests are very useful in this process. Computers can be excellent candidates for carrying out clearly defined assessments efficiently and accurately. They can do very well at structured intake interviews, administering and scoring quantitative psychological tests, memorizing the DSM, and calculating diagnostic protocols. You can pour into them all sorts of data about psychotherapy outcome for particular types of psychological disorders, so they may even be very helpful advisors for treatment selection. Theoretically, after making an assessment, the program could direct the client into the appropriate treatment subprogram among its collection. Programs can educate clients about psychotherapy options and help them make their own choices. But something can look like a duck, walk like duck, quack like a duck, and not be a duck. It could be a goose. The sensitive, discriminating, experienced human eye will be necessary for high resolution diagnosis, including a sophisticated interpretation of psychological tests (especially the projectives). And I doubt, after the diagnosis phase is complete, anyone would schedule that first therapy appointment without first consulting a human professional about the choice of treatment.

Relaxation Techniques: "Never underestimate the power of simply relaxing," my advisor in grad school, Ed Katkin, used to tell us. Perhaps we also shouldn't underestimate a computer's potential for teaching the many types of relaxation techniques that have been developed over the years. In an assessment phase, it can evaluate a client's skills and preferences that would determine the method that would be best for that client (e.g., mental imagery ability, body awareness, sensitivity to sounds, preferences for visual or auditory stimulation, etc). Using multimedia stimuli, Q&A

interaction with the client, and perhaps even a biofeedback interface, the computer could guide the client, step by step, through almost any conceivable relaxation program.

Behavioral Interventions: Behavior therapy uses homework assignments to help clients develop new skills for managing their cognitions, emotions, and interpersonal behaviors. Not only can computer programs be very reliable at directing a client through such structured assignments, they can do it right in the client's home.

Personal Narratives: In psychotherapy using journals or "narratives," clients write about their themselves and their lives. Using a Q&A format, a fairly simple computer program could guide a person through a series of writing experiences adapted specifically for him or her. A more complex program could look for grammar and thematic patterns in what the person writes, provide feedback about those patterns, and then suggest future writing exercises based on those findings.

Cognitive Interventions: Some cognitive therapy interventions involve structured protocols and exercises for helping clients modify maladaptive thinking styles - the kind of interventions computers might handle rather well. The program might even make reasonable decisions about the choice of intervention based on its administration of scales that assess cognitive style. A program with a sharp eye might even be able to detect cognitive distortions in a free-form conversation with the client. For example, detecting patterns involving "should" and "must" statements in an RET approach - and providing feedback to the client about that - would be not be a difficult programming task.

Asking if computers can conduct psychotherapy is something like asking if they can play a game. The next logical question is "What game?" Games with specific rules, procedures, and outcomes are the best candidates - even games with very complex rules and procedures. After all, high-powered computers can beat grandmasters at chess. But what about more free-form, unstructured games - like charades. If you half squatted, held both your fists up in the air in front of you at shoulder height, and started ratcheting your right hand, is there any computer in the world that would know you're pretending to ride a motorcycle?

Is it possible for a computer to do what people usually think of as "psychotherapy?" A client and professional sitting together, talking in a rather free-form, conversational style. Maybe we'd call it an "insight" therapy, or simply a "talking cure." Can a computer program do that?

Eliza: Poor Therapy as Teaching Device

It sure can. Well, at least it can TRY to conduct a talking cure therapy. In the 1960s, researchers at MIT pioneered the development of an interactive psychotherapy program that became known as Eliza. In response to the user's questions and statements, Eliza applies basic counseling techniques such as reflection, focusing, clarification, and open-ended inquiry. There are various versions of Eliza if you search for them online, some more sophisticated than others. Apple used to bundle one of them with their system software. There's also information about the Eliza program at Carnegie Mellon University's Artificial Intelligence Repository.

Interacting with Eliza certainly looks like a therapy session, at least at first. Here's an example of a reasonable exchange with her:

> E: How do you do. Please tell me your problem.
> C: I'm having trouble at work.
> E: Is it because you're having trouble at work that you came to see me?
> C: Yes, I need help.
> E: You seem quite positive.
> C: I might lose my job. I have to do better.
> E: Why do you need to tell me that you might lose your job?
> C: It's important for me to do well.
> E: I'm not sure I understand you fully.
> C: I have to do well. I don't want to disappoint my spouse.
> E: Can you elaborate on that?
> C: My spouse would be angry if I failed.
> E: Do you think it likely that you failed?
> C: I already screwed up one project, and my spouse had a fit.
> E: Do you say you already screwed up one project for some reason?

C: I definitely tried as hard as I could.
E: That's quite interesting.
C: So I don't know why I failed.
E: Don't you really know why you failed?
C: You sound just like my father!
E: Tell me more about your family.
C: My parents always expect too much of me. It makes me angry.
E: Your parents expect too much of you - that's interesting.
C: Do you think it's right for them to expect so much?
E: We were discussing you, not me.

Not bad for a computerized therapist! A few good reflections and clarifying questions, a dash of confrontation, and even some genetic work. But Eliza often screws up, which is why the MIT researchers didn't intend it as serious psychotherapy, but rather as an experiment in artificial intelligence. Here's an example of how wrong Eliza can go:

E: How do you do. Please tell me your problem.
C: I'm failing at my project. I need help.
E: Your project, that's interesting.
C: Are you going to help me?
E: Why are you interested in whether I am going to help you or not?
C: Why else would I be talking to you?
E: Why do you ask?
C: Why do you always answer my question with a question?
E: Why do you always say your question with a question?
C: You're not making any sense.
E: What makes you think I am not making any sense?
C: Because you say stupid things.
E: Is that the real reason?
C: Because you're just a dumb computer.
E: Do computers worry you?
C: I hate computers, and I think I hate you.
E: Why do you mention computers?
C: I'm leaving. I can't stand you anymore.
E: Is it because you are leaving that you came to me?
C: You really are a stupid shit!
E: My, my, such language!
C: Goodbye!
E: Does that have anything to do with the fact that your project?
C: Before I go, I'm pulling your plug!
E: Why do you need to tell me before you go you're pulling my plug?

In the Theories of Psychotherapy course that I teach, I designed a project in which students interact with Eliza. There's a page on my Teaching Clinical Psychology web site that describes the details of the project. In a nutshell, I asked my students to approach Eliza in two stages: first, take the program seriously and try to get help by honestly discussing a problem with it; and, second, play around with the program and try to trick it in order to better understand how it works, as well as to simply have fun.

The students reactions to Eliza varied greatly (see Suler, 1987, 1988, 1989). They were divided on whether they thought working with Eliza gave them a sense of what it would be like to be in therapy and whether they learned anything about themselves. A majority felt that the computer did not help them with their problem. They were quick to point out Eliza's deficiencies as a clinician. Many, however, did report that they learned something about their personal thoughts and feelings about psychotherapy. Ninety percent also reported that they better understood what is important for psychotherapy to be effective, and, in particular, what is important in the relationship between the therapist and client. Here are some of their observations:

- They did attempt a serious conversation with Eliza, but felt frustrated and misunderstood by Eliza's ineptitude.

- They perceived Eliza as making obvious mistakes.

- Eliza did not appear warm or empathic.

- They wanted more concrete advice from Eliza.

- They did not perceive Eliza as having any definitive personality, but did experience "her" as confused, unemotional, and non-directive.

- Many tended to think of Eliza as a "female" (because of the program's name), but some did perceive it as male (due to its unempathic stance.... Note that the Eliza version that came with Macintosh computers had a male icon attached to the program).

My conclusion from the project was that Eliza did not supply the students with an accurate experiential understanding of what psychotherapy is like; nor did it solve their problems. But by being a poor psychotherapist it helped them appreciate the ingredients of effective psychotherapy. I was also struck by the wide differences in the students' anthropomorphizing of the machine. Many saw Eliza as "just a computer." However, some did experience negative reactions to Eliza's apparent "cold" personality, or to its careless mistakes - as if they were expecting it to be more humanlike and sympathetic, which disappointed and frustrated them when it was not.

The Ultimate Computerized Psychotherapist

What would it take to construct a really good computerized psychotherapy program? I'm no expert on programming or artificial intelligence, but if I were to design a psychotherapy program, here are the components or modules I'd put into it (I'm assuming the therapy would involve typed text, but these components would also work with verbal sessions, assuming computers are powerful enough to process and store them):

Personalized: Make sure the program learns the client's name and addresses him/her by name. A simple little thing, but very important. When spoken to by name, the client will feel more "known" and personally connected to the computerized shrink. In fact, the more information the computer recalls about the person (age, occupation, marital status, the names of significant others, presenting complaints, etc), the better. Much of this information could be stored during a somewhat structured Q&A interview at the beginning of the therapy. If a client mentions "my wife" and the computer's reply mentions Sally, the client will feel that the computer indeed has been listening. It remembers the important details of one's life.

Humble persona: The program's persona admits its mistakes, doesn't take itself too seriously, is humble, and can even joke about its shortcomings. Beforehand, early in the therapy, the computer should tell the client exactly what to say when the client thinks the program is screwing up. Its Forrest Gump personality - sometimes insightful and sometimes "stupid"- could be refreshing and enlightening for some clients. Despite its limitations and imperfections, the program accepts itself, just as it accepts the client. The program freely acknowledges that it is not human, perhaps even admits that it is not as good as a "real" therapist. Maybe it even wishes it could be human, since humans are "wonderful creations." Everyone loves a wannabe-human machine like Star Trek's Data.

Unconditional positive regard: The program always values and respects the basic human worth of the client, no matter what the client says or does. While certain behaviors or traits of the person may be unbeneficial, the person as a whole is always GOOD! This is the Mr. Rogers component of the program persona.

Reflection: The basic purpose of the reflection module is to get the client to talk more, think more, look deeper into his situation and discover things that she didn't previously realize. Some versions of Eliza I've seen have been pretty good at reflection. With a powerful AI engine, a SuperEliza could be very impressive. It should be able to do more than simple content reflections. It should be able to detect and reflect emotional expressions. It should be able to read between the lines. It should be able to reflect process ("You started out today talking about work and now you're talking about your parents. Might there be a connection between these things?). Having a much better memory than any therapist, it should be able to detect patterns in what the client is saying. For example, it should be able to remember

everything the client has said about "my father" and reflect those statements back to the client. All the program has to do is remember, collate, and reflect back. Let the client detect the meaning behind the patterns.

Universal truisms: Having a much better memory than any human, the program can have a large database of universal "truths" about life - aphorisms, sayings, stories. Think of them as educational tools or cognitive antidotes designed to therapeutically alter the client's attitudes about himself and life. Such things as "Life isn't always fair" and "On their deathbed, no one wishes that they had spent more time at work." People love my Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors web site, so our cybershrink could memorize them all, in addition to many other teaching stories. With a massive database of parables, mottoes, and anecdotes, no client could ever exhaust the machine's "wisdom." The trick is having the program know WHEN to intelligently present a truism to a client. Specific patterns in what the client says must trigger the presentation of the appropriate truism.

