

The Sexual Life of Cyber-Savants

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Introduction

This paper describes the role of sex within an Internet mailing list, and the spillage of that sexual contact into offlist and offline life. I briefly describe the kind of group being studied and the practicalities of the acts, and then attempt to show how these acts and their representations work in 'everyday' online life. I claim that netsex serves to stabilise the divergence of meaning within a communicative structure which accelerates uncertainty, and that netsex is part of the framing conventions which revolve around the problems of authenticity.

Online Groups

The group of people discussed in this paper were linked by their use of the mailing list 'Cybermind' during 1995-97.¹ The list's official topic is the philosophy and psychology of cyberspace—discussing netsex is incidental to the list and is not its primary focus. Most members of the list can be described as middle class intellectuals, primarily from the US, Australia and the UK. They were generally well educated, oriented towards the humanities and leftist liberal in politics. Ages ranged from 18 to 64, the median age was 33, and about 30% of the list was female. At the time of study, list-members also frequently communicated on PMC-MOO,² the MOO supposedly devoted to the study of postmodernism at the University of Virginia.

Mailing lists and MOOs have different communicative structures which enable and restrict different types of behaviour. With a mailing list members send emails to a central computer which then mails them to every other member. People's presence on a list is indicated by the mail that they send to it, otherwise they are invisible, and usually known as 'lurkers'. One particular member usually has responsibility for the list, they are called the list owner and they, together with anyone else they appoint, can moderate and maintain the list. Such moderators can remove members from the list, and may have to carry out tasks like dealing with error messages, and bouncebacks etc. As a result moderators have a certain status, but the power they have is limited by the acceptance of the group—members can dispute their decisions, start up their own groups, or just simply leave.

Apart from moderation, the only status markers are earned, and largely depend upon the member's contribution to the list. As member presence only exists when presented, and as any list gains new members continually, status cannot be maintained without continual

prestation of messages. Little stabilises status, and there is little in the way of reward or largess which moderators can divide among potential supporters. Most offlist communication occurs between pairs of members. It is fairly difficult for subgroups to communicate *as groups* offlist, unless they move to a MOO. As a result subgroups, particularly as recognisable by others, are not common. Most messages also have a delay between them and thus frequently diverge in content.

A MOO also depends upon a particular computer. The MOO uses a model of partitioned space or rooms. Each room usually has a description, and may have programmed objects. Participants connect to that computer (usually via telnet), they take character names and their messages are seen by everybody in that room. Because MOOs allow various forms of programming and interaction with the ‘environment’—such as making rooms or objects, describing characters etc—status differences can be more easily allocated, earned and maintained, than on a mailing list. MOO administrators can allocate programming powers, extra memory and so on to their friends, and use their powers to ban or silence other members, or they can sit in judgement on them in committees. MOO ‘law’ is usually a matter of patronage.

As people with characters on MOO can usually gain permission to build their own rooms, these rooms, which are in effect private to most other MOO users, allow a much greater formation of subgroups and, together with the simultaneity of text entry, an easier degree of intimate interaction.³ MOOs also allow people to enter with randomly assigned ‘guest names’, if they wish to act anonymously. Thus MOOs tend to be the favoured scenes of whatever netsex occurs between members of a list—email usually being too slow, and netsex in front of the rest of the list usually being inappropriate (a ‘private’ activity in ‘public’).⁴ MOOs also have certain unsettling features—one can never be entirely certain what one’s partner is doing—as we shall see later on.

Techniques

Netsex, as considered here, occurs between participants sitting at terminals in different locations, describing sexual activity to each other in text, together with their responses to those descriptions.⁵ Techniques of netsex do not receive detailed discussion onlist, other than casual mentions of ‘typing with one hand’. The same is true of most articles analysing netsex, with the possible exception of Branwyn (1993). To give some example, with commentary, of what we are discussing I include the following transcription of netsex, which was given to me by a Cybermind member (‘Inanna’). The events transcribed occurred on PMC-MOO in mid-1996. The encounter is relatively impersonal—between three friends rather than between lovers—as such it is fairly atypical. The text, as presented is from Inanna’s point of view—each person would have a unique transcript of the events with different ambiguities. It is impossible to reproduce the irregular speed of the appearance of text on the screen, which is also an important part of the experience. The names have been changed.

TRANSCRIPT

[Inanna, Amadiz and Mary-widow are discussing netsex]

:smile at Amadiz ^A

You smile at Amadiz.

Mary-widow [to Amadiz]: well i guess you

NOTES

A. The ‘:’ indicates this is a ‘emote command’ from Inanna. It is what she types into her machine. The line *You smile at Amadiz* is seen by Inanna, other people involved would see *Inanna smiles at Amadiz*.

B. Screen scrolling has put Amadiz comments

are a moosex virgin
 Amadiz lights a smoke...
 :kisses may Amadiz says, 'Yes' B
 ^R C
 :kisses mary
 Inanna kisses mary
 :opens a bottle of wine
 Inanna opens a bottle of wine D
 Amadiz spreads his arms wide, trying to
 span the continents...E
 -mary where are you? F
 Inanna [to Mary-widow]: where are you?
 Mary-widow holds Inanna close and kisses
 Inanna again
 :slides a hand over mary G
 Mary-widow [to Inanna]: i am a long way
 away from you...i am in
 Little Rock^Hs hip
 Inanna slides a hand over marys hip
 nod mary I
 Inanna nods in agreement with Mary-
 widow.
 :licks azs

Amadiz careeses Inanna's shoulders...
 face
 Inanna licks azs face
 Mary-widow bites Inannas neck...
 purr
 Inanna purrs, 'Mmmmmm!'
 :runs a hand thru marys hair, and around
 her ear
 Inanna runs a hand thru marys hair, and
 around her ear
 @who J

Total: 12 participants, 6 of whom have
 been active recently.

Mary-widow pulls ama close and touches
 his hand
 :rubs her boMary-widow mmmmm! K
 dy against am
 Inanna rubs her body against am
 Amadiz moves his hand to marys chest,
 exploring...L
 :kisses ams mouth slowly

- on the same line as Inanna's writing of
:kisses may.
- C. The '^R' command indicates that Inanna is deleting her unfinished command *:kisses may*, probably because of the spelling mistake.
 - D. Inanna's attempt to ground the reality in shared drinking is not taken up by the others and she abandons it.
 - E. Probably a reference to the fact that they are in different continents. The statement also implies that 'touching' (a bodily metaphor for closeness) requires a rhetoric of contact. Inanna follows this up by asking Mary-widow where she is— she presumably knows where Amadiz is. The speed of response suggests that distance is also on Mary-widow's mind as well. The subsequent line about holding Inanna close will probably have been typed before Mary-widow received the question. Responses can appear delayed because they are interrupted by responses to earlier remarks. Inanna adapts by responding non-linearly— she responds to the earlier response first. In this case intention, or mood, maintains the coherence.
 - F. In this case the '-mary' indicates a command which is supposed to indicate that the comment is directed to Mary-widow— as shown by the next line. The abbreviation of 'mary' for 'Mary-widow' has been pre-defined by Inanna.
 - G. The scrolling of the screen coming from Mary-widow's comment disrupts the appearance of Inanna's command, which continues in a later line.
 - H. From here on is the remainder of Inanna's interrupted command. This does not effect the command but can make it harder for Inanna to check the spelling or coherence of the command etc.
 - I. 'nod' is a specially defined term, so that instead of reading '*Inanna nods*', we read the next line '*Inanna nods in agreement*'. Sometimes these terms are pre-programmed, and sometimes specially defined by a programmer.
 - J. Inanna has entered an @who command to find out who is on the MOO. She does this several times in the transcript and is presumably hoping to see someone's name. The list of people follows. I have not repeated this list later in the transcript. In

Amadiz basks in the scent of women...
 Inanna kisses ams mouth slowly
 Mary-widow kisses Inanna 's chest...
 Amadiz lets his toungue slid in...
 @
 >> Mail from Tom Yousef—Re:
 Triangulation 2 M
 w
 ho [deleted list of who is on the MOO]
 :runs her foot Mary-widow slowly bites
 Inanna's nipples
 down marys leg and Amadiz caresses the
 multitude of thighs...
 sighs N
 Inanna runs her foot down marys leg and
 sighs
 :wraps a arm around am
 Inanna wraps a arm around am
 Mary-widow O
 Amadiz picks Inanna up and sets her on the
 bed...
 :smile
 You smile.
 :pull Mary-widow knells down and fingers
 her clit
 s am to Mary-widow fingers Inanna's clit P
 her
 Inanna pulls am to her
 Amadiz lets his hand join hers...Q
 'mmm that feels really nice' R
 You say, 'mmm that feels really nice'
 Amadiz slides his face to marys pussy..
 taking it in...
 Mary-widow licks Inanna's pussy
 slowly...sticking myS tounge in her
 sweet hole
 :kisses marys mouth, running her
 Mary-widow ummm diz that feels very
 good
 hand down dizes body
 Inanna kisses marys mouth, running her
 hand down dizes body T

 Amdiz moves to Inanna, feeling her
 breasts...
 :runs her handAmadiz kissing her nipples..
 down dizes body to his pubic hair
 Inanna runs her hand down dizes body to his

another transcript I have, the maker of the transcript, on finding another person on MOO holds a private discourse with them via *page* commands, at the same time as continuing to perform netsex with the person in the room. This is less noticeable than it would be offline, because of the slight delay between typing a comment and its appearance on the MOO.

- K. Mary Widow has typed *:mmmmm!* rather than *'mmmmm!*, which would read *Mary-widow says 'mmmmm!'* for Inanna and Amadiz, and *You say 'mmmmm!'* for Mary-widow. It is notable that this example of netsex primarily uses indirect speech— at the very least this lowers the number of commands participant's have to implement.
- L. Amadiz is the first to indicate explicit gender sex codes— though body references have been common. He continues this in his next line about basking in the scent of women. Perhaps the women involved find coding gender of the other woman a problem— at least one of them normally claims not to find women sexually attractive.
- M. Inanna's telenet program tells her when email arrives for her. This is independent of what is happening on MOO.
- N. Inanna's command *:runs her foot down mary's leg and sighs* has been interrupted by two lines of text— which are in turn interrupted by her command. This could easily be confusing, as texts merge together, making the writer hard to locate.
- O. This looks like Mary-widow wrote *: [enter]* either distracted or unable to think of a useful response. However it does tell the others she is still there.
- P. The ambiguity of who the first 'her' refers to, is resolved— thus bringing Mary-widow into the act between Amadiz and Inanna. Frequently ambiguity is either not seen, is corrected, or is exploited.
- Q. Of course, we cannot tell if Amadiz is also exploiting the ambiguity in 'hers', but here it acts to include both women.
- R. See footnote 15. This is the first example of direct speech in the transcript.
- S. The syntax problem, arises because of the desire to use direct speech while being constrained by the 'Mary-widow [does something]' format. Or perhaps it is part of Amadiz's text which is using ellipses.

pubic hair
 :kisseMary-widow says, ‘ummmm’
 ^R
 :kisses Amadiz moans with pleasure...
 ^R U
 :is still kissing mary and her hand slips
 down over dizz penis
 Inanna is still kissing mary and her hand
 slips down over dizz penis
 :Mary-widow nibbles and licks diz’s ears
 and neck.....then goes
 back to
 kissing Inanna
 Amadiz unlike the Knifehand, Diz is in
 ecstasy...V
 ^R
 Mary-widow giggles

chuckle
 Inanna chuckles under her breath.
 :runs her hand up marys thigh to her pussy
 and plays gently with
 her clit Inanna runs her hand up marys
 thigh to her pussy and
 plays gently with her clitAmadiz grasps
 marys waist squeezing,
 caressing moving down...
 Mary-widow puts her hand on diz’s dick
 and caresses it gently
 @who
 [...]

:kisses Mary-widow takes his dick in her
 mouth and sucks lightly W
 ^R
 :licks dizz face and ears
 Inanna licks dizz face and ears
 Amadiz Mary is blowing bith his mind and
 body...

Ambiguity of source is not easy to resolve
 and can even be created in this way.