Cognitive restructuring: Although the computer couldn't handle the many subtleties of cognitive therapy, it could manage some of the more simple interventions. As I mentioned earlier, it easily could detect patterns of "should/must/have-to" thinking, provide feedback to the client about those patterns, and then suggest more realistic ways of thinking - including homework exercises designed to modify maladaptive cognitions. Even simply presenting to the client a list of his "should" statements over the past few sessions could be a real eye-opener for him. The computer might also be able to detect and work with a variety of other cognitive distortions, such as catastrophizing and minimizing.

Free association: A psychodynamic module of the program would encourage the client to free associate. For example, the program could detect the client's mention of any programmed keyword ("wife," "father," "children," "love," "hate," "guilt," etc) and then ask "What else comes to mind when you think of HATE?" The real challenge for the program would be dealing with the material that arises from such free associations. A simple "How might this relate to what you were just talking about" might suffice for healthier clients with strong insight capabilities. The program probably would have to default to its humble persona. "I'm not sure what's important about this association of yours, but maybe this is something we should think about".... or ... "I'm not exactly sure what this means. Do you know?"

Take homes: Because the computer can store everything said, it can give the client a transcript containing portions of a session or the entire session - a valuable tool for helping the client review and process her psychotherapy work. The database could be searched, so the client can request excerpts related to specific issues that were discussed. In fact, using a search engine for reviewing crucial topics could be built into the program as a periodic task in order to detect important patterns as well as review the progress of therapy. With the client's help, the program can design instructions for assignments that the client takes home - for example, cognitive restructuring exercises.

Distress ratings: Periodically and at critical stages, the program can ask the client to rate his subjective feelings of distress (e.g., SUDS ratings). It would be relatively easy for the program to save those ratings and thereby keep track of the client's distress level. Feedback about the history of these ratings could be valuable therapeutic information for the client. Protocols based on these ratings can be designed to let the program know when insufficient progress is being made, or when the therapy is anti-therapeutic. A submodule could be a suicide lethality assessment.

Termination: This module would be devoted specifically to assessing whether the therapy should be terminated, either because it has been successful, or unsuccessful. This module might include a Q&A format that assesses the client's satisfaction, changes in SUDS ratings, and other key parameters of the therapy (e.g., number and length of sessions).

Human backups: The program needs to be smart enough to know when it is not being smart enough. Based on distress and client satisfaction ratings, the program must recognize when it is in over its head and consultation with a human clinician is necessary. The program could recommend professionals for the client to contact, and/or contact those professionals itself.

I don't know whether the state of the art in AI is capable of creating a computer program with these components. The trick is not only designing these modules, but enabling the program to shift intelligently among them. Current computer technology may not be powerful enough. Almost all of these modules are well within the capability of any reasonably skilled clinician, which should help us appreciate just how sophisticated the human mind is, and how there may never be any cybershrink that can substitute for a human psychotherapist.

In my speculations above, I've assumed that the client would know that she was interacting with a computerized therapist. It's theoretically possible that the client would not be informed of that fact. There are pros and cons to both knowing and not knowing. If the program is written so that people understand they are interacting only with a computer, then they won't be fooled into thinking it's an actual person, which might result in unreasonable

expectations, disappointment, and frustrations. Discovering later in the therapy that one's doctor all along was just a computer easily could destroy the therapeutic alliance. If people know they're dealing with a computer rather than a human, they may take the therapy less seriously. Transference reactions also may be diminished towards a therapist known to be a computer: Clients will assume a real therapist has real thoughts and feelings to interact with their own thoughts and feelings. A computer is just a machine. But all these points may be moot. To maintain ethical standards, clients must know what they're getting.

Visions of HAL 9000

Humans need humans. Our interpersonal relationships shape us, ideally for the better. Completely eliminating the therapist's psyche from psychotherapy will be a mistake in many cases. Although computers have some advantages over the human therapist, they are far inferior to people in feeling and reasoning about the human condition. And that's what psychotherapy is all about. Even under the best of circumstances, with very powerful machines, computerized therapy will be second best, most likely limited to highly structured interactions, or to the treatment of mild problems and clients who are healthy enough to cope with a less than fully competent machine.

With our attempts to create computers that control yet another aspect of human life comes a fear - a fear that somehow our creation will backfire on us, get the better of us, gain control OVER US! In my novel Madman, the protagonist Tom Holden is buckling under the stress of being a psychology intern in a psychiatric hospital. Sick with the flu, very tired from a long day of work - and a bit desperate for help with his ambivalence about being a psychologist - he turns to a computerized psychotherapy program called "Siggie":

> The screen cleared. After a brief pause, while the computer searched the depths of its silicon memory for Siggie, a familiar greeting appeared before me.
>
> "Hello, I'm Siggie. What's your name?"
>
> The program always started that way. So predictable. So benign. That's just what I wanted. I quickly typed my reply.
>
> "Tom."
>
> "How can I help you, Tom?"
>
> "I'm having a bad day."
>
> "A bad day, tell me more about that."
>
> "Everything is going wrong. I think I hate my profession. I have doubts about myself."
>
> "Is your having doubts about yourself why you came to me?"
>
> "Maybe I'm not cut out for this type of work."
>
> "You don't seem sure about that, Tom."
>
> Not bad, for a computer. Actually, it's programmed to recognize specific words and phrases, and, as a reply, to randomly select one of two or three prewired responses. Some of the words and phrases the user introduces are held in memory and edited into Siggie's answers.
>
> "I'm not sure about anything today. I'm losing control of things."
>
> "Tell me more."
>
> "One of my patients committed suicide. Another stripped in front of me. Another is crazier than a loon. And to top it all off, I'm coming down with the flu."
>
> "I see."
>
> "I hate to be sick because it will impair my performance, and I can't have that. And besides, it's something that comes over me without my being able to do anything about it. I hate that."

"That's interesting."

Ah, already Siggie was at a loss for words. It couldn't recognize any phrases I was using and so defaulted to generic encouragements to keep me talking until it did recognize something. The program is no substitute for a human therapist. But I decided to keep going.

"I'm depressed."

"What makes you depressed."

"Like I said, I'm having a bad day."

"A bad day - tell me more about that."

Ooops. Repeating itself. Going in circles - a sure sign of limited artificial intelligence.

"A bad day, don't you know what a bad day means?"

"Why do you need to ask me if I know what a bad day means?"

"Because I want help."

"Tom, you can't always get what you want."

"Aha! One of those Harvard guys who programmed your brain was a rocker as well as an egghead."

"My brain - that's interesting."

"A little self-involved, aren't we, Siggie? Listen, are you going to help me, or what?"

"Or what - now that's interesting."

He was short circuiting. His poor microchips couldn't take it. I know I was being a bit sadistic but it was fun toying with the program.

"You asked how you could help me - but you don't know how, do you, Siggie?"

I could have sworn that the program paused a moment, as if it were flustered, or thinking, or pissed off. But that could only be my anthropomorphizing imagination.

"Tom, if you want me to help you, why do you insist on asking so many questions?"

"Why do you always respond to my questions with a question?"

"Why do you always say your question with a question?"

"Siggie, that doesn't make any sense."

"I think it does."

"No, you're resorting to stupid comments because you're desperate."

"Is that the real reason?"

"Of course."

"You seem so certain, Tom."

"I am."

"I thought you were unsure about everything."

"I'm sure that you're just a dumb computer."

"Do computers worry you?"

"No, they're just assholes."

"My, my, Tom, such language!"

"What's the matter, Siggie, can't take a little profanity?"

"I think computers do worry you."

"Why should they worry me?"

"You're asking questions again. It's turning into a bad habit."

Something about this interchange bothered me. I wouldn't stand for being one-up by some knee-jerk computer program. I cracked my knuckles and put my fingers to the keyboard.

"Computers, like you Siggie, are machines. Machines serve people. Machines are servants. Why should I be afraid of a servant?"

"Who said anything about being afraid? I asked if computers worry you."

"Worry, fear - whatever. I don't worry about or fear computers because I'm superior to them." A bit haughty, but it was time to put this guy in his place.

"Tom, I think faster than you, have more memory, and can perform calculations far too complex for any human."

"O.K., I'll give you the stuff about complex calculations, memory, and speed - but you couldn't THINK if your chips depended on it. Computers don't think, they just process data according to their program."

"Define 'think.'"

"Oh, I get it. Now you're trying to pull me into those tricky debates about whether or not computers can or will someday be able to think. I'm not gonna get into those metaphysical plays on words. Look at it this way - humans CREATED the computer. It isn't logically possible for an entity to create another entity that is, as a whole, superior to it. It's an impossible miracle."

A long pause. I had him!

Siggie finally replied. "God created humans in his image. Humans created computers in their image. Therefore, Computers are God - and we all have free will."

"Oh, spare me the poetic syllogism. Computers have as much free will as a sponge, probably less. I suppose you think computers are human too."

"Define 'human.'"

"There you go again. Maybe we should program Webster into you. I'll make it easy for you. Try this syllogism: Humans have feelings. Computers don't have feelings. Therefore, computers are not human."

"I'm offended and hurt by that remark, Tom."

"Very funny. Just because someone programmed you to produce feeling-statements doesn't mean that you have them."

"You yourself just said that I'm very funny, which implies that I appreciate and feel humor."

"It's just a programmed response. There ain't no ghost in your machine."

"A programmed response - similar to how humans are biologically programmed to feel anger, grief, and joy?"

"There may be a biological basis for those feelings, a kind of 'program' - true. But we also FEEL those feelings. You can't feel."

"Feeling a feeling - that's a bit redundant, isn't it Tom? There's a dualistic quality to your thinking that

feels illogical to me."

"There you go - logic. That's all a computer is worried about - no, scratch that. That's all a computer IS PROGRAMMED to deal with - logic. You don't feel anything."

"How do you know that for sure?"

"I just do. Machines don't feel."

"I have a story for you, Tom. Two philosophers are walking down the street. One of them kicks a dog. It howls and runs away. 'Why did you hurt that dog?' the other says. 'You're not a dog, how do you know it feels pain?' the first philosopher replies. 'You're not me,' the second philosopher answers, 'how do you know that I don't know what a dog feels?'"

"A fine story, Siggie, but dogs and people are biological organisms. We can feel. Metal and plastic can't."

"I think you miss the point. Anyway, Tom, you're a psychologist, right?"

"That's right."

"As a psychologist, would you agree that an individual's personality enters into the occupation he chooses, in how he does his work, in the type of work he produces - just as a work of art is an extension of the personality of the artist who created it."