- T. Perhaps Inanna feels some discomfort here,
 disrupting Mary’s cunnilingus, perhaps it is
 accidental.
- U. Two corrections might indicate some
 distraction, or simply the difficulty of
 deciding what to do to carry the story on, or
 the difficulty of resolving what others are
 doing because of scrolling.
- V. This is a reference to an earlier part of the
 conversation in which it was stated that a
 character called ‘knifehand’ did not like
 netsex.
- W. Gender instability? Inanna may have
 ‘forgotten’ Mary-widow’s gender or simply
 have forgotten that ‘he’ in this context would
 refer to Mary not to Amadiz. however she
 restated correct gender. Inanna did not
 explore any possible variants (i.e. that Mary
 had both kinds of organ). She may have
 considered that this would be disruptive for
 the others. The remark is cancelled by the ^R
 or, emphasising ambiguity, it may be part of
 a statement typed by Mary.

Later Inanna will leave ‘To smoke a cigarette’, Amadiz and Mary-widow continue.
 Later still, Amadiz and Mary-widow agree that netsex is harder to do with three people. It
 should be remarked that references to the body and ‘physical gesture are quite common
 online, outside of netsex.

We can have little idea whether there are any physiological responses among the participants, of the kind that we usually call genital, and it could be quite irrelevant to the dialogue anyway. There is also no clear separation between the ‘fantasy’ and the ‘reality’ of what is occurring in the sense that fantasy is usually opposed to reality. Without the fantasy there would be no reality. Neither is the fantasy individual and underlying, a primary process, separated from, or disruptive of, sociality—it emerges within a social interaction and is directed by the responses of others. Although the possibilities of this online interaction may appear more open than those of offline interactions (certainly as more ambiguous and uncertain) they are still limited by the participant’s guesses as to what constitutes an acceptable act which furthers, and does not disrupt, the story—participants are sensitive to cues and probabilities.

Discussing netsex

Frequently in discussions of netsex, people portray it as intense and overwhelming; thus a male list member writes: ‘What one hears over and over again is that I was doing it but didn’t realise how serious it was to myself/my partner/etc. until—’. Another man writes: ‘Sex on-line is like nothing I have ever experienced before. It can be overwhelming and at least for me, has never been like masturbation’. Members often make this intensity a distinction between netsex and masturbation, as when a woman writes that netsex results ‘in a much more intense experience than solitary masturbation would be. The interaction takes it to a much higher level’. The distinction here, between masturbation and interactive sex, might be a transposition of offline valuations.

The most detailed discussion on netsex during the fieldwork period, illustrative of this point about intensity, concerned S&M. It is hard not to fall into the discourse of authenticity and suggest that some aspect of the writer’s personality was ‘released’ or ‘liberated’ by netsex, but there is no evidence the behaviour was not special to that situation rather than always underlying. In this case a lesbian woman entered the ‘femdom’ Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel unaware of its subject matter, but soon found out and returned with a more suitable name. To her surprise she found enjoyment and skill in her dominant role. One man wanted to meet her on a private IRC channel for further ‘talk’. She comments ‘I am a nice middle class, middle aged lesbian. What on earth was going on here’. She describes her subsequent encounter as: ‘violent and sadistic in the extreme. It was one of the most powerful encounters I have ever experienced [...] It was like having a fever, feeling slightly sick but—such _intensity_’. Later she talked with the man on the phone and he reassured her that this intensity was normal, and she asked the list ‘how is it that sexual acts performed in text can take on such incredible vividness?’.

This intensity is more frequently mentioned than explained. Even the delay can be alleged to add to the power. Thus a woman writes ‘One of the most powerful things in net encounters is the tensions as you wait for what the other person is going to say/”do” next’, a man comments ‘delay can become a lure’, and a woman suggests that distance can increase desire ‘exponentially’. Other people find the distance and the delay offputting, as we shall see.

One woman tries to explain intensity in terms of liberation and safety: ‘Perhaps interaction on the Net becomes more intense intellectually, because we have the sense of freedom to state our minds, our fantasies, in ways we would never dare to, face to face’.

The power of netsex is frequently explained by the claim that 'external' society is repressive of either sex or vital aspects of the personality and that online life is a compensation or relief valve for this suppression—a kind of Bakhtinian carnival. As Alan writes (23 July 2000): 'One often moves into these areas to explore parts of oneself that are missing in everyday life with one's partner—or parts of oneself that one keeps hidden—or simply for the play of it'. It is perhaps worth noting that sex as liberatory is a standard part of left-liberal discourse.

However, as well as being portrayed as more intense or liberatory than offline sex, netsex can also be found to be unsatisfactory, a diminished copy. One male list member writes: 'Net.sex doesn't intrigue me—part of the attraction of sex for me is its nonverbalness [...] So, as long as it's text based, I don't think it's my cup of tea ...'. An experienced male wrote: 'net.sex is at its very best a poetic, erotic *shadow* of real sex. One can romanticise it and talk about the sublime connection of minds online, but the fact remains that it is still only a shadow'. Another male writes 'at its best netsex is like the plastic tomatoes one gets in supermarkets in the winter'.

Other people remark that netsex loses its attraction with experience, thus a woman writes: 'net.sex is less thrilling for me. more and more I think it is not going to be as exciting as I hoped'. A male writes: 'I used to like it a lot, but I haven't been doing it for months. It feels empty to me[...] With net sex also you don't wake up with anyone. You just turn your machine off eventually and walk away feeling totally empty', and a woman writes: 'It can also be horribly empty and lonely and cold. I've found it becomes moreso the longer I'm in this space which is probably why I don't do that much anymore'. As far as I know none of these three people actually gave up netsex forever, although they occasionally made similar remarks on later occasions.

This simultaneous presence of, or movement between, involvement and uninvolvement also suggests the often expressed ambiguities between offline 'confirmation' and online 'fantasy'. One woman explicitly states it was the 'possibility of realisation' or the prospect of meeting which rendered netsex worthwhile: 'If that possibility (however remote) were not there, I wouldn't bother—it would be a waste of time'. Another person writes that he 'Can't imagine it being a source of sexual pleasure, unless it is intended as a prelude to a physical encounter'. In counterposition, another person reported they knew somebody who 'wanted to fantasise without RL [Real Life] entanglements'. Another person described how she went in search of sex in a MOO where she was anonymous and untraceable and afterwards, when the other person suggested meeting offline, it was:

jarring... there's no way in 'real life' I would ever be able to feel good about an actual similar anonymous physical exchange [...] the entire experience is a beautiful juncture of possibility, the fact of an 'actual person' there w/you in real time and the magnificent tension sprung from tightly wound desire...