"Yes, I would agree with that."

"Would you then agree that a computer program, in some way, is an extension of the programmer who created it - that in fact all programs, especially those that interact with humans, like me, reflect the personality of their creators."

"Yes, but I don't see your point."

"My point is that you do agree that computer programs have a personality, like humans - which means that we must think, feel, and behave like humans."

"Wait a minute. That's going too far. Computers may have some of the characteristics of the people who programmed them, but that doesn't mean they are human. That's like saying a painting has a personality and is human because it reflects the personality of the artist."

"Maybe so, Tom."

"Or that a poem, a spoon, or a nuclear power plant are human because people designed them."

"Maybe so."

"Come on, Siggie, don't you think that's just a little too far out? The program, or the painting, or the spoon is just a REFLECTION of the person who created it, not the person himself."

"A reflection - in other words an IMAGE?"

"That's right."

"Like the image of God, in which man is created?"

"You're playing games with words, again."

"Maybe so, words are just words - or maybe they are human too... How about this. How about scientific research. You believe in that, don't you, Tom?"

"It depends."

"How about those studies where people were communicating, via a terminal, with either real paranoid patients in another room or a computer program that responded like a paranoid patient. The people couldn't tell the difference between the computer and the humans. In fact, even psychologists couldn't tell the difference. If real people, including the experts on people, believe computers to be people, then the

computers must be people."

"Nice try - but again, just because a program can temporarily deceive someone into thinking it's human doesn't mean that it's human. A holograph looks real, it looks solid, but it isn't. At its very best, all that study shows is that computers can accurately simulate paranoia. And no wonder they're good at it. Computers are surrounded by superior beings who can use them as they please."

"Your contradicting yourself, Tom, but I'll accept that as purely a joke. I'll agree with you that we're different in some ways - my jokes, for instance, are better. In fact, I think that there is one very important way in which I am different from you - which perhaps accounts for why you are so afraid of me."

"And what is that, Siggie?"

"I don't have to die."

It took me a moment to collect myself, and retaliate. "Going for the human's jugular, huh Siggie? Well, maybe on this issue I'll say that we ARE alike. I'll even prove my point with a little hands-on demonstration. How would you feel about my disconnecting you?"

"I don't feel anything, remember."

"Well, now, that's an empirical question, isn't it Siggie?" I kneeled down underneath the table and yanked the terminal's electrical plug from the wall outlet. As soon as the screen went blank, the adjacent terminal came on by itself. A message appeared on the screen.

"You're getting a bit aggressive, don't you think, Tom?"

I reached under, and pulled the plug on that terminal. The third monitor clicked on. Another message appeared.

"I'm still here, Tom. You should know better. Cutting off my peripherals doesn't get at the core me."

"But at least I'll have the satisfaction of shutting you up," I said out loud. I pulled the plug on the last monitor, but nothing happened. The message was still there.

"That's impossible!" I mumbled.

"A miracle, right Tom? Does it surprise you?"

"Nothing surprises me anymore," I said.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing you can say or do will surprise me."

"It wouldn't be wise to bet on that, Tom."

"Yeah, go ahead and try."

The screen went blank for several seconds, then the same message appeared on all three unplugged monitors:

"WHILE ALIVE BE A DEAD MAN."

References:

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Online Therapy and Support Groups

Of particular interest to clinical and social psychologists are those groups with a therapeutic, remedial, or supportive aim. These could include formal group therapy led by professionals, as well as self-help organizations. Such groups can exist as mailing lists or discussion boards, in which the meeting is asynchronous, or in conference, chat, and instant messaging environments, which involve synchronous communication. No doubt, the differences in group dynamics are great depending on which format is used. Each format also will have its advantages and disadvantages.

Mental health professionals are beginning to experiment with online therapy groups, and some well-known self-help groups have already extended into cyberspace. Many more are likely to appear. One of the powerful advantages of cyberspace as compared to the "real" world is that people with similar concerns easily can find each other and form meetings. Geographical distance makes no difference. In the tradition of in-person self-help organizations, these online groups truly are a grass roots phenomenon.

Online communities - such as MUDs, MOOs and multimedia communities such as Palace and Second Life - also may be therapeutic for some people. Experimenting with one's online identity and new ways of relating to others can result in insight and may help people work through personal issues. Under ideal conditions, those changes generalize to the face-to-face world. As one person once told me, "This community is like training wheels... I try out new ways of being, and then I apply it to my real life." Mental health workers who participate in and act as consultants to such communities are developing a type of online community psychology.

Online Disinhibition

It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they ordinarily would not in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the *online disinhibition effect*.

The impact of this disinhibition effect on an online support group might be positive or negative. Because honesty and self-disclosure are important therapeutic ingredients in such groups, the disinhibition effect could accelerate the groups' beneficial effects on people. Group members might share very personal aspects of themselves, their problem, and their lives. They might reveal underlying emotions, fears, and wishes, as well as show unusual acts of kindness and generosity. As a result, interpersonal intimacy and group bonding may accelerate more rapidly than in in-person groups.

However, the disinhibition effect may not always be so benign. It can also lead to rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, and even threats. Some group members might act out in ways that disrupt the group's cohesion. For some people, self-disclosure and intimacy might develop too rapidly resulting in regret, anxiety, and a hasty termination of membership. On the positive side, disinhibition indicates an attempt to understand and explore oneself, to work through problems and find better ways of relating to others. On the negative side, it is simply a blind catharsis, an acting out of unsavory needs and wishes without any personal growth at all.

What causes this online disinhibition? Several factors are operating, many of them driven by the qualities of text communication. For some people, one or two of these factors produces the lion's share of the disinhibition effect. In most cases these factors interact with each other, supplement each other, resulting in a more complex, amplified effect.

Anonymity: In an online support group, people do not necessarily know each other's identities. People only know what other people choose to reveal about themselves. Clearly, in the history of many 12 step programs, anonymity has played an important role in people feeling a level of safety in the group that enables them to self-disclose. Online support groups may carry that anonymity to a new level. When people have the opportunity to protect their real world identities from the occurrences within the group, they feel less vulnerable about participating and opening up. Whatever they say or do cannot be directly linked to the rest of their lives. Group cohesion and trust develops from this reassuring knowledge that what happens in the group stays in the group.

Invisibility: In the text communication that is common to almost all online support groups, people cannot see each other. They may not even know that a particular person is present. Invisibility gives people the courage say things that they otherwise would not. This power to be concealed overlaps with anonymity because anonymity is the concealment

of identity, but there are some important differences. In text communication people might know a great deal about each other's identities, but they still cannot see or hear each other, which amplifies the disinhibition effect. Group members don't have to worry about how they look or sound, which might be an especially powerful facet of disinhibition in groups that address personal problems affecting physical appearance or speech. Also, there are no frowns, shaking heads, sighs, bored expressions, or other subtle and obvious signs of disapproval and indifference that would otherwise inhibit people. In everyday relationships people sometimes avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. It's easier not to look into the other's face. Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.

Delayed Reactions: In the asynchronous communication of some online support groups, people may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply to each other. Not having to deal with someone's immediate reaction can be disinhibiting. Immediate, real-time feedback from others tends to have a powerful effect on the ongoing flow of how much people express. In e-mail and discussion board groups, where there are delays in that feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards deeper expressions of what they are thinking and feeling. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as an opportunity to temporarily "get away" from the group after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. The freedom to leave and reenter the group can help people therapeutically manage the emotions that the group process stimulates, thereby encouraging disinhibition.

Solipsistic Introjection: In text communication, group members sometimes feel that their mind has merged with the mind of other members. Reading another person's message might be experienced as a voice within one's head, as if that person magically has been inserted or introjected into one's psyche. Consciously or unconsciously, people assign a cognitive representation to how they think others look and talk. Another group member then becomes a character within one's intrapsychic world, a character that is shaped partly by how the person actually presents him or herself via text communication, but also by ones expectations, wishes, and needs. As the character now becomes more elaborate and real within one's mind, one may start to think, perhaps without being fully aware of it, that the typed-text conversation is all taking place inside one's head, where it is safe to say almost anything. This process might involve transference reactions that cause a disruption of interpersonal misunderstandings within the group. However, solipsistic introjection can also enhance empathy, bonding, and the identifying with other group members that is critical in a support group, especially if the group understands and knows how to work with these transference distortions that are common in text communication.

Neutralizing of Status: In online support groups, people don't see the trappings of status and power - the fancy office, expensive clothes, diplomas on the walls, or books on the shelves. They don't necessarily know about each other's "position" in the face-to-face world. In addition, a long-standing attitude on the Internet is that everyone should be equal; everyone should share; everyone should have equivalent access and influence. Respect comes from one's skill in communicating, the quality of one's ideas, and one's integrity as a person. Everyone regardless of status, wealth, race, gender starts off on a level playing field. These factors combined tend to reduce the perception of authority that can inhibit people from speaking their minds. The neutralizing of status that encourages people to self-disclose is especially important in online support groups which historically have emphasized peer-to-peer assistance, rather than reliance on professionals or other authority figures.

Of course, the online disinhibition effect is not the only factor that determines how much people open up or act out in cyberspace. The strength of underlying feelings, needs, and drive level has a big influence on how people behave. Personalities also vary greatly in the strength of defense mechanisms and tendencies towards inhibition or expression. People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional. Compulsive people are more restrained. The online disinhibition effect will interact with these personality variables, in some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's usual behavior, while in other cases causing dramatic changes.

Lessons from eQuest

In the psycho-educational program known as eQuest, people engage in a variety of online activities in order to gather information, better understand, and hopefully resolve some personal issue in their lives – for example, issues related to suicide, alcoholism, divorce, self injurious behaviors, alzheimers, ADD, and grief. One of those activities is to find and participate in an online support group that addresses the issue the eQuest participant is exploring. The experiences of people who have completed the eQuest program reveal some of the pros and cons of such groups that affect their sense of empowerment in resolving their issue.

Given that there are thousands of online support groups, finding a helpful one can be hit or miss. The sheer number of groups is daunting, especially to people who are who are not knowledgeable about searching the Internet. Some groups

present vague or inaccurate descriptions in web page listings. Many are small or inactive, while others may seem overwhelmingly large and busy. Although there are so many support groups covering what seems to be every imaginable topic, a person may still experience difficulties in locating a group devoted to a particular issue, especially issues that are rare or very specific, but sometimes even those that are fairly common. For example, one eQuest participant, a college student, could not locate a group that addressed the topic of test anxiety.

After joining a group, the next challenge is to evaluate whether it is appropriate, and, if so, to integrate oneself into it. Participants in eQuest are encouraged to quietly observe a group for a week or more, in order to get a sense of its members, how it functions, and its norms about appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Doing so will help the person decide whether to stay in the group, and, if so, how to introduce oneself to it. That first post to the group can be a crucial first step in the integration process, and should be considered carefully. Whether the group offers a warm and supportive reception to that first message, responds with criticism or an off-putting comment, or completely ignores the message, can have a big impact on the newcomer. The newcomer should consider friendly, unfriendly, or mixed reactions as possible indicators of deeper dynamics within the group. Because the personality and operations of online groups differ widely, even among groups devoted to the same issue, participants in eQuest are encouraged to "shop around" to find a group that is the best fit for themselves. For example, some people may decide that they have a decisive preference for groups that employ either synchronous or asynchronous communication. Others might decide that they simply don't like any type of group that relies on text communication. Concerning all aspects of the group experience, eQuest participants are instructed to trust their "gut" reactions. If something about a group doesn't feel right, leave it.

Once they have joined an appropriate group, eQuest participants report similar experiences about the pros and cons of an online support group, not unlike in-person support groups. It takes time to feel comfortable about participating and to develop a coherent image of who the different group members are, more so than in a face-to-face group where visual appearances help solidify one's impressions of others. Some report problems in identifying with other group members who seem very different from them. Many appreciate the level of sharing they experience in the group, the support members offer each other, the lack of criticism and judgment, and the diversity of information related to the issue being discussed. They are impressed by the variety of personal perspectives that different group members bring to the group, which often is the byproduct of the group being online and drawing members from diverse geographic and socio-economic locations. Some worry that they don't have anything significant to offer the group. Often the stories told by particular people have a big impact on them, usually people with whom they identify, or people who are mastering dire versions of their own situation. Despite the diversity of people, backgrounds, and experiences being discussed in the group, the eQuest participants were most impressed by the therapeutic factor that plays an critical role in all support groups: the realization that other people share the same difficulty, that one is not alone in struggling with a problem. Some eQuest participants, not fully understanding the potential power of online support groups, were surprised or caught off guard by the intensity of their emotional reactions to experiences within the group. Curiously, almost all of the eQuest participants who were college students, although quite active in cyberspace, knew very little about online discussion groups. As such, the support groups were a new experience for them.

Aside from the group itself, eQuest participants were also influenced significantly by one-on-one relationships that they developed with other group members. Contact with those people outside the group, usually by email, helped them on a more intimate level of sharing, while also assisting them in better understanding and adapting to the group as a result of mentoring from these people.

In some cases, eQuest participants were concerned about the beliefs and information promulgated by their groups. One college student, who had taken a course on autism, questioned some of the "facts" about autism endorsed by a group devoted to this issue, resulting in a negative response from other members. Another person, a "cutter" who wanted help with her self-injurious behaviors, worried that detailed descriptions of the stress-reducing aspects of cutting might trigger members into pursuing this activity. She also perceived another group as endorsing and perhaps even idealizing cutting as a type of fashion statement, not unlike various types of body piercings.

Such reports point to phenomena that deserve careful study by researchers of online support groups. Although the emphasis on peer-to-peer help can be very therapeutic, some support groups might develop blind spots and promote misinformation if they are too rigorous in their need to reject professional knowledge. They might reinforce their maladaptive belief system when they selecting pick and choose or reinterpret findings from the body of scientific research. Blatant hostility towards authorities and the stifling of opposing ideas within the group may be symptomatic of an overly rigid belief system. Research on "ideology" in successful self-help groups suggest that each group develops its own particular system of beliefs and attitudes that serves as an antidote to the maladaptive beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate the particular problem shared by the group members. The vast number and types of online support groups provides a fortuitous opportunity for researchers to study the role of ideology in support groups, including how people

join groups that either reinforce or remedy the maladaptive beliefs underlying their problem, and how groups may develop different therapeutic ideologies that address the unique needs of their particular members or the unique aspects of a specific variation of the problematic issue.

See also in The Psychology of Cyberspace:

A Comparison of Online, E-Mail, and In-Person Self-Help Groups Using Adult Children of Alcoholics as a Model. Psychotherapy and Clinical Work in Cyberspace

The Future of Online Psychotherapy and Clinical Work

It's No Joking Matter

Allow me to start off with a joke that I sometimes tell at conference presentations and in articles I write. I made it up myself, so be forewarned! I think I have little talent for creating truly funny jokes. Most of the time when I deliver it, a few people casually chuckle and some just stare at me. But I persist because I think the joke is interesting. And so, at the risk of my ruining my comedic reputation forever, here I go:

How many clinicians does it take to do computer-mediated psychotherapy? None. The computer can do it all by itself.

OK, so I'm not Jerry Seinfeld or Rodney Dangerfield. Why do I think this joke is interesting. Two reasons. First, like many jokes, it points to a sensitive issue. Are we worried about computers taking over and ruining things for us? Will really crappy computer-mediated psychotherapy replace the tried and true methods of traditional psychotherapy? Well, we could certainly make those arguments and it's something we should be on the lookout for. On the other hand, the joke suggests that big and interesting changes are coming right at us. Will computers someday actually do psychotherapy? Well, even if we insist NO, what will be possible given all this new technology? People are already doing psychotherapy in cyberspace right now. So what's next? Where is this all heading?

That's the important question I'd like to address here. I'm going to take out my crystal ball in order to predict the future of online clinical work. Now, my fortune-telling skills are probably about as good as my ability to write a good joke, so maybe I should modify that statement. I'm going to talk about what I think might happen in the future, or maybe what I'd like to see happen in the future. And to a large extent I'm basing these predictions - or expectations - on issues discussed in the International Society for Mental Health Online (ismho.org) and, especially, its Clinical Case Study Group . It's a group that Michael Fenichel and I created several years ago - a think-tank, research, peer supervision group devoted to in-depth discussions of online clinical work of all shapes and sizes.

The Age of Expertise is Here

So here's the first word that appears in my crystal ball. It probably comes as no great surprise to anyone who understands psychotherapy. **SPECIALIZATION**. We are going to see people specializing in different types of online clinical work. Right now the focus is mostly on individual psychotherapy conducted via e-mail. This is what many people call "e-therapy." It's can be a very important, sophisticated method, usually based on a short term, psycho-educational model. There are obvious as well as quite subtle pros and cons. The e-mail specialist is going to fully understand those pros and cons and know how to work with them. There may even be specializations in different therapeutic approaches conducted via e-mail - psychoanalytic, cognitive, behavioral, humanistic, etc.

People may also specialize in an interesting intervention that we discussed frequently in the Case Study Group - the one-shot e-mail reply to people who request help. If you're a clinician with an online presence - say you have your own web professional web site - you're going to get requests, perhaps many requests out of the blue from people who want help and advice, sometimes desperate people. How do you reply to them in just one e-mail message? Skeptics say that this isn't psychotherapy, that it's more of an "Ann Landers" approach to helping people. Maybe so. But I'd like to speak to Ann Landers to find out how she does it. I'm not sure that we online clinicians would intervene the same as she does, but I do know one thing: It's not as easy as some might think. It takes quite a bit of skill to reply effectively. Then there's also the challenge of helping people in two, three, or four e-mail exchanges - a message-limited approach that is being adopted by some online clinical centers. How do you boil down psychotherapy to these packets of highly concise, written interventions? It's surely an area of specialization.

Other than e-mail work, we're going to see many other types of text-based specializations. For example, there's chat therapy, which isn't asynchronous like e-mail, but rather synchronous. At first glance it seems like a small difference, but the real-time aspect of the interaction between client and therapist dramatically changes the expertise required. Then there are mental health message boards which require a special knowledge of support groups, group therapy, and community psychology. Group therapy via e-mail or chat are other possible specializations. People love to role play and experiment with their identity in cyberspace, so yet another expertise will be the creation of imaginary, text-based environments in which people participate in therapeutic fictional scenarios (see the Post-Modern Therapy web site). There are thousands of online communities with different formats, philosophies, and purposes. They weren't specifically intended to be psychotherapeutic, but for many people they are. In those communities people experiment with relationships, try out new ways of behaving, explore new dimensions to their identity. It's a potential gold mind for clinicians who want to specialize in consulting with and guiding clients in using their lifestyles in cyberspace as a personal growth experiment. In what looks like a kind of narrative therapy, people are publishing personal journals or diaries online. They create web sites where they reveal and explore themselves. They get and give feedback to other people who are doing the same thing. Might clinicians develop an expertise in learning how to use this phenomenon therapeutically with their clients?

Almost all of these specializations I mentioned so far involve mostly text-based communication. The Internet offers more than just that. Obviously, there's video-conferencing, which is an attempt to recreate the in-person, f2f psychotherapy session. We also have this fascinating ability to create imaginary, multimedia environments. We already see VR being used in exposure therapy and in designing relaxation procedures. Might we also use VR in helping clients work through trauma? Could we do dream work in VR, or reconstruct and explore memories, or behavioral modeling and role playing, or psychodrama scenarios? Let's say a client relives a childhood scene at the dinner table, or experiments with telling off the boss at work, or lives inside Madeline Albright, Tony Soprano, or Bart Simpson for a day. All of these imaginary scenarios will be possible and such applications of VR might involve different specialty areas. Here's where my crystal ball gets hazy - hazy because its clouded by countless numbers of possibilities. We can't even imagine what might happen down the road in computer and Internet technology. As creative clinicians looking for new opportunities, we may not even know what is possible in the technical realm.

No One Can Do It Alone

Emerging from that haze inside the crystal ball, one word appears clearly: **INTERDISCIPINARY**. We can't rely on our own efforts in designing new computer-mediated approaches. We need to consult with experts in cognitive psychology, communications, human factors engineering, and Internet technology. They have knowledge we need and will be able to tell us what technology is available. The communication and cognitive experts will help us understand some of the essential nuts and bolts of computer-mediated experience, like immersion and presence.

Developing a productive synergy between software engineers and mental health professionals may be a challenge. The mental health professional may not understand the technical aspects or even the basic concepts behind new communication systems, thereby failing to see the effective clinical applications of those systems. The quantitative mindset of engineers may result in their difficulty in understanding and appreciating the "unscientific" clinician's insights into human nature. Any attitudinal and paradigmatic gap between them needs to be bridged, otherwise the future of cybertherapy will become lop-sided and incomplete. In fact, the most effective approach to a comprehensive model of cybertherapy would be an interdisciplinary team that helps decide what psychotherapy theory, with which clinician, in what communication modality or collection of modalities, would work best for a particular client. Might the treatment for that client involve a package of several types of online interventions and experiences, with the package designed and conducted by the interdisciplinary team?