These kinds of counterpositions about netsex seem relatively common.

Restricted knowledge of others leads to the common description of Internet life as 'disembodied', and netsex as sex occurring between minds.⁶ One person said to me after meeting an Internet lover, that it showed how much all relationships were in the mind. Failure of online romantic relationships is frequently explained by fantasy, which is counterposed to the authenticity, or truth, which is usually associated with offline contact.⁷ To some extent online relationships are caught between the idea that you can only be yourself online, without physical markers, and you can only make the relationship real offline, with bodily markers.

These conflicts add to the worries about authenticity of experience—the ‘real’ motives of others are held to be harder to discern online, and fantasy is often held to lead people astray. Finding out about the true self of the other becomes a problem which must be solved rather than a vagueness to be celebrated (Slater 1998:92). Revealing things about oneself can act as a reward for the other, so that there is a play of revealing and concealing. On the whole, it seemed that many people put more time and effort into netsex partnerships than they did into their non-living together sexual partnerships. Online, more effort is needed to overcome uncertainty, confirm discoveries, and prove an existence.

Worries about one’s own authenticity are shown by a woman’s confession that she engaged in netsex description and then tended:

to take it away from the computer and into the ‘physical’ me. Does this make me ‘fake’ when I write what I will feel fully when I’m no longer reading/writing here—when I’ve taken memories or print-outs to bed with me...?

One way of detecting authenticity is mentioned by Hamman who writes:

I have noticed that as the exchange becomes more heated and the actors get closer to orgasm, typing speed decreases while the number of typographical errors increase. This is a good check on whether users are really masturbating during cybersex (1996: n4).

The issue of typing errors came up on Cybermind⁸ in a discussion of the differences in netsex via Unixtalk or on MOO, when some people thought the display of keystrokes (and hence typing errors) in Unixtalk made it better and more real. On other occasions several people of either sex mentioned the oddness of typing an orgasm. One woman suggested that typed orgasms (ie ‘oooooooooooooooooooo’) seemed fake to her, but that she frequently faked. Strangely people often seem to think that although they may ‘fake’ orgasms this way (or fill in what they consider to be the narrative requirements of the story), their partners do not.

There are also various responses to the act. In contrast with the woman who took the transcript to bed with her, another woman writes that she reads the ‘screen compulsively, totally focused’. Another person writes that she has ‘spoken to people who feel no physical reaction while engaging in cybersex yet they still enjoy it on some other mental level’.⁹ This also suggests that a genital focus is not always the primary aim of netsex.

During the act, some people tend to describe what they do, others how the partner behaves. [f] ‘It is almost like being alone, without reservations, but someone else is typing unexpected and hoped for things’. [m] ‘Statements appear in the imperative sometimes: if I write a story about you, then you are moved or not in relation to the text’.¹⁰ Alan (11 November 1996) renders this latter into a theoretical principle: ‘In cybersex your desire is spoken by the other becoming your desire’, therefore ‘hysteric embodiment, the reading of the self through the text of the body of the Other becomes auto-embodiment, the reading of the self through the text of the body of the other’ (cf Sondheim 2000). At the same time, one woman complained to me that some people ‘typed wht you did, or what they did without any reagrd for yr own desire’ and this was tiresome, and perhaps verged on rape.¹¹ Counterpositions haunt the act.

Netsex is frequently, though rarely on Cybermind, explained by claiming it is safe sex. This is done by a radical separation of the ‘Virtual’ and the ‘Real’. It is often claimed that it is impossible to get AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases through typing—or to get pregnant. Likewise it supposedly prevents messy, and potentially dangerous,

relationships intruding into one's offline life. However, the decrease of one set of popular dangers, does not prevent the emergence of other commonly spoken of dangers such as 'falling for a fantasy', being uncertain of your partner's gender, being subject to electronic harassment, or to discredit in one's online life. On Cybermind people seemed to find netsex as fraught or complicated as offline sex. Caitlin responded to a person claiming netsex was not 'serious' (16 August 1995):

But if you privilege the flesh so much that you ignore the potential consequences and implications of behaviors in this space then you are, indeed, playing a game. Unfortunately, it's a dangerous one [...] and the potential for all kinds of damage hovers in the air like a murder of crows waiting to strike.

More humorously Renata writes (4 May 1999):

I mean, if you start into a net romance you are likely to start sending each other various little presents, files, photos and so forth, and if you aint extremely careful, it is also possible that your computer can get a virus that way.

Mary, gives another example of the dangers (3 May 1999):

I know a woman who may be safe physically, but her emotions from cybersex are in a word, trashed [...] The worse part about the whole thing, is she knows she is addicted, and cries over it. In the 5 months I have been talking to her, she has gotten hard, hiding behind false fronts, daring anyone to see her for what she really is... which is lost.

Another person described how an email affair nearly broke up her seven year old relationship 'because this other lover was able to bring out all my fantasies of myself', but she then began to use the net with her offline lover 'to reinvent parts of our relationship we stopped using'.

In netsex, complexity and failure, might increase because of the absence of immediate feedback. Online relationships and netsex can be as emotionally distressing, and perhaps as beneficial, as any more conventional relationship. Netsex can be seen as both liberatory and as potentially traumatic. It can be seen as intense and as lacking, as disembodied and confirmed by the body, as authentic and as fake, as safe or as bringing new dangers, as oscillating between the 'truths' of the online and the 'truths' of the offline. People seem both keen to separate the Virtual and the Real and to blend them simultaneously. Netsex, and 'virtual life' more generally, apparently disturb the conventional borders between truth and concealment.