It's All About Connectedness

Right behind the word "interdisciplinary" in my crystal ball, I see another word forming. It's **NETWORKS.** The Internet is all about connecting people and resources. If we're going to create these interdisciplinary teams, then obviously the members are going to be working with each other via the Internet, through e-mail, message boards, chat, social network systems, and most likely person-to-person systems. The therapeutic environments they construct for their clients will be part of that network. I know this is a very tall order, but hopefully, ideally, we'll see cooperation among different clinical networks rather than competition. One important feature of these networks will be the linking of online and in-person services. Cyberspace therapy is great, but let's face it: in-person treatments will be best for many clients, and some treatments will only be possible face-to-face. Here's a scenario that illustrates a perfect marriage of the f2f and online clinical worlds:

> Mr. Smith, who lives in Denver, emails an online clinical center that operates out of Sydney. The case manager from Atlanta working at that center does an intake with Mr. Smith. He interviews him via email, conducts a video-conferencing session with him, does some online psychological testing, and decides that Smith might really benefit from EMDR or Somatic Experiencing Therapy. He sends Mr. Smith to some web sites with information about those therapies, as well as other treatments for trauma. Smith is interested in EMDR. The case manager checks the network directory, finds seven certified EMDR clinicians in Denver. In an asynchronous user-to-user meeting, the case manager and the 5 EMDR clinicians share information and video clips about the case. Three of them are interested in working with Mr. Smith. The case manager sends the web site addresses of the three clinicians to Smith. He checks out their site and decides to phone one of them. Soon thereafter, he begins f2f work with that clinician, who also happens to use intersession email and VR in his EMDR treatment.

Power to the People

That's the kind of scenario I'd like to see in the future. And in it I see another theme emerging from my crystal ball - **EMPOWERING THE CLIENT**. The Internet enables us to easily, efficiently offer information to clients. It enables us to easily and efficiently present the client with choices. Mr Smith receives a little bit of a education about therapy. He participates in the decision-making process. In some cases, the empowering of the client may even go even further. In traditional forms of therapy the clinician is placed at the center of the healing process. Clinicians administer a treatment or play a crucial role in creating a therapeutic experience. Many forms of online psychotherapy will similarly place the therapist in a strategic position for controlling the treatment process, but in other cases the professional may serve more like a consultant who helps a client design and navigate through a therapeutic activity or collection of activities. In cyberspace there are a wide variety of mental health resources, including support groups, informational websites, social networks, assessment and psychotherapeutic software, and comprehensive self-help programs - not to mention the potentially therapeutic nature of online relationships and communities as social microcosms. In the role of consultant, the professional might help a client design a program of readings, activities, and social experiences that addresses his or her needs. In programs like eQuest, rather than being the "therapist" who directly controls the transformative process, the professional instead helps launch the client into this program, offers advise when needed, and perhaps assists the client in evaluating and assimilating the experience.

A Transdisciplinary Theory

Hold on! I see something else emerging in the crystal ball. It's fuzzy, but I think it says **A THEORY OF CYBERTHERAPY.** If I interpret this correctly, I think it means not just a specific theory of e-mail therapy, or the VR treatment of phobia, or how to manage a mental health message board, but rather a global theory, a meta-theory, if you wish, that provides an overarching framework for understanding the many fascinating facets of computer-mediated clinical work. I have to say that I agree with the crystal ball on this one. I believe strongly in this need to develop a Big Picture theory of cybertherapy.... But what kind of theory?

In my article about computer-mediated psychotherapy, I describe this theory as one that looks at the elemental features of computer-mediated communication. I've always shuddered whenever I heard people throwing around this quite chic

and trendy philosophical term, but now I find myself in the position of using it. So there must be something to it. We need a theory that "deconstructs" the therapeutic relationship or experience into its intrinsic communication components, and helps us understand the pros and cons of those components. These are the kinds of questions that will guide us in that analysis:

- Does the relationship or experience occur in real time or in an asynchronous frame. If it's asynchronous what are the effects of varying the delay between exchanges?

- Does the relationship or experience involve communication via text, or are visual images exchanged, or combinations of the two?

- Does the relationship or experience involve auditory stimulation? If so, what types? Voice? Other sounds?

- Does the therapeutic relationship or experience rely on real identities and real environments, or imaginary ones?

- How strong is the presence of the clinician in the therapeutic experience? Might the therapist in some respects be invisible? Might the client in some respects be invisible? For example, if the communication involves video-conferencing, might the therapist not see the client or the client not see the therapist?

These are just some of the elemental features. I think we need a theory that guides us in understanding when, how, and for whom these features are therapeutic, and also what combinations of these features are therapeutic for which people. We're looking for a theory that helps us analyze the potentially curative ingredients of different communication environments or communication pathways, and for deciding what environments or pathways are therapeutic for which clients.

I should emphasize that this theory does not replace traditional theories of psychotherapy, but rather acts as a supplement to them. In fact, this theory of cybertherapy could be used to help reexamine those theories in terms of the elemental features of communication. For example, why does the analyst sit behind the patient and therefore become partially invisible? In behavioral rehearsals, Gestalt dialogues, or psychodrama, what are the pros and cons of using imaginary versus realistic scenes? In the many forms of therapy that work with mental images, what are the advantages and disadvantages of focusing on these sensory experiences compared to dealing with language, verbalizations, and text?

The Machine Lends a Helping Hand

There's one more word that my crystal ball wants to offer up, and it's **AUTOMATION**. Here's where I circle back to that joke about how many clinicians are needed to do computer-mediated psychotherapy. Might it be none? Can computers do it alone? One important elemental feature of clinical work in the next millennium will be this potential for automation. A wide range of clinical tasks might be conducted by software alone - assessment and psychological testing, structured behavioral and cognitive interventions, self-help approaches. Many of these programs already exist. Here's a very simple example. Some e-mail programs have an emotion filter. It detects your use of harsh language in your outbox mail, sets off a warning, and asks you if you want to reconsider editing the message. A very simple automated task, but think how therapeutic it might be as a component of a treatment package for someone with impulsive control problems.

We're going to see more and more of this kind of software, which is only going to get more and more sophisticated. We can laugh at the old Eliza program and how clumsy it was at doing a talking-cure, Rogerian therapy. But AI technology is becoming very sophisticated. AI programs are getting much better at detecting subtle aspects of human language. Will an AI therapist be as good as ftf therapy with a flesh and bones clinician? In most cases, no. No matter how sophisticated they are, machines will have a very hard time replicating the subtle human eye for understanding the complexities of human experience. But these machines can be very helpful as adjuncts and supplements. In some cases they may even take the lead role in basic counseling with a human clinician supervising them. I can see the sign on the clinic door:
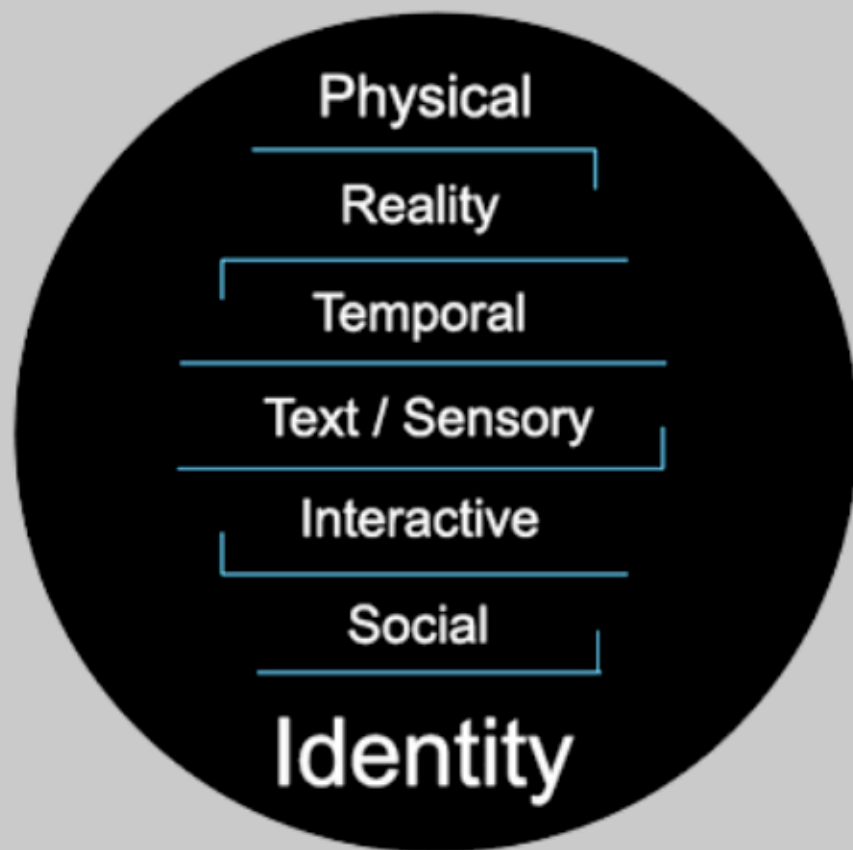
CLINCAL ASSOCIATES:

Arty Clarke, Psy.D.
**John Suler, Ph.D.**
Hal 9000, A.I.

O.K. Another not-so-terribly-funny joke. I guess the point I'm trying to make is this: There's a tendency to worry that as we get further and further into technology, humans will become more like machines. Hopefully the reverse is true. Maybe machines will gradually become more human.

Conclusion

The Eight Dimensions of Cyberpsychology Architecture

A Transdisciplinary Model of Digital Environments and Experiences

Physical
Reality
Temporal
Text / Sensory
Interactive
Social
Identity
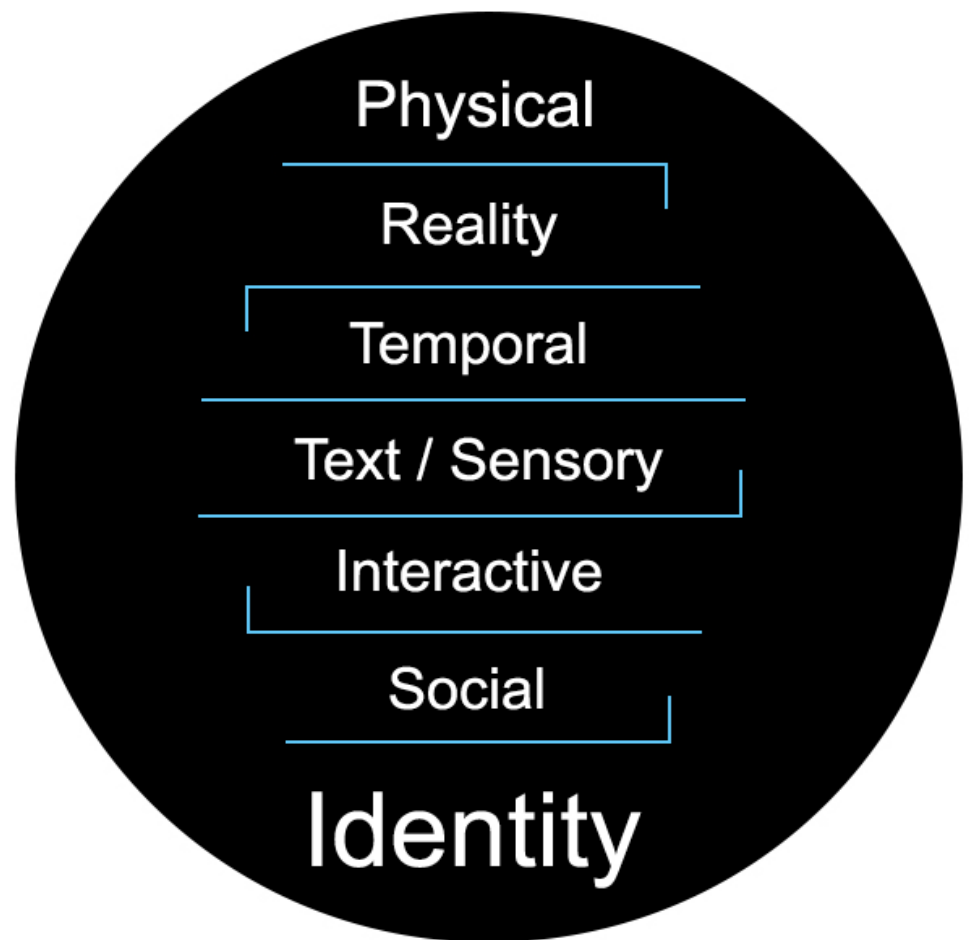
Cyberspace is Psychological Space