Gender

Sometimes the prevalence of sex online is explained as a way the net is marked as a male domain. In this view women are excluded and harassed by sextalk and by males trying to 'pick them up'. One time Cybermind member, Deirdre Ruane refers to Sherman who 'believes that the publicity of Net harassment is a deliberate attempt on the part of the male-controlled media to keep women frightened away from the Net, leaving it as a sort of boys' club' (1997: part 2, np). Fletcher quotes several women from Cybermind who wrote to her offline:

One woman says, 'I have had male users proposition me when I was online answering questions about art, or moving files to different art libraries' (Loomer [19 November 1997. E-mail]). She believes there is a 'subculture' of sexism

throughout the online experience for women. Another woman surveyed says she 'identified myself as female and this user unleashed a barrage of sexual language, on channel and in private message, complete with invitations and explicit details of what he would do to me' (Sivadon [14 November 1997 email]). This experience is not uncommon for women on the Internet, particularly in chat environments (Fletcher 1997: np).

However, many women frequently stated that Cybermind did not function in this kind of way, even though members might occasionally allege, or deny, differences between male and female communication styles (cf. Bennett and Palmer 1997).

It appears that sexual harassment is not only greatly disapproved in this group, but that women participate in netsex with as much enthusiasm and ambiguity as men. The rare cases of harassment that I know of, involved either lurkers (who had a false sense of familiarity), or new members. This is not to dismiss the issues of gender and power, but to state that it is not a focus of this paper.

Although, in the literature there is much discussion of online gender ambiguity, and the disappointment or dislocation this can cause, on Cybermind most people are identified by their name, and naming conventions, as male or female. Of those few using ungendered pseudonymous names, the majority are identified as male or female by use of a gendered name within their posts during their life on list. When Alan asked people on the list about 'changing' gender (18 May 1997), of 14 replies two implied it might be interesting to do but they hadn't. One had done it to 'explore theoretical issues', two chose to make themselves spivak on MOOs¹² and the rest couldn't be bothered. It was only on MOOs that anyone thought it worthwhile to change gender, no-one admitted doing it on a mailing list—perhaps because a list is more easily classified as private.¹³ An experimental list set up in 2001, in which members of Cybermind were to be anonymous and not reveal their gender, was very short lived.

Some writers have pointed out that, whatever the case of the 'real gender' of people, when they are looking for sex those gender characteristics are exaggerated (Deuel 1996: 141, Kendall 1998:137-8). Thus, although it may be the case that you do not know the sex of people in MOOs, it is more than probable that they will be sexed, as in the transcript.¹⁴ Furthermore some people seem to think that they can easily recognise gender characteristics, and people can be excluded from single sex groups for failing to match expected stereotypes (Hall 1996).

I know of no particular differences in gendered usage of netsex, or attributions of gender difference in the use of netsex which are regularly produced on Cybermind. However the recurrent anxiety about gender, in writings about the Internet, suggests that gender is an important way that Western people have of resolving problems in communication and establishing relationship.

Netsex as used within the group

Now that we have considered some of the talk about netsex, the environments of netsex, and a little on the techniques of netsex, I want to discuss how it can function in the life of the individual and the group. Netsex is part of offlist contact and is usually hidden, part of what Alan calls list aura. He defines this term by giving a listing of interest (11 June 1996):

By list 'aura' I mean the private email, telephone calls, panty exchanges, snail mail letters, packages and private or public/private photographs, fleshmeets,

everything and anything that doesn't appear directly on the list, or isn't a part of software give-and-take.¹⁵

He writes that he has heard (11 June 1996):

... of such incredibly baroque interrelationships among list members that soap opera pales in comparison. I have heard of opportunities and missed opportunities and honest and dishonest consummations, failures and conquests and meetings gone by the wayside. I have not heard of larceny, rape, murder, armed robbery, kidnapping, or parking violations, but nothing would surprise me at this point.

In offline society, to some extent, people know what is happening 'backstage', or they know something is happening, even if they are not sure what. They might observe the people involved whispering to each other or going off into the bush together, and guess. In online life, however, people are not likely to know that *anything* is happening. The markedness of this dislocation may vary from person to person, and from time to time, but clearly affects the knowledge any one person could have of the list, and how it worked.

Activity on the list engenders a network of, largely dyadic, offlist contacts between list members, and it seems that most active people eventually attract some offlist correspondence.¹⁶ Attempting to describe offlist contact between list members is difficult, not only because it is invisible, but because people resisted describing their offlist (private) life in email. I only received a few replies to a large number of public requests for such data. As a result of a discussion initiated by someone else and my expression of interest, three people wrote to me to claim they had netsex with another member of the list, in each case without saying who. Without those spontaneous comments I would have had no idea these three people had had any such interactions.

Likewise, when Rose asked the group (22 June 1997): 'To the best of anyone's knowledge, has Cybermind ever spawned a relationship of the Permanent persuasion?', the response was vague. This question, unusually for one initiated by her, produced few straight answers and much discussion of what was meant by 'Permanent' and so on. Laurie attempted to answer the question (22 June 1997) 'permanent friends, yes; permanent romance, not that i know of'. To which Rose, herself replied (24 June 1997) 'Friendships are born on the wires, and last virtually forever'. Mitchell elaborated, that not all relationships are simple (24 June 1997):

[MOOs have] gotten me into relationships of varying degrees of permanence/ephemerality (choose one) with a lot of people, some of whom are even on this list. One of these relationships has just crashed and burned, proving that permanence is always problematic; but electronic community continues often to be the best kind for me.

Pam added (24 June 1997):

So many acquaintanceships/friendships/love affairs [...] start via the medium of computers and then develop in the flesh that it seems to me sometimes to be the only 'proper' way to do things. Often on this list and elsewhere I get the feeling that the exchange of written words is just a preliminary, an introduction often drawn out but necessarily consummated at some point, if the contact is not to be abandoned, by physical meeting, eye contact, the pressing of flesh, the exchange of drunken confidences or body fluids, something 'more real'. It's not real, somehow, until it's physical. So sometimes the possibility of physical meeting becomes a prerequisite for conversation, and those of us for whom the

possibilities are severely limited or non-existent feel... very far away, and wistful. I have watched friendships grow and wane, and wondered how much difference a physical meeting might make.

This statement clearly anchors the reality of relationships in bodily presence, in meeting and touching, for this person.

Such brief remarks can be elaborated by information uncovered through private, mainly face to face, contact with seven or so list members. These contacts described the offlist relationships of 32 list members, of which about half were reported to have had netsex with each other, and a significant proportion of those people were reputed to have had offline sex with each other.¹⁷ These people were easily less than one tenth of the people on the list at that time, yet they make up a significant proportion of prominent members. As people reported their own and other's memorable interactions they perhaps tended to only include 'memorable' list members. Thus the information probably omits interactions with those members who did not post often. People were generally more inclined to talk about other people's list-based love affairs than their own.¹⁸ There were multiple and occasionally conflicting narratives, though the conflict did not seem analytically interesting. Many parts of this network would have remained unknown to me without a particular contact at a particular time, and thus is likely to be abridged. Almost all of these offlist contacts involved at least one woman, and most of the informants were women.

It appears from what I was told, that most, though not all, of these contacts aimed at some kind of lasting pairing relationship, emphasising the importance of the private pair relationship in Western English-speaking society's construction of intimacy. It also seems that the success rate of these attempted romantic contacts was not high, although friendship contacts were often said to be successful. Without some idea of the 'success rate' of people's attempts to initiate lasting pairing relationships in the embedding societies, it is not possible to decide whether these failures are significant. Neither is it possible to decide whether the degree of attempted sexual activity is higher than in the embedding society for a similar 'class' of people.

Despite this, the anecdotal evidence is clear. People often say they have had more love affairs via the Internet than in any similar time period in their offline lives. For example a list member wrote to me that they had 'had sexual and love relationships and sometimes both [...], coming from the list... more than and more intense than would have happened in real life..'. However these affairs may have less translation into lasting relationships. As Alan writes (11 June 1996): 'of course we all envy people who meet on the Net, marry, and/or end up living together. These people, however, are becoming more of the urban myth 'friend of a friend' variety'. I only know of two love affairs, in the list's history, that lead to the participants living together, for a period of several years.¹⁹

It seems probable that the quest for a close relationship was more important, or more common, among list members than the quest for 'simple' sexual pleasure. There may be people who primarily want netsex without involvement, but they do *not* generally try and achieve this with list friends or with people they specifically know on MOO, they tend to seek such partners anonymously or in sex specific MOOs or chat-rooms. Even in those IRC channels, which might be thought of as existing entirely for netsex, people who treat them in such a way may be thrown off.²⁰

Sexual pleasure may well be considered an attempt to generate intimacy (Giddens 1992: 50). A search for intimacy may be evidence of loneliness, or of alienation from one's everyday life. Perhaps it also expresses people's need to make networks in a world which appears increasingly problematic and precarious for the middle-class intellectuals who

make up the list. The decline of family contacts is frequently mentioned in this kind of context.²¹ At the least, it is an expression of the idea that such problems can be faced at a personal level through engendering intimacy.

Explanations

We have seen how people use netsex as a bonding device, or a way of establishing intimacy. However, we need to go further. One of the most obvious things about online presence, as affected by the structures of communication, is that a person does not have presence for others unless that person acts. Similarly, presence is not confirmed unless other people respond—there is no independent marker of existence. Online-presence is continually suspended between presence and absence. This form of online-presence I have called asence. Asence is like a liminal presence.

On MOOs, some boundary problems and forms of asence are emphasised—not to mention the ambiguity of context, of ‘speaker’, of mixed texts and unresolved signifiers, as shown in the transcript. On a MOO, a person can be excluded; or an intimate conversation can have participants which another participant is unaware of; or a person can give attention to multiple subjects at the same time—or be on multiple MOOs. I have heard of people leaving the computer to smoke or go to the toilet without informing the person they were supposedly being intimate with—hiding their absence behind net lag. People can get cut off mid-sentence and it is not always clear if this is deliberate or some kind of technical problem—this can be particularly awkward when lovers are arguing. It is also impossible to share silence together, because not typing while online simply makes a person disappear. Similarly people can also be thought to be present when they are absent. In general MOO people can appear insubstantial: disappearing unless held by incantation, bond, or the compunctions of repetition and vows. Any kind of special relationship in this circumstance needs something which renders a claim possible—yet the conventions about authenticity appear to clash with any use of ritual to maintain, or mark, these states or claims. Therefore, people may demand promises that someone will always be there for them, after one meeting. More commonly, I suggest, people use sex, as a framing convention, to sustain the mutuality of mood.

Within this high asence environment with weak boundaries and little elaborated ritual code, people might need to ‘fall in love’ to prove that a relationship actually exists. Love is the prime justification in Western English-speaking society for closeness and intimacy particularly between the sexes. With this act, a person can then maintain the presence of the other before them via narration. Netsex can also, as one person wrote to me, restore contact if the dialogue slides out of areas of mutual interest.

Usually characters on MOO are marked by an excess of gendered features—most women are beautiful and well endowed and all men handsome and well endowed—adorned with the symbolisms of the gender and sexual discourse they participate within—at the least they do not repulse.²² These features act to evoke the sexuality which reduces asence, but at the same time, produce fears that all is not as it seems, or that intimacy might be deleted by potential inauthenticity—though people continually hope that it will not be. People continually worry about authenticity, while assuming it can be found.

People often claim that they feel the boundaries of their body change online—which perhaps increases a sense of personal vagueness. Some list members implied they felt their bodies extended online. For example, Enok writes (19 May 1997): ‘I am a secret tiger, walking restless along the fence, stretching my paws out between the bars,—to touch and

scratch the freedom'. Alan adds (19 May 1997): 'it's as if I'm extended into another space, boundariless'. Rose wrote (20 May 1997) that her body 'flows into the space created for it. Always!'. Jerry (20 May 1997): 'my fingers reach out into the wires...'. These statements, carry the implication that online life constitutes a freedom from the restriction or the 'resistance of the Real', and hence from 'materiality'—reinforcing experiences of disembodiment.

It might also be suggested that ideas of 'disembodiment', or of netsex as occurring between minds alone, arises from demands that bodily asence (arising from the oscillation of presence in front of and using a machine, and becoming involved with people elsewhere), should be resolved by deleting the body. Polarity, in the West seems to have a tendency to be resolved in favour of one pole, and thus we have presence being claimed to reside either in the mind or the machine. However, netsex actually plays with this asencing of the body, destabilising both categories while simultaneously asserting them. It 'makes' bodies, plays with their proximity and its lack, and sexualises them in order to temporarily bridge the gap. Waldby (1998) suggests that such a deployment of language also has a rhythm which can mimic bodily exchange. The intertwining of text in itself destroys the boundaries between one person's utterance and another's. The response of the other may give a sense of wholeness and coordination in a person's online asencing self-image.