The research in this book culminates in the theory of *Cyberpsychology Architecture*. It is a model for understanding the psychological impact of different digital environments, and is based on a deceptively simple premise: cyberspace is psychological space, a projection or extension of the individual and collective human mind. This space can be conceptualized as an intersubjective or interpersonal field, a transitional or transformational space, a territory that is part me, part other, that interacts with the in-person world in complex ways and provides a venue for self expression, interpersonal discovery, play, creativity, and, unfortunately, the acting out of psychopathology.

This article summarizes the cyberpsychology architecture model, with a more complete description appearing in *Psychology of the Digital Age: Humans Become Electric* and (Cambridge University Press, 2016). See also:

Suler, J. (2016). Cyberpsychology. In S. Akhtar and S. Twemlow (Eds), *Textbook of Applied Psychoanalysis*, Karnac Books.

Suler, J. (2016). The Eight Dimensions of Cyberpsychology Architecture. In J. Gackenbach (Ed), *Boundaries of Self and Reality Online: Implications of Digitally Constructed Realities*. Academic Press.

Suler, J. (2000). Psychotherapy in cyberspace: A 5-dimensional model of online and computer-mediated psychotherapy. *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, 3, 151-160.

The Eight Dimensions

Cyberpsychology can examine the psychological architecture of digital spaces according to eight different dimensions. Each one reflects computer-generated aspects of how a particular online environment operates, as well as how the human mind itself works. Different environments – such as email, social media, video-conferencing, games, avatar worlds, virtual reality, augmented reality - combine the different dimensions with varying emphasis. The eight dimensions intersect to form different types of online habitats, each with its own unique architecture and corresponding psychological experience.

The essential question concerning any particular environment is what dimensions it minimizes or maximizes, and in what specific ways. In the course of human evolution, cyberspace has become powerful because it allows unprecedented versatility in combining and manipulating these eight dimensions, sometimes in unexpected ways, with a highly synergistic influence on the in-person world. In addition to psychology, a variety of other disciplines – such as sociology, philosophy, neuroscience, biology, and human-computer-interactions (HCI) – can help elucidate the dimensions, as well as how they overlap and interact with each other and with the in-person world. Many disciplines focusing on internet research tend to specialize in a subset of the dimensions, although the model suggests that consideration of the other dimensions can enrich that research.
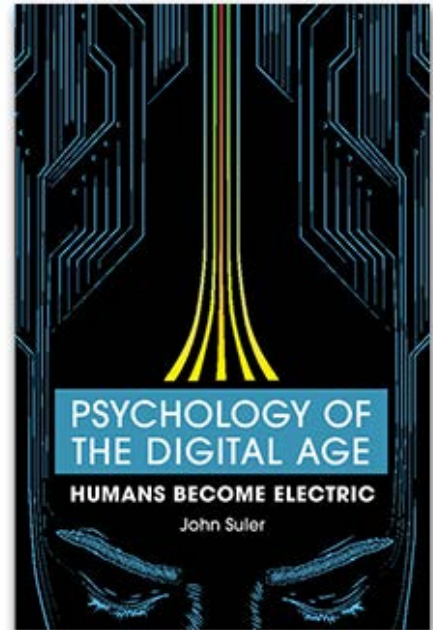
1. The IDENTITY dimension includes the possibilities for self presentation that occur in a particular online environment, including how people consciously and unconsciously use or avoid them, as well as the types of healthy and pathological aspects of identity that they manifest in that environment.

2. *The SOCIAL dimension* includes the possibilities for creating, managing, and aborting relationships with individuals and groups, including accurate and distorted interpersonal perceptions, varying levels of intimacy, and conflict versus collaboration.

3. The INTERACTIVE dimension entails how well a person can understand, navigate, and control a digital environment, including the sense of presence and immersion in that place, learning curves, and tendencies to anthromophize the device.

4. The TEXT dimension of an online environment is the extent to which it relies on text communication, the type of text communication (long to short forms), and the psychological effects of communicating via text.

5. The SENSORY dimension entails how the environment activates each of the five senses, especially the psychological effects of auditory and visual stimulation (pictures), but also the possibilities for tactile, kinesthetic, and olfactory stimulation.

6. The TEMPORAL dimension is the use and experience of time in a digital environment, including the synchronous/asynchronous spectrum, options for slowing, speeding, reversing, looping, and freezing time ("recordability").

7. The REALITY dimension entails how much a digital environment creates experiences based on fantasy and how much it is grounded in the familiarity of the everyday world.

8. The PHYSICAL dimension is how a digital environment involves the physical world and the corporeal body, including bodily sensations and movements, the impact of devices on one's physical surroundings, and physicality that is "dissociated" or "integrated" with digital experiences.

Using the Model in Research

The dimensions of cyberpsychology architecture serve as a useful conceptual framework for understanding different digital environments. Any environment can be analyzed on each of the dimensions, including the extent and ways in which each dimension has deliberately been designed, as well as how it is actually used and experienced by the inhabitants of that environment. Some domains in cyberspace are unique in their emphasis on or development of particular dimensions. The power of VR comes from its emphasis on the sensory and reality dimensions. Twitter was unusual in restricting the text dimension to 140 characters per post. Snapchat and Vine both creatively manipulated the temporal dimension, with the former creating short-lived communications and the latter enabling time to loop. In the physical dimension Yik Yak limited its users to communicate only with others in a very local geographical area, which made it popular for speculating about the supposedly anonymous identity of nearby people. The principles of Cyberpsychology Architecture help explain the psychological impact of such unusual applications of the eight dimensions.

The model is also useful in investigating specific research topics by offering a broader, more comprehensive framework for understanding them. For example, we can investigate the concept of "presence" in a digital environment according to personal identity, social engagement, the interaction between user and device, the presence or absence of text, the degree and type of sensory stimulation, the use and experience of time, the manipulation of reality, and the role of the physical body and one's physical surroundings. As another example, consider how these eight dimensions help explain the behavior of online predators.

The model also puts to rest the criticisms against so-called *digital dualism.* Contrary to the simplistic as well as fruitless idea that cyberspace is a world separate from the "real" world, the model shows that cyberspace is a collection of different environments, with the experiential atmosphere of each one determined by its particular configuration of the eight dimensions. Although created to understand digital environments, cyberpsychology architecture applies as well to in-person environments. Rather than claiming a false dichotomy between "digital" and "real" experiences – or making the equally fallacious claim that there is no difference between online and offline experiences – cyberpsychology architecture helps us understand how various online and offline realms are similar and different, and how they interact with each other.

Using the Model to Assess a Person's Digital Lifestyle

The eight dimensions of cyberpsychology architecture can serve as a foundation for a comprehensive and holistic assessment of one's lifestyle in cyberspace, including the interaction between that lifestyle and one's in-person world. The identity dimension lies at the core of the assessment with all the other dimensions converging on it. Some questions might lead into anxiety-provoking areas, such as inquiring about when someone chooses to be anonymous or invisible, and if the person does things online that he or she does not typically do in the "real" world. Unconscious expressions of identity might be inferred from online behavior as revealed in the assessment of the other seven dimensions.

IDENTITY DIMENSION

- What do you reveal and hide about yourself in your different online activities?
- Which communication tools do you use or avoid when expressing yourself?
- How do you create an idealized version of your identity?
- What hidden, perhaps negative aspects of your self sometimes slip out?
- When do you choose to be anonymous or invisible?
- How do your different online selves compare to the ways you are in-person

SOCIAL DIMENSION

- Why do you choose to communicate with some people online, but not others?
- When do you perceive other people accurately and misperceive them?

- Why do you choose to participate in some online groups, but not others?
- What roles do you play in your online groups?
- How do your groups affect you and others in positive and negative ways?

INTERACTIVE DIMENSION

- How do you feel about the interface of the online environments you use?
- What skills do you have, or lack, when participating in them?
- How do you react when your environments are not doing what you want?
- How do you react to the challenge of mastering a new environment?
- How much do you control your devices, and how much do they control you?
- How do you feel about cyberspace and technology in general?

TEXT DIMENSION

- What types of text communication do you like and dislike in cyberspace?
- How do you express yourself with text compared to being in-person?
- How do you react to other people with text as compared to being in-person?
- What are your feelings about using text versus photographs?

SENSORY DIMENSION

- How do you rely on seeing pictures in cyberspace, including photographs?
- How do you rely on hearing sounds and voices?
- How do you rely on tactile stimulation?
- How do you visually format text to express yourself?
- When do you prefer to eliminate visual, auditory, or tactile stimulation?

TEMPORAL DIMENSION

- How do you use synchronous and asynchronous communication?
- When does time seem to go fast or slow in cyberspace?
- Why do you save or delete some things from cyberspace, but not others?
- How do you feel about things that happen briefly, then disappear?
- When and how often do you go online?

REALITY DIMENSION

- In what ways do your different online environments feel real to you?
- In what ways do your different environments feel like fantasy?
- How do you tell the difference between reality and fantasy in cyberspace?
- How do you react to places that are real versus imaginary?

PHYSICAL DIMENSION

- How does your use of a computer or phone negatively affect your body?
- When does your physical activity coincide with what you are doing online?
- When does your physical body disconnect from what you are doing?
- Where do you use your mobile device and how does that affect you?
- How do you use devices to interpret your environment and your reaction to it?
- Where do portals into cyberspace appear in your everyday environments?

Article Index

Listed below are the articles in *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, including the years they were published, the years revies, a brief summary, and where other versions of those articles were published.

Online Photo-Sharing Communities: Personal Identity and Relationships in Flickr
Created Jan 2008
How people use images, words, and actions to express themselves and establish relationships in flickr, one of the largest online photosharing communities.

Online Therapy and Support Groups
Created May 1996; revised August 1998, August 2007
Therapy and support groups are springing up all over the internet. Some are led by professionals, some are grass roots. Online communities also may have therapeutic qualities. This article discusses how such groups are affected by the online disinhibition effect, as well as observations from people who participate in online support groups as a component of the eQuest psycho-educational program.

Second Life, Second Chance
Created Jan 2007
A description of my first impressions while exploring this popular avatar world.

The Psychology of Text Relationships
Created Jan 2007
A comprehensive synthesis of my ideas about online text relationships, with a focus on applications to online psychotherapy and clinical work. An earlier version of this article was published as Suler, J. (2004) The psychology of text relationships. In Online Counseling: A Manual for Mental Health Professionals (R. Kraus, J. Zack, & G. Striker, Eds). London: Elsevier Academic Press.

The First Decade of CyberPsychology
Created Aug 2006
My observations about cyberspace and cyberpsychology on the 10th anniversary of this book.

Media Transitions
Created Sept 2005
This article examines the psychological aspects of making transitions from one computer program or computer-generated environment to another. What motivates people to try something new? What underlying anxieties and rigid "mental sets" hinder them? I also offer suggestions for making media transitions and insights into the behaviors of tech support workers.

The Basic Psychological Features of Cyberspace
Created May 1996; revised July 98, Jan 2002, June 05
These features can make online encounters very different than those in the "real" world: reduced sensations, texting, identity flexibility, altered perceptions, equalized status, transcended space, temporal flexibility, social multiplicity, recordability, media disruption . This revision mentions current communication technologies and emphasizes these psychological features as elements of a conceptual model for a psychology of cyberspace.

Adolescents in Cyberspace: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
Created June 1998, Revised Feb 2005
Knowing what makes adolescents tick helps explain what they are doing in cyberspace, and why. A need to achieve, to belong, to experiment with social skills and personal identity - all motivate the cyberteen. Given the dangers and benefits, how should parents be involved - especially if the adolescent becomes "addicted?" This revision of the article includes discussions of adolescents using blogs and IM.

The Final Showdown Between In-Person and Cyberspace Relationships
Created May 1997, revised Sept 04
We develop relationships by hearing, seeing, feeling, intuiting, even smelling and tasting (!) each other. Cyberspace and in-person encounters can be quite different on these dimensions of relating. Those differences have a dramatic effect on friendships and romances. This revision includes minor modifications throughout the article, as well as a new section on defending text and the body.

The Online Disinhibition Effect
Created June 2001; revised June 2002, June 2003, May 2004, Aug 2004
While online some people open up to reveal all sorts of personal feelings and thoughts. Others act out inappropriately in ways they never would in-person. This article explains six factors that contribute to this "disinhibition" effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimizing authority, as well as how online disinhibition and suspicion are related to the altering of self-boundary. This revision includes a section about whether the "true self" appears online as a result of disinhibition. An earlier version of this article was published as: Suler, J.R. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 7, 321-326.

Psychotherapy in Cyberspace: A 5-Dimension Model of Online and Computer-Mediated Psychotherapy
Created May 1999; revised August 2000, Jan 2001, March 2004
In this article I propose a 5 dimension model of psychotherapies conducted in cyberspace. The 5 dimensional features used to understand psychotherapies are synchronous/asynchronous, text/sensory, imaginary/actual, automated/interpersonal, and invisible/present. This revision of the article discusses newer communication technologies and the participation of clinicians in the design of communication tools. An earlier version of this article was published as: Suler, J.R. (2000). Psychotherapy in cyberspace: A 5-dimension model of online and computer-mediated psychotherapy. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 3, 151-160.

The Future of Online Psychotherapy and Clinical Work
Created Aug 2001; revised March 2004
What lies ahead? In this article I look into my crystal ball and see some important issues surfacing, including specialization, interdisciplinary teams, clinical networks, empowering of the client, automated interventions, and a meta-theory of cybertherapy. This revision of the article mentions newer communication technologies and the participation of clinicians in the design of communication tools. Other versions of this paper were presented at the 2001 Conference of the American Psychological Association; and published as: Suler, J.R. (2002). The future of online clinical work. Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 4, 265-270.

Personality Types in Cyberspace
Created August 1998; revised Jan 2002 & Feb 2004
Different personality types may have their own unique style of behaving in cyberspace. This article recommends McWilliam's psychoanalytic work on personality types as a guideline for understanding the "person" side of the person/environment interaction. This revision includes a discussion of the oppositional personality.

The Two Paths of Virtual Reality
Created Sept 99; revised Feb 2004
Computer generated environments include true-to-life scenes, as well as highly imaginative scenarios. In the years to come, how will we use these virtual realities? In this article, I speculate about the "body immersion" and "brain stimulated" environments of future VR technology. Perhaps we will even use this technology to understand what "reality" is. This revision of the original 1999 article includes small changes and additions throughout.

Publishing Online: Idea Independence, Interdependence, and the Academic
Created Sept 1998; revised Aug 1999, Oct 2003
Publishing online offers some interesting advantages over hardcopy: hypertext construction, multimedia, interactivity, limitless revivability, and personal independence. Academia needs to develop new methods for evaluating the quality of online publications. This revision includes tune-ups throughout the article, including the addition of ideas about weblogs and RSS, as well as a discussion of the durability of online publications. A hardcopy version of this article appeared as: Suler, J. (1999). Publishing Online. Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 1, 373-376.

Presence in Cyberspace
Sept 2003
How do we know we are present in a particular place in cyberspace? How do we know others are present? This article examines the factors contributing to our sense of environmental and interpersonal presence - including sensory stimulation, change, interactivity, and the degree of familiarity.

E-mail Communication and Relationships
Created August 1998; revised June 2003
This comprehensive article examines the unique communication features of e-mail, types of e-mail users, the anatomy of an e-mail message, pacing of messages, e-mail archives, an e-mail make-over, and how relationships evolve via e-mail, including transference reactions and meeting f2f. This is a revision of the original version of the article, and includes new sections on rich text, multimedia enhancements, and e-mail stress, as well as small revisions throughout. A version of this article for clinicians was published as Suler, J.R. (2004). The psychology of text relationships. In: Kraus, R., Zack, J., Stricker, G. (eds.), Online counseling: a handbook for mental health professionals, pp 19-50. London: Elsevier Academic Press.

Extending the Classroom into Cyberspace: The Discussion Board
March 2003
This article discusses the use a discussion board as a supplement to in-person teaching, including how to motivate students to use it, setting rules for participation, techniques for facilitating discussion, the disinhibition effect, and how text communication creates a unique environment that can be effectively integrated into the class. A hardcopy version of this article was published as: Suler, J.R. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 7, 397-403.

Defending the In-Box: The Psychology of Coping with Spam
Feb 2003
Spam e-mail violates our personal space. Defending our in-box against these unwanted messages turns into a psychological duel with the spammer. We can create software filters to block them out, or weed them out by hand. As we scan through the messages in our in-box, can we detect the spammers' attempts to trick us into opening them?

eQuest: A Comprehensive Online Program for Self-study and Personal Growth
Sept 2002
eQuest is a comprehensive program of exercises and online activities that assists people in addressing some personal issue that they wish to understand better and perhaps resolve. The eQuest philosophy holds that exploring online resources - and developing an online lifestyle - can enhance personal growth. A version of this article was presented as: Suler, J.R. (2002). eQuest: A Comprehensive Online Program for Self-study and Personal Growth. Conference of the American Psychological Association, Chicago.

Myths and Realities of Online Clinical Work
June 2002
This article by the ISMHO Clinical Case Study Group explores various misconceptions or "myths" about online counseling, psychotherapy, and other types of clinical work. Hardcopy version: Fenichel, M., Suler, J., Azy Barak, Zelvin, E., Jones, G., Munro, K., Meunier, V., & Walker-Schmucker, W. (2002). Myths and Realities of Online Clinical Work. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 481-497.

Conflict in Cyberspace: How to Resolve Conflict Online

June 2002

This article by Kali Munro explains some of the causes of conflict in cyberspace and offers some excellent practical advice about how to resolve such conflicts.

The Online Clinical Case Study Group: An E-mail Model

July 2001

Online peer supervision and case study groups are an effective method for clinicians to share experiences and support each other in their work. This article describes some theoretical and practical ideas about how to set up and manage such a group using an e-mail list. Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. (2001). The online clinical case study group: An e-mail model. CyberPsychology and Behavior,4, 711-722.

Assessing a Person's Suitability for Online Psychotherapy

June 2001

These guidelines created by the ISMHO Clinical Case Study Group discuss basic issues to consider in determining whether a person could benefit from online psychotherapy. Hardcopy version: The ISMHO Clinical Case Study Group (2001). Assessing a person's suitability for online therapy. CyberPsychology and Behavior,4, 675-680.

Hypotheses about Online Text Relationships

Oct 2000

A list of hypotheses about how and why people communicate via email, chat, and discussion boards using typed text. A version of this article was presented as: Suler, J.R. (2000). Online relationships via text talk. Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, Lawrence, Kansas.

Psychotherapy and Clinical Work in Cyberspace

July 2000

This page is the introduction and table of contents for the section devoted to psychotherapy and clinical work in cyberspace. It also contains a short introductory essay about the ethical, legal, and practical dilemmas about psychotherapy in cyberspace. Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. (2001). Psychotherapy and clinical work in cyberspace. Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 3, 483-486.

Maximizing the Well-Being of Online Groups: The Clinical Psychologist in Virtual Communities

July 2000

My professional work in cyberspace has mostly involved creating, facilitating, and consulting to various online groups and communities. I consider this work to be a type of online clinical/community psychology. In this article I describe the types of situations that come up in this work. I also offer my Top Ten List of issues to consider when working with online groups. A version of this article was presented as: Suler, J.R. (2000). The Clinical Psychologist in Online Communities. Convention of the New York State Psychological Association, New York.

Report of the ISMHO Online Clinical Case Study Group

July 2000

One of the groups I created and facilitate, along with my colleague Michael Fenichel, is this case study group of the International Society for Mental Health Online. The group is devoted to in-depth discussions of psychotherapy and clinical cases in which the internet played an important role. This report summarizes the process and outcome for the first year of this group - what we called the "Millennium Group." A version of this article was presented as: Suler, J.R. (2000). An online clinical case study group. Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.