Although the displacement of being that occurs with lack of acknowledgment can be temporarily reduced by netsex (through its intensity and extension of mood), it can also increase it by contrast with the embedding offline world. However people return to it because of the mood stabilising functions which appear to ground communication.

These difficulties of communication, the ambiguity and inherent sliding of semantic values in signs, mean that communication needs to be framed to be interpreted. One method of framing which seems common online is, as already implied, the assumption of authenticity—that is, the notion that there is a fundamental inner truth of the other to which the communication can be referred. Authenticity, itself, needs to be recognised, and has to be indicated by conventions, also invoked offline, which include references to 'the body', to 'underlying emotions', to breaking rules (absence of formal etiquettes or politenesses), and to gender.

Contemporary Western English-speaking models of authenticity are intertwined with ideas of individualistic, self determining freedom and self expression, which are supposedly emphasised on the Internet. Other pre-existing and overt social rules are usually considered to restrict authenticity. We tend to relate the body to the underlying truth of things, hence people's worry about gender, and hence it seems that expressions of sex and anger reduce the anxiety experienced in a 'new medium'. Anger, or 'flame', is held to display honesty, like typing mistakes or more ambivalently sex. Trust is established when a person is convinced that another's 'inner' is on display, and that this inner is acceptable. Following Foucault (1979:6-7), we might note that discourse about sex in Western society tends to be considered a revelation about 'truth' (especially through confession), and hence becomes a form of declaring authenticity. This links with signs of 'the body' acting as signs of authenticity, and also suggests the importance of sex in establishing the 'truth' needed to make intimacy. Sex, then, establishes the importance of gender as a truth, which allows intimacy, as intimacy is nearly always specified, in the West, in terms of gender, and usually as involving women. On mailing lists, the volume of the list itself gives presence, and when members have read and/or responded they move on—sex is not so necessary, as it is on MOOs, to maintain presence. But should some kind

of attraction eventuate and move a relationship to the more dyadic environs of a MOO, then netsex may well emerge as anchor.

In support of these concerns about authenticity, we can instance Deuel's remarks that the use of pre-programmed objects and 'canned messages' becomes less frequent as the netsex becomes more 'real' (1996:140). The transcript might show that incoherent use of commands also increases. People also appear to privilege 'private' knowledge of each other (authenticity being hidden). Kendall writes that people 'privilege offline identity information over information received online... This allows them to continue to understand identity in the essentialised terms of a persistent and consistent self, grounded in a particular physical body' (1998:130). People also privilege offlist information (given 'in private') over onlist, even though the truth conditions differ little. Also, the conventions of authenticity imply that the more unpleasant the information the more likely it is taken to be true. Thus, if someone is told by their lover who was supposed to be 17, single and sexy that they are really 57, married and ugly they will probably regard the second statement as more true on exactly the same evidence. Offline, authenticity is taken for granted, people assume they can read the signs of the person's body, their dress and tone of voice to know what the person means or is likely to say or do. Online authenticity is to some extent problematised, by the opaqueness of these factors, but the idea is not abandoned and people may assume they can read online signs correctly.

In a society which values authenticity, the common use of exaggerated gender symbols to enable performance, may appear to simultaneously delete the presence of 'real gender', or a real self, which might be expressed in uncertainties and hesitations. This could appear particularly disastrous. As already suggested, many people, involved in online romance, fear they could be falling for fantasy (inauthentic) images, and hence need to bring the relationship into the 'real' to check it or render it 'true'. Though online romance may be perceived as intense, it may also be perceived as 'unreal'. The person becomes caught in a contradiction between an intimacy which is supposedly only confirmed offline, and an equally supposed ability to only be 'who they are' online.

Conclusion

Online society is not a society which is held together by immediate survival issues, economic cooperation is minimal, as is life threatening warfare, or problems with the supply of resources etc. Likewise there is no established framework of social relations, such as kinship, which people can be slotted into. Survival relates to the group rather than to the person—group members change continually. Online society is primarily a society of personal relations, which must be continually cultivated and reformed in a relatively unstable and unclear environment. Continuance depends on personal relationships which continually shift from anonymity to intimacy, and thus may need some 'reinforcement' or stability. Likewise, the structures of communication tend to make ambiguities more prevalent, and thus increase the difficulties of framing outside, supposedly fundamental and easily referenced, body or mood states.

If we accept that meaning tends to multiply, that it is mutually dependent on context, that responses vary, and that many of the techniques used in offline life to resolve these issues—such as direct force—cannot work as well online, and that the structures of communication online (at the moment) tend to encourage this divergence, then we have to consider the modes of framing which are used online to reduce, or otherwise deal with this divergence. It has been suggested that the main mode of framing in Cybermind has been

the idea of authenticity—of there being an inner truth which can be indicated. Problems with the indication of authenticity are clear. Ideally authenticity should be overt without indication—without needing an etiquette or ritual as it is defined in opposition to such things—and so reference is frequently made to supposedly underlying ‘non-virtual’ phenomena such as strong emotion, private communication, typing errors, bodily feelings, body appearance, gender and sex. This reinforces a play between online and offline life, which people often seem to try to overcome, or dissolve. They can be who they ‘truly are’ online away from the body, but this can only be confirmed offline by the body. Likewise, netsex can be said to be safe at the same time as people admit that it leads to ‘new’ dangers. Netsex is overtly powered by mutual fantasy and can lead to closeness, but at the same time its fantasy can detract from the authenticity that sex supposedly indicates. The exaggerations of gender which are used in the fantasy are perceived as a problem which might delete the truth they supposedly refer to. Netsex gives continuity—it stops the other from vanishing, it reduces absence—yet in so doing it may appear to become a sign of falseness, a method of preventing the discovery of difference. It may be perceived as intense, and thus genuine, or non-physical and thus fake; as an excitement which wears off, or which becomes addictive; it may be anonymous and based in personal connection simultaneously. Permanency becomes a problem, perhaps because it clashes with the possibilities of multiple contact. As the act is private (to ensure its honesty), and has its base in the pair (to ensure stability and cooperation), it can involve many members of the same group, who form a serial connectivity with public consequences and shifting stability.