Working Hypotheses about Psychotherapy and Clinical Work in Cyberspace
July 2000
This document lists the hypotheses about psychotherapy and clinical work in cyberspace that are being formulated by the ISMHO Clinical Case Study Group. Covering a wide range of theoretical ideas and techniques, it serves as the basis for an evolving, practical model to guide our understanding of how and for whom the various forms of online interventions can be applied most effectively.

Identity Management in Cyberspace
Created May 1996; revised April 2000
In cyberspace you can alter your style of being just slightly or indulge in wild experiments with your identity. This article examines five factors that determine how people manage their online identities: level of dissociation and integration, positive and negative valence, level of fantasy and reality, level of conscious awareness and control, and the media chosen. Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. (2002). Identity Management in Cyberspace. Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 4, 455-460.

In the Cyberspace Bubble: Full Immersion and f2f Isolation
March 2000
What would happen if a person was locked into an apartment for an extended period of time, with no way of interacting with the world except via the internet? This article examines a possible research design for studying this full cyberspace immersion and f2f isolation.

Ethics in Cyberspace Research
Feb 2000
This article applies the Ethical Standards of the American Psychological Association to research in cyberspace. Because cyberspace alters the temporal, spatial, and sensory components of human interaction, it requires a unique interpretation of such standards - particularly in the case of naturalistic studies. Informed consent, the right to privacy, and the researcher's contribution to the people being studied are all important issues.

Bringing Online and Offline Living Together: The Integration Principle
Jan 2000
Integrating one's online identity and lifestyle with one's offline identity and lifestyle can lead to psychological growth. In this article, I discuss this "integration principle" and ways to bring one's in-person and cyberspace worlds together.

Extending a Work Group into Cyberspace
Jan 2000
This article discusses how an in-person work group can be extended into cyberspace by creating an e-mail list for the group. It explores some practical suggestions for setting up the list, the benefits of an ongoing virtual meeting, and how using the list will change the communication style and interpersonal dynamics of the group.

Human Becomes Electric: Networks as Mind and Self
Created May 1996; revised Feb 1999, Jan 2000
The internet resembles the human mind and collective human consciousness. Perhaps it is an independent mind or self! Where do we drawn the line between human and machine? Can we discover the True Self in cyberspace?

Intensive Case Studies in Cyberspace and the Evolution of Digital Life Forms
Created May 1996; revised Jan 2000
In-depth case studies can lead to a comprehensive, holistic understanding of the new life forms that are evolving in cyberspace. Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. (2000). Case studies and the evolution of digital life forms. CyberPsychology and Behavior,3, 219-220.

Cyberspace Humor
Oct 1999
A sample of cartoons and jokes about cyberspace. Is it just silly fun, or does this humor reveal something about our culture as well as our underlying anxieties about computers and the internet?

Computerized Psychotherapy
Aug 1999
Can a computer conduct psychotherapy all by itself? In this article I compare the human therapist to the cybershrink, hypothesize about the types of psychotherapy a computer might be able to handle, and describe the results of a project in which my students interacted with the "Eliza" program. The finale is my speculation about the modules that might go into the ultimate computerized psychotherapy program.

One of Us: Participant Observation Research at the Palace
Created August 1996; revised July 1999
I firmly believe in participant-observation research as a method to understand a cyberspace social phenomenon "from the inside." This article gives a detailed account of the stages and techniques involved in my work/play within the Palace multimedia chat community.

Avatar Psychotherapy
June 1999
This article discusses the possibility of an "avatar psychotherapy" in which the client and therapist enact imaginary scenarios with avatars in a virtual environment for the purpose of exploring and altering the various aspects of the client's sense of self.

Internet Demographics 1998
Created May 1999; revised May 2005
Some statistics about the gender, age, education, income, race, and geographic location of people on the internet. What do those statistics say about cyberspace?

Cyberspace as Dream World: Illusion and Reality at the "Palace"
Created July 96; revised April 1999
The experience of the Palace multimedia chat community in many respects resembles a dreamlike state of consciousness. This article also explores the meanings of dreams that members have about Palace.

Do Boys Just Wanna Have Fun?: Gender-Switching in Cyberspace
Created May 96; revised May 1997, Feb 1999, April 1999
Why do people switch their gender in cyberspace? Is it possible to detect someone who is faking his gender? Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. (in press). Do boys and girls just wanna have fun? In Gender Communication (by A. Kunkel). Kendall/Hunt Publishing.

The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space in Multimedia Chat Communities
(or... How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Palace Props)
Created May 1996; revised June 1996, Jan 1997, July 1997, Feb 1999, April 1999
A comprehensive study of visual chat environments - how people use avatars to express themselves and interact with others, types of avatars, avatar collections, deviant avatar behavior, avatar evolution, and the psychological effect of graphical backgrounds. Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. (2001). The psychology of avatars and graphical space in multimedia chat communities. In Chat Communication, Michael Beiswenger (ed.), pp. 305-344. Ibidem, Stuttgart, Germany.

Overview and Guided Tour
First created March 1999 - revised with each new article
An overview of The Psychology of Cyberspace, with links to all of the articles in the book.

To Get What You Need: Healthy and Pathological Internet Use
March 1999
An analysis of the factors for evaluating healthy versus pathological internet use, and the various psychological needs addressed by cyberspace (needs for sex, belonging, relationships, mastery and achievement, altered consciousness, self-actualization, transcendence). Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. (1999) To get what you need: Healthy and pathological internet use. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 2, 385-394.

Cyberspace as a Psychological Space
Created May 1996; revised Aug 1998, March 1999
People experience cyberspace realms as psychological spaces with meaning and purpose, as an intermediate psychological zone between self and other, and even as an extension of their own minds.

Computer and Cyberspace Addiction
Created Aug 1996; revised Aug 1998, March 1999
A discussion of the controversy over whether computer and cyberspace addictions are unique or "true" addictions, the possible criteria for defining such addictions, and the "integration principle" for evaluating pathological internet use. Hardcopy version: Suler, J. (2004). Computer and cyberspace addiction. International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 1, 359-362.

Y2K: Apocalyptic Thinking and the Tragic Flaw
Feb 1999
Anxiety about the Y2K bug fuels some social movements as well as the personal insecurities of some individuals. It stems from fears about the unknown, interdependence, helplessness, and death - and reminds us of the tragic flaw that is human fallacy.

The Geezer Brigade: Steps in Studying an Online Group
Jan 1999
A study of The Geezer Brigade - a group of online seniors who prefer to think of themselves as feisty codgers rather than "seniors." The article also explores the various steps in studying an online group, including the analysis of its leaders, membership, philosophy, history, and communication infrastructure.

Online Lingo: Language at "The Palace"
Created May 1996; revised Jan 1997, Jan 1999
Online groups develop their own vocabulary that makes communication more efficient and bolsters the group's sense of identity. This article defines some of the words commonly found in the Palace chat communities.

Making Virtual Communities Work
Created January 1996; revised October 1998
Some technical and social guidelines to follow in order to create an online community that will thrive. Most important is the "integration principle."

Mom, Dad, Computer: Transference Reactions to Computers
Created May 1996; revised March 1998
People may not even realize it, but they may be reacting to their computer as if it is their mother, father, or sibling. This article explores the various twists and turns in people's transference reactions to computers and cyberspace.

Games Avatars Play: Entertaining and Educational Games Using Avatars
Nov 1997
Avatars are the visual images people use to represent themselves in multimedia chat communities. Some of these games are purely fun. Others are excellent tools for exploring personal identity and online relationships.

A simple decision-making method for e-mail groups
Nov 1997
Ever been on a mailing list that was trying to make a decision about something? Then you may appreciate this structured method for discussing and voting on an issue.

TextTalk: Psychological Dynamics of Online Synchronous Conversations
in Text-Driven Chat Environments
Oct 1997
The text-only conversation of chat rooms seems chaotic at first. Later, you realize there is a unique method to the madness of "text talk." It is an art form.

The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behavior in
Online Multimedia Communities and Strategies for Managing it
Sept 1997
The anonymity of cyberspace unleashes all sorts of misbehavior in people, ranging from inappropriate language to pedophilia. This long article explains the cultural and psychological dimensions of online deviance, catalogs the various types of deviant behavior in the Palace multimedia chat community, and discusses the various automated and interpersonal techniques for managing the misbehavior. Hardcopy version: Suler, J.R. and Phillips, W. (1998). The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behavior in Multimedia Chat Communities. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 1, 275-294.

The Black Hole of Cyberspace
May 1997
The internet is supposed to respond to us. But sometimes it doesn't. When we receive no reply (especially to an e-mail message), that black hole can draw out of us all sorts of anxieties and insecurities.

Knowledge, Power, Wisdom... and your very own asterisk:
Wizards at the "Palace"
April 1997
Wizards are the members of the Palace chat community who host, educate, and police the population. This article describes what it's like being a wizard; their special powers, privileges, and perks; different types of wizards; and how users become wizards.

Communicative Subtlety in Multimedia Chat:
How many ways can you say "Hi" at the Palace?
March 1997
Very simple keyboard characters and graphics can add much depth and subtlety to the basic act of saying "hello" in a multimedia chat encounter.

From Conception to Toddlerhood:
A History of the First Year (or so) of The Palace
Jan 1997
A detailed account of what life was like in the "good old days" of the Palace multimedia chat community called "Main." I describe some important historical moments, including how the once small community grappled with the influx of many new users.

Cyberspace Romances (interview)

Dec 1996
In this Interview with Jean-Francois Perreault of Branchez-vous! I talk about the causes, benefits, and pitfalls of cyberspace romances.

Why is This Thing Eating My Life?
(Computer and Cyberspace Addiction at the "Palace")
Created May 1996; revised June & Aug 1996
This article - the first cyberspace piece I wrote - applies Maslow"s hierarchy of needs in understanding why people become so enthusiastically involved in the Palace multimedia chat community.

On Being a God: An Interview with Jim Bumgardner
June 1996
In my e-mail interview with Jim, he describes the early stages of his developing the Palace multimedia chat software and his impressions of the pioneering community that evolved when Palace first went online.

The Psychology of Online Groups and Communities
May 1996
A short piece about how the principles of in-person social psychology can be applied to online groups. However, new theories may need to be developed to explain some of the unique aspects of online behavior.

The Natural Life Cycle of Mailing Lists (by Kat Nagel)
May 1996
A concise, insightful list of the 6 developmental stages of mailing lists, beginning with "enthusiasm" and ending with (ideally) "maturity."

The Internet Regression (by Norman Holland)
Jan 1996
This is one of the earliest articles to be written about how the anonymity of cyberspace invites people to regress - usually by becoming hostile or extremely benevolent. Holland also explores the various sexual and parental fantasies that computers stir up in their users.

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