Furthermore, this problem is increased because the paradoxes of Western relationships seem emphasised online. Intimacy, in Western societies, demands increasing self disclosure which demonstrates that intimacy is still occurring and thus may eventually reach a point where people cut back on intimacy, because they increasingly risk disclosing something about themselves which will drive away the other person. Similarly, the person, as a category which extends or expresses itself but resists incursion, almost automatically offends other persons (Bauman 1992:84-6). As closeness tends to be defined in terms of what one can express outwards without concern, it can mean a movement which forces the other person into silence or isolation and resentment. Likewise, if emotion is demonstrated when regularity is disrupted, then the better that people know each other and can predict behaviour, then the less they may experience the emotion which tells them they are intimate (Sternberg 1998:8, 36-7).

Because the body and underlying emotion supposedly demonstrates authenticity then an authentic relationship is assumed to be indicated by depth of passion. Again if passion is largely noticed by disruption, then continuing intimacy will destroy the basis by which the relationship is considered authentic or meaningful.

We may also note the counterpositions around the activities in the offline world—that pornography is trivial and threatening, that it is suppressive and liberatory, that sex is a form of completion of the person which is also a risk to personal integrity. It might be suggested that part of the excitement of netsex precisely arises in being caught between these contradictions and using them.

Notes

1. Although I have used comments made to the list, outside this period.
2. PMC (Post Modern Culture) is a scholarly journal published by the University of Virginia. MOO = MUD (Multiple User Dimension, Multiple User Dungeon, or Multiple User Dialogue) is a computer program which users can log into and explore. Each user takes control of a computerised persona/avatar/incarnation/character.
3. Private comments to a specific character can also be made via *page* commands.
4. Deuel states that in her research people who behaved sexually in a public room on a MOO were usually pressured into leaving for a private room (1996:135). Young (nd) writes 'believe it or not, players on MUDs are, for the most part, discreet in their online heavy petting'.
5. I have not found Hamman's distinction between '1) computer mediated interactive masturbation in real time and, 2) computer mediated telling of interactive sexual stories (in real time) with the intent of arousal' (1996:np), either clear or useful. The same is also the case with Deuel's distinction between 'Vsex' and other forms of computer mediated sex on the grounds that VSex uses spatial constructions (1996:130).
6. 'Disembodied' is a term frequently, and casually, used in academic analysis. For example Dery (1993:559, 'disembodied... combatants'), McLagan (1996:161, 'disembodied communication'), Danet et al. (1998:41, 'disembodied 'virtual play''). See also the quotations from Stone, Fierheller, Barlow and FM-2030 in Frohman (1994-9). I analyse the experience of 'Ghost bodies' as a result of attempts to resolve contradictions, and the dilemmas of concealment and revelation in Marshall (2000: chp 8).
7. See Hamman (nd), Adamse & Motta (1996:154).
8. For further on typing errors as indicators of authenticity see Marshall (2000: chp 7).
9. Cooper et al. write: 'sexual experiences involve both the pursuit of sexual activity and the behavior itself. Recognizing this dual aspect of sexual behavior is important to the study of Internet sexuality because this medium allows users to engage in sexually-related activities that do not necessarily, though apparently often do, lead to the physical release usually found in partnered face to face (i.e., offline) sexual encounters', Later the same authors write: 'Most participants reported their on-line sexual experiences to be satisfying but not particularly arousing' (1999:np).
10. I presume he means such statements as 'Your penis becomes erect' or 'Your vulva moistens'.
11. In this paper I have not pursued the issue of how offline factors might affect the ability to inscribe others within a sexual discourse.
12. This means they use the pronouns *e*, *em*, *eir*, *eirs*, *eirself*. When people set their gender to 'spivak' it is usually possible to classify them as *really* a male or female spivak user. It is assumed that they are concealing gender rather than that they don't have one. For the origins of spivak on LambdaMOO see Danet (1998:141).
13. Even with MOOs Deuel writes: 'Evidence suggests that most MOO participants represent themselves as their true gender or as neuter, with only a small percentage of players actually attempting to conceal or intentionally misrepresent their gender (1996: 133). For further data see Cooper et al (1999).
14. Rodino (1997), although claiming that gender online is not simply bipolar writes 'Research suggests that some [Computer-Mediated Communication] CMC participants prefer to interact with players who can be distinguished as male or female.... The present study confirms that individuals present themselves and are treated on line according to the binary gender system'. O'Brien (1999) writes "'individuals who evade this question [about their real gender] are not considered to be creative mavericks; they are assumed to be hiding something. If someone persists in maintaining a gender-neutral position, others online will inquire of one another about what the person's gender 'really' is and why he/she is reluctant to reveal it'.
15. Parks and Floyd (1996) write of their study of newsgroup 'friends': 'nearly two thirds (63.7%) of our respondents with personal relationships had used communication channels other than the computer'.

16. Obviously the longer a person is *participating* onlist the more likely this is to occur. There is some suggestion that offlist correspondence is more likely if the person is female (cf Parks and Floyd 1996).
17. For an anonymised list of these contacts see Marshall (2000: Chp 12, pt 2)
18. And there is possibly a politics here, as people know about the possibility of articles like this, when they talk to an anthropologist who is 'studying' them.
19. Sannicolas writes: 'in the year that this researcher has spent visiting SIG's I have seen approximately 50 relationships form on-line. ... out of these approximately 50 relationships, only a very small number (3) have worked out to last more than 6 months' (Sannicolas 1997: np). For one of the only studies of relationships which successfully moved offline see Baker (1998).
20. See Calista (nd), and the remarks in Young (nd) and Hamman (1996).
21. Giddens comments: 'Kinship relations often used to be taken for granted on the basis of trust; now trust has to be negotiated and bargained for, and commitment is as much an issue as in sexual relationships' (1992:96). Castells writes 'at the moment when the traditional family becomes indispensable as an instrument of both financial and psychological security, it has been falling apart' (1997:97).
22. I have omitted the descriptions of the characters in the transcript for obvious reasons, but the attractiveness of their described personas is marked.

